

Shaken up so we can pour ourselves out

Grayson Warren Brown | Aug. 21, 2010



(NCR photo/Casey McCorry)

Viewpoint

The following was edited from remarks delivered at the Celebration Conference on Effective Liturgy in Chicago, July 21-23.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement taught me something about liturgy. Remember those scenes in places like Selma or Birmingham, Ala., with the police dogs and the fire hoses? When those ordinary folks were marching, singing and facing incredible horrors -- the vicious dogs that were attacking even the children, the fire hoses that were coming out with such incredible force -- I asked, "How did they do that?" Here's what I found out.

Before every single march, those people gathered together for liturgy. They had church.

Before they would step out to march or do anything, first they had to come together to pray as a community. They had to sing songs. "Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn. Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn. Pharaoh's army got drowned. Oh, Mary, don't you weep." They knew that Pharaoh's army was waiting for them, and when you know Pharaoh's army is waiting for you, you have to sing a song like that.

They didn't need some cantor begging them to sing. The preacher could not afford to deliver a dull, lifeless sermon. That preacher knew it was his responsibility because he was hearing the word of God himself, and he knew that at that moment, God was saying, "Get up. Come. Walk with me."

So church -- liturgy -- became necessary, not to get to heaven, but to get through life.

It seems to me that we can't ever do good liturgy unless first we have some idea of why we are coming together in the first place. I do a lot of parish missions. When I start a mission, one of the things I always ask people is, "Why are you here?"

They say, "I come here to praise the Lord." I reply, "You don't have to come to a church to praise the Lord."

You know that God is everywhere.?

Or they say, ?I know I?m going to die someday and this is like my ecclesiastical insurance policy.? I always tell people, ?If you are coming here in order to save your soul, you?re trying to buy what?s already been given to you, for I believe that the grace of God is such that he has purchased your soul already. There is nothing you can do to earn what God has already given you.?

People look at me as if to say, ?Well then?? I always say these three powerful, prophetic words from scripture: ?Here I am.?

God called Moses. He said in effect, ?Moses, Moses, I want you to partner with me. I want you to become my mouth, my eyes, my ears, and I want you to go out into the community and the world and I want you to make a difference in my name. I want you to tell them you?re there because I sent you.?

Moses answered with these three words: ?Here I am.?

If you don?t know it from scripture, you know it from the song. ?I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry. I have wept for love of them. They turn away, but I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright. I will give my light to them.?

And then the question. It?s not a rhetorical one. It is a real question from God to us. ?Whom shall I send?? I ask, ?Have you come here today to say to Almighty God, ?Here I am. What is it you want of me? What is it that you need of me? Tell me. Here I am???

John Kennedy said, ?Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.? I ask congregations what this world would be like if everyone who walks through these doors today said, ?I am not here today, God, to ask what you can do for me. I am here to ask, ?What can I do for you?? Here I am, Lord.?

The changes we are seeing in liturgy fail to take into account that while we are all brothers and sisters, there are things that are different culturally about many of us. Not better but different.

How do you know in a black church when Jesus becomes present? In the black church, the preacher will start preaching. Jesus is on the way. The mood in the church starts to change. Jesus is just outside. Suddenly, something happens to the preacher where he can?t stand still anymore. The church starts to move. Jesus is at the door. Suddenly, the preacher can?t say his words anymore, and he starts to sing. Something is happening now. Jesus is here.

We seem to be squeezing out any possibility for such spontaneity -- which is essential for people -- if every word has to be pronounced exactly, if there can be no commas or anything slightly out of place.

People need to feel. There are things that we genuinely need to feel in order to worship, because we feel racism. We feel hatred. We feel pain. We feel anger. We feel frustration. We need to have a service that lets us feel the love of God, that lets us feel God?s power, that lets us feel the negative stuff so we can feel the positive stuff that comes from Jesus Christ.

We must also, even liturgically, deal with the issue of women. Let me tell you why. In our minority communities, because of the devastation that has taken place for so long, a lot of our black men were not there. So we were led by these strong, powerful, loving women.

We see our mothers and our wives as being powerhouses. The church has got to understand that they can say anything they want, but in today?s world, if you say, ?Because you are a woman, you cannot be ...? what? Fill in

the blank. A doctor, lawyer, firefighter, police officer, pilot, teacher, member of Congress? There is only one thing that I can't fill in: "Because you are a woman, you cannot be a priest."

The church has to understand that if you are saying, particularly to minorities, "You either accept this or go somewhere else," what is happening is we are going somewhere else. We have to stand up and talk about this stuff. When you say, "Because you're a woman, you cannot be this or that," you better have some really good reasons. I'm not sure it's because you can say Jesus had 12 men as his disciples and from that, he meant for you to infer for all eternity they were alone worthy to be priests. As a liturgist, I know the symbolism is having a devastating effect.

Look at a bottle of Italian salad dressing, not the creamy kind, but the kind that has oil at the top and all the good stuff at the bottom. That looks like a lot of Christians I know. If you want that salad dressing to be good, what do you have to do? You have to shake it up.

This should be happening in liturgy. I ask people, "How many times have you come to Mass, received the Eucharist, heard the word of God? How many blessings have you received in your life? How much have you gotten and, still, on the outside, you look lifeless and dull? If you stay motionless and still, all that good stuff just sits there."

So you shake it up, and then what do you have to do? You have to pour it out. Once you pour out all that goodness, your vessel is empty. So when you come back to the house of God, now you're hungry. Now you'll want to hear, "All right, God, what you gave me last week, I poured out. What do you have for me this week? Let me hear the word of God this week."

If what you heard there is enough to shake you up, then you do something with it, you pour it out into a hungry world or a church that we love that needs to hear your voice. It is up to folks like us to make sure we shake the foundation because that's what Jesus Christ did. He shook us.

How many Masses do we go to where we settle for feeling lifeless? We need to be shaken loose. We need to be shaken up so that we can pour ourselves out.

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Online resources

All of the conference presentations are being prepared in edited form and will be available in the coming weeks on NCRonline.org and celebrationpublications.org.

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