

Liturgy Means ‘the Work of God’s People’
Psalm 119:33—40; Matthew 18:15—20

My first job, for which I was paid ‘*under the table*,’ involved slicing onions on Tuesday and lunchmeat on Saturday—*Plaza Cold Cuts*, on Chester Pike, in Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania. And on one busy day in early September, it seemed like everybody and their mother wanted to have their imported ham sliced thin and they wanted it ASAP, or as fast as I could clean the liverwurst off the blade, offer a smiling statement like ‘*How may I help you?*’, receive their order and go! The owner, after a couple hours, noticed how I seemed a little red-faced and breathless; and in the midst of all these customers, standing at the counter, folding their arms, he pulled me aside and he said, “Rest.” And for a few brief moments my work consisted of just that: rest.

I mention this memory because what we do during a service of worship is considered THE WORK OF GOD’S PEOPLE FOR THE BENEFIT OF GOD’S PEOPLE. That’s what the word, ‘*LITURGY*,’ means. It’s work—not just for me, but for all of us. And yet, it’s the kind of work that Jesus refers to as a “*yoke*.” Drawing on his first century agrarian culture, talking to peasants who know what it’s like to glean a field, he says “*My yoke is easy and my burden is light*.” That’s from Matthew 11:30; and from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi—as he takes a break from his part-time job as a tent-maker—we venture a step further:

“... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

In other words, just as we take the time and exert the effort to gather here on Labor Day weekend and to participate in a worship service, God is doing a holy work on us. We are God’s Workmanship. And it’s for this reason that *Liturgy* has borne the test of millennia.

However, I know what some of you may be thinking. You're thinking these words and phrases, written on this piece of paper, are just words. Big deal! And if we wanted to, we could totally ad-lib our way through worship without a formalized liturgy. And, of course, we could. We could just blurt out whatever pops into our heads—impromptu. And that would be fine except, very often what pops into our heads and spills out of our mouths has nothing to do with the work God is doing on us. It has more to do with the chatter of our own egos—our own self-talk—and in stead of offering up the clay of our lives for the Holy Spirit to shape into the vessel God intends us to be, we alone are crafting a more, manageable version of a 'god' we can handle.

By contrast, the liturgy from Psalm 119 is not something we can handle alone:

“Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I might keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.”

All 150 psalms, you see, are promptings like that. And notice: what makes them *work* is how we get to ask God *to teach* and *to give SO THAT you and I* might do something in response.

And not just any old thing! Not whatever we want because we can! In fact, very often the liturgy might prepare us for the really difficult work that Jesus describes in Matthew 18:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If that member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if not...”

Now, let's pause and really take this in. What Jesus seems to admit quite frankly is that the church will consist of persons who occasionally injure one another, and the damage will occasionally be enough that we could and we should devote some energy to reconciliation with them. We should try to do this work. We should try to participate in this yoke because the difficult people in our lives—even mothers and fathers—aren't necessarily there by accident.

Into the Wild was a 1996 best-selling book (eventually made into a film) which tells the story of Christopher McCandless. McCandless is this a disgruntled, recently graduated-from-college kid. He's upset with his parents and he's upset with society in general. And so he goes! McCandless tramps his way across the country in an effort to live by himself in the Alaskan wilderness. Along the way, of course, he gets odd jobs and makes a few friends; but when the retired, recovering alcoholic, Mr. Franz, confronts him about what he's going to make of this life, McCandless replies, "I think careers are a twentieth century invention and I don't want one." And yet, that's not the end of it. Curiously, McCandless goes on to describe how 'God' can be experienced in everything and everyone (presumably without the need of organized or disorganized religion); and when Mr. Franz gets wind of that remark he offers this response:

"I want to tell you something. From bits and pieces of what you have told me about your family, your mother and your dad... And I know you have problems with the church too... But there is some kind of bigger thing that we can all appreciate and it sounds to me you don't mind calling it God... But when you forgive, you love. And when you love, God's light shines through you."

You see, this is what I'm saying: the liturgy of any church—even this one—is meant to provide someone like Christopher McCandless with the tools he'll need for the only real job that matters. And we're not talking about a career in Corporate America. We're talking about the work of authentic, honest-to-goodness reconciliation. And if it doesn't happen within a church community, how can the church demonstrate it to the world? Liturgy, far from being this formulaic stuff that we recite—*blah, blah, blah*—can instead provide the guidance we need. And so, we don't run away and hide in Alaska. We do that work. We do that work because God has put us into these relationships... Am I being naive?

Aren't there toxic people out there who are bound to do toxic things? Yes, there are. And the church sometimes has to do its work of reconciliation among them and with them. "But if you are not listened to," Jesus says back in Matthew 18,

"take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector."

Again, if this sounds like work, that's because it is. But the truth is—we don't take it up in a vacuum. A church's liturgy can become that voice telling us to 'Rest' in the midst of some very trying and very exhausting encounters. And if you come into worship and you hear the worship leader say, "***God is near the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit,***" don't just treat that verse like a *Hallmark* card. Look around. Is there someone whose heart is broken? Have you contributed to the breaking? Is there someone you know who won't set foot in the church because their spirit's been crushed by some hypocrisy? After worship, go find them. Not necessarily to recruit them back to church, but to embody how God is near the crushed in spirit!

Annie Dillard, in her off-color way, once joked that the ladies of the church shouldn't wear frilly Easter bonnets on Easter; they should wear crash helmets. She also wrote that the ushers shouldn't pass out leaflets; they should issue life-jackets. And why? Well, maybe because the work of being a serious community of reconciliation isn't meant to be taken lightly. We are not an audience, looking to be entertained. We are not a club, hoping others will join our club and fit in. The church is God's on-the-job training, full of misfits and broken-down pieces, and the work that needs to happen happens because of the Spirit-inspired liturgy.

There's an episode of *The Simpsons*, which is this sarcastic television show, featuring Homer Simpson. He's in church with his family, and because he's secretly listening to a football game through his earphones, he really has no idea of what's at stake. During the football game, which has its own programmed responses, the kicker is lining up a field goal. And just as the radio announcer describes the ball, going through the uprights, Homer raises his arms over his head and stands up in the middle of the congregation. "*It's good! It's good!*" he shouts. And yes! That's hilarious! But maybe, after everything has been said and done—over a lifetime of gambling-addictions, pornography-addictions, intentional slights, unintentional slights—the athletic events that take place in multi-billion dollar stadiums, before massive crowds, won't matter as much as the work happening here—"***wherever two or three are gathered...***"

In a film on the Vietnam War I watched a soldier stumble out on the battle field, shouting "*Save us, Howard! Save us, Howard!*" And when the survivors found him later and asked about 'Howard,' he referred back to the prayer he learned in Sunday School: "*Our Father, Howard be thy name...*" Again, this is very funny! I get a cathartic laugh, every time I ponder the gallows-humor of scenes like that. But wouldn't it be better for us to bring the reality of warfare into the Presence of of the Reality of God? Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 provide the liturgy: "***they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.***" And so, look! Whether we refer to God's name as 'Howard' or 'Hallowed', isn't this the work? Isn't this how we're being saved? Think about it: just as Jesus embodies the Word of God in the flesh, so are we summoned to do the same. Embody these words. Let them work on you!

A few Sundays ago, when Ken Cathcart was filling in for Joette, working the sound system, I overheard someone tease him. He said, “*You better watch it; if you don’t do a good job, you might be fired.*” And I get it. That’s funny. This church is full of many retirees like Ken, who’ve spent their lives doing really important and laudable work. And I do thank you for that work. I applaud you. Congratulations to all those who’ve come to the end of their careers and whose children have been launched. Well done! And I affirm what you may believe to be your voluntarism and your voluntary gifts to the church. No one is going to fire you. Amen.

And yet—the real work of reconciliation continues, doesn’t it? The real work that we cannot handle alone continues, doesn’t it? The real work between family members—that goes on! Doesn’t it? The real work of reconciliation between generations, between races, between ethnic groups, economic classes, between political parties... the real work continues. Doesn’t it?

And, you see, if it does for you as it does for me, the liturgy is where we rest.