

“Around the Bases: Λειτουργία”

“God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”
John 4:19-26 ¹

The General Thanksgiving from Morning Prayer in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

“Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

“And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.”

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“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

So begins what is generally called “The Collect for Purity” that precedes Communion in the Anglican and Episcopal liturgies of worship. And with these words we also begin another look at the five areas of our congregational life that we call WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, DISCIPLESHIP, MINISTRY, and MISSION (also WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO).

This, time, though, we’re going to look at these five areas using their Greek names, which are **leiturgia** (λειτουργία), **koinonia** (κοινωνία), **didache** (διδάχη), **diakonia** (διακονία), and **kerygma** (κηρυγμα). Using these new lenses to assist our vision may help us discover new aspects of these familiar dimensions of our common life.

The word “liturgy” comes from *leiturgia*, and “refers to the customary public worship done by a specific religious group according to its particular traditions. As a religious phenomenon, liturgy is a communal response to the sacred through activity reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication, or repentance. . . . It forms the basis for establishing a relationship with a divine agency, as well as with other participants in the liturgy.”<sup>2</sup> While Baptists don’t generally use the word “liturgy” to refer to our worship, our worship is indeed a “communal response to the sacred through activity reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and repentance,” and our worship does help us establish and strengthen relationships both with God and with each other.

The word *leiturgia* (from the verb λειτουργειν) is composed of a noun, *ergon* (εργον), which means “work,” and the adjective *leitos* (λειτος), which means “belonging to the people.” So *leiturgia* is “people’s work.”

Originally, *leiturgia* referred to work done for the good of the people either by the well-to-do or by the state; but from the second century B.C. onward (such as in the Septuagint), *leiturgia*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 14, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgy>

has represented the worship leadership provided by the priests and Levites in the Temple.<sup>3</sup> As time went by, *leiturgia* came to represent “the customary public worship done by a specific religious group, according to its particular traditions.”

I’ve noted before that Baptists have pretty much always been about missions. Indeed, William Carey, the “father of modern missions,” was an English Baptist. But surprising as it may seem at first, **missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is.**

John Piper has pointed out that **missions exists because worship doesn’t.** We were created to worship God, and missionary endeavor exists to lead persons into lives of worship after they’ve been born a second time through God’s Spirit. “When this present age is over,” Piper wrote, “and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more . . . but worship [leiturgia] abides forever.”<sup>4</sup> And so we turn our attention once more to this fundamental, central, eternal dimension of our common life.

Mark Galli, the editor of *Christianity Today*, has written a short book entitled, *Beyond Smells & Bells: the Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy*.<sup>5</sup> There he notes that the liturgy, from beginning to end, is not about meeting our needs, though they will be addressed. It’s not even about God-as-the-fulfiller-of-our-need-for-spiritual-meaning. The liturgy is about God. It’s about God as God is in Himself: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s not about our blessedness but about God’s.<sup>6</sup>

As we experienced in the “pastoral prayer” earlier, which was in fact the “General Thanksgiving for Morning Prayer” from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*,<sup>7</sup> liturgy signals from the very first moment of worship that our needs are not nearly as central as we imagine them to be. There is something infinitely more worthy of our attention—something, Someone who lies outside our selves.<sup>8</sup>

Galli notes that the liturgy takes us out of our worlds and ushers us into a strange new world, to show us that, despite what we might think or expect, the very last thing we need is more of the world out of which we’ve come.<sup>9</sup> The liturgy begins by informing us that, far from needing experiences congruent with our own fad-driven culture, what we really need is to be invited into an older and wiser culture—the culture of the Trinitarian God and His kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

This train of thought reminds me of that famous sentence with which Rick Warren begins *The Purpose Driven Life*: “**It’s not about you,**”<sup>11</sup> and of C. S. Lewis’s frequent affirmation throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* about Aslan, the Christ figure: “**He’s not a tame lion.**”

Before he became pope, Benedict XVI wrote that “the grandeur of the liturgy does not rest upon the fact that it offers interesting entertainment, but in rendering tangible the Totally Other, whom we are not capable of summoning. He comes because He wills.”<sup>12</sup> We gather to worship

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius Puthiadam, S.J., *Christian Liturgy: The Re-Presentation of the Greatest God-Human Story* (St. Paul’s Publications, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Galli, *Beyond Smells & Bells: the Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Galli, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Episcopal Church Publishing, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Galli, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Galli, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> Galli, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Galli, p. 61.

a God wrapped in transcendence and mystery, who, when asked to name Himself, answered cryptically, “**I AM WHO I AM**” (Exodus 3:14). But there’s more . . . .

Let’s return to Galli’s idea that what we need in worship is to “be invited into an older and wiser culture—the culture of the Trinitarian God and His kingdom.”<sup>13</sup> We do not worship “a solitary, dispassionate God who lives in peaceful isolation within His own perfections, but a God who from eternity has ‘lived in community’ as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>14</sup>

We’re granted glimpses into this Trinitarian Reality from the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 refers to both God the Creator and God the Spirit, and Genesis 3:15 gives us the first hint of the future arrival of God the Redeemer/Son. In Genesis 1:26, God said, “*Let us make mankind in **our** image, in **our** likeness,*” and so we have been created from the beginning in the image of a loving Trinity of Eternal Persons, a reality we cannot begin to fathom, but in which we have much cause to rejoice.

It’s important that we bear in mind that the unity of the Trinity is not merely formal and logical. It is also a unity of purpose; and most importantly, it is a unity of love.<sup>15</sup> And if God-as-Trinity is indeed the Core Reality of the universe, then that means that the Core of Reality is community.<sup>16</sup>

**And if loving community is at the core of the Trinity, then loving community is also at the core of who we are.**<sup>17</sup> Descartes notwithstanding, the real nature of things is not “I think, therefore I am.” God’s Word to us is, “**I love, therefore you are.**”<sup>18</sup>

Galli reminds us that “God’s love for us is not based on [God’s] need for love and fellowship—as if we were necessary for a God of love to be complete, as if God *needed* us. This cannot be true of the Trinitarian God. This God has known perfect love from before the creation of time and space. . . . God doesn’t need our paltry love, and yet He reaches out to us in love, wanting us to grab His hand in love, simply because, well, He wants to.”<sup>19</sup>

Because it is so difficult for us to understand these things, the liturgy’s Nicene Creed reminds us that in the fullness of time, God took on bodily form and lived among us so that we might know Him better (John 1:14). Dating from the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, the Nicene Creed is perhaps the most commonly used of the great ancient creeds. Let’s read it together:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

<sup>13</sup> Galli, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Galli, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Galli, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Galli, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Galli, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Galli, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> Galli, pp. 100-101.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

In taking on bodily form, Jesus made it impossible for us to continue to believe that God is merely, as some would have it, “the ground of being,” “the universal or collective consciousness,” “the higher self,” or that He resides primarily in “the depths of the subconscious.” This is no “tame lion.” In the objective, bodily presence of Jesus, we collide with the reality that God is not to be identified with our thoughts or feelings or religious experiences. The liturgy reminds us that God is Truly and Totally Other, not some projection of our own selves, and the Good News in this is that this means we really can have a genuine relationship with God.<sup>20</sup>

The liturgy does not point us to “the Christ spirit,” “the ground of all being,” “the Force,” or to any other amorphous, abstract spiritual entity. It points us instead to the One who did not think Pure Spirit a thing to be grasped. He who created flesh and called it good, put His money where His divine mouth was, took on physical form, and lived among the embodied.<sup>21</sup>

You and I worship God because once we have seen God in the Person of Jesus, we cannot help worshipping God. Indeed, as the Bible shows us in dozens of ways, to see God, to experience God, *demand*s the response of worship, because God is *worthy* of worship.

When we worship, we offer passionate adoration to Father, Son, and Spirit who love us passionately, and we open ourselves to God so we can begin to see life as God sees it. True worship involves choosing to focus on God’s will rather than on our own agendas, to receive God’s Word rather than merely spouting our own points of view.

In worship, we offer ourselves anew to God’s purposes rather than trying to fit God into our own goals and plans, and a sustained practice of such worship lends coherence, meaning, depth, and connection to our lives. Worship reconfigures our interior lives and aligns us with the life of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

We don’t come to worship looking for a particular religious experience. We don’t come to be edified. We don’t come to be instructed. We come simply to worship Father, Son, and Spirit. “We do this on weeks when we feel the joy of the Lord. We do this on weeks when we only feel despair. We do this on weeks when we feel nothing. And if we do this for weeks and years, we’ll slowly find that the soul is gaining its own sort of intelligence, that we’re apprehending things the mind and heart cannot fathom, that we’re entering into the divine presence, and that divine presence is entering into us.”<sup>23</sup>

Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp affirm that “Worship is first and finally the service of God and needs no other justification. The transformation of worshipers is not its central aim. In fact, we are not apt to be changed by worship if we come to it primarily to be changed, for then we will be back to concentrating on ourselves. The transformation of the church is a by-product of the liturgy. It occurs only when the church is determined foremost to simply worship God.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Galli, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Galli, p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Galli, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth: The Power of the Worshipping Community in the Modern World* (London: Wipf & Stock, 2001), p. 69.

Another way to think about liturgy, about *leiturgia*, is as invitation to join our lives to a drama that is both epic and eternal. *Leiturgia* is not about watching others perform something that was wonderful once-upon-a-time. **We are the characters in HisStory**, actors in in a divine drama, protagonists in an enduring Story that makes sense of life and allows us to enter into communion with God in ways that touch body, mind, and spirit.<sup>25</sup>

For persons who find themselves without a story, or with a story no larger than themselves, or with a story soiled by sin, *leiturgia* reminds us that we do not have to abandon Hope or fabricate some new myth to force meaning onto and into our existence. In this Story, our past is not defined by our own sin but by Christ's victory.<sup>26</sup>

In this Story, the future is no longer defined by the anxieties of our age. The future very well may include terrorism, disease, and environmental havoc, and we may be called upon to suffer many kinds of pain. But this future does not define our Future, the Ultimate Reality toward which all of history moves. This is the Good News that transcends the daily news. And so we live not by the predictions of pundits who make their living by the furrows of their brows, but by the sure and certain Hope of Christ's inbreaking Kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

This Story invites us into both a New Creation and into a new "time zone." *Leiturgia* "is an experience of God's Kingdom in which past and future coincide in joyous present!"<sup>28</sup> As we are one in Christ, so are those who have gone before us. If we and they are all one in Christ, then we are also in union with one another, a union so strong and lasting that nothing can separate us, not even death—and certainly not time or space.<sup>29</sup>

To say all this is to say that worship is not about what happens at the front of the sanctuary. Worship is about what happens in each of our hearts as we experience God's Presence. There is one, and only one, audience for worship, and that audience is our creating, sustaining, forgiving, and redeeming God. When we truly experience God's Presence, we fall to our knees, both literally and figuratively, as will every other creature in the universe on that Great Day when our Lord Christ returns (Philippians 2:10-11).

And now, as we conclude our worship for this morning, I invite you to join me in the responsive affirmations of the liturgy's *sursum corda*, which is Latin for "lift up your hearts." It goes like this:

"Lift up your hearts."

**"We lift them up to the Lord."**

"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**"It is right to give our thanks and praise."**

These words, used in the liturgies of the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches, express the longing of our souls in this sin-torn world for the wholeness of the New Heaven and the New Earth, which are a-borning, even now:<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Galli, pp. 11-14.

<sup>26</sup> Galli, pp. 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> Galli, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Galli, p. 66.

<sup>29</sup> Galli, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> [www.reformedworship.org/article/december-2006/lift-your-hearts](http://www.reformedworship.org/article/december-2006/lift-your-hearts); the words date at least from A.D. 215, in Hippolytus's *Apostolic Traditions*.

“Lift up your hearts.”

**“We lift them up to the Lord.”**

“Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**“It is right to give Him our thanks and praise.”**

“And therefore, O Lord, we praise You, joining with the heavenly chorus, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all those in every generation who have looked to You in hope, to proclaim with them Your glory, in their unending hymn: ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, Heaven and earth are full of Your glory!’”

And all God’s people said, “AMEN”!