

Prayer and Action: a liturgical adventure

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Introduction and outline

In this lecture, I will begin by examining some expressions found in the tradition for the close relationship between leitourgia and diakonia. This will reveal the theological foundations of worship and the liturgical order that I will first explore in Luther's own thought and then develop in three dimensions that shape the worshipping community towards the neighbor: liturgy as embodied proclamation, liturgy as a language beyond representation offering a simple structure and dynamic of word and sacrament, gift and discipleship, faith and obedience, and liturgy as a spiritual discipline. I will then look more closely at the sacrament of Holy Communion and prayer as disrupters of a certain status quo.

But let's begin with Scripture. Amos prophesies in God's name...

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." [Amos 5:21-24]

I. Terminology and approaches

Aren't these powerful verses for liturgists and musicians? "Do away with your rituals, your beautiful hymns, your melodies – they mean nothing if you do not serve your neighbor." "Don't come to my altar if, in your heart, you have built a wall between you and your brother or sister, between your neighbor and yourself, between the stranger and yourself." Liturgy and life are entwined, deeply intermingled, shaping each other, admonishing and comforting.

Several expressions have sought to describe this interconnection. *Lex orandi – lex credenda* complexifies the relationship between prayer and belief with, more recently, a third component added: *lex agenda*. Belief (doctrine), prayer (supplication), action (ethics) point to blurred boundaries between the three with, perhaps the most problematic word being *lex*. The Orthodox tradition has given the church the understanding of a liturgy after the liturgy, that is, a way of being in the world is not only shaped by the liturgy but is a liturgy itself. This tradition highlights the biblical connection between liturgy and service in particular, to which I will return. And finally, a more recent, and Lutheran description, which curiously has been more fully received in the Catholic Church, even in an encyclical by Benedict XVI,¹ that defines the connection between liturgy and life with these three terms: *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia* – a trinitarian confluence describing both church and Christian life.

I will focus primarily on this third expression and even more specifically with two of its terms, *leitourgia* and *diakonia*, since they are specifically the focus of this conference.

Diakonia is, I want to argue, at least initially, the more self-evident term though it too has multiple layers of meaning. In the New Testament, *diakonia* means to serve or to minister. It must be noted, however, that also in the NT, this act of serving “is always to God.” (Halvorson, 2). A holistic understanding of *diakonia* always begins with God and ends with God. Service is rooted in God’s gracious initiative and extends through persons to neighbors, in whom also God is encountered. The equipping for service or ministry is also God’s initiative. It is God who is the source of all gifts or charisms for the building up of the body – not just the body of the church but the body of humanity and of all creation, the building up of a communion already given. [The vision is large!] *Diakonia* is the gracious acting of God through God’s servants (Halvorson, 3).

Diakonia as service, rooted in God’s gracious act, has at least two dimensions. I cannot say it better than one of my finest teachers, Prof. Loren Halvorson.

There are two moods to the church's *diakonia*, both the *Te Deum Laudamus*, and the *Kyrie*. Both find expression in the church's service. (...) The servants of God are those who bear the invitation to a banquet: a summons to a royal feast. Christ's very first act of service, the opening line of his ministry, contains this

¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI, 2005.

note of joy and fulfillment in the miracle at Cana of Galilee. Surrounding the ministry of the church is the halo of excitement in the bearing of the good news to the world.²

These servants, who bear the “magnificent invitation,” who go out into the world with thanksgiving, are also the ones who encounter human need, misery, and despair. The invitation is to the world. Yet, it is always God who is served whether in thanksgiving at the feast or through stepping into the suffering of the neighbor. Unfortunately, the *Te Deum* mood of diakonia has been largely forgotten with the focus primarily and even solely on service to human need. Yet, the stepping into suffering, bearing the burden of the neighbor, building up the body, revealing a communion is only possible as an act of thanksgiving. Religiously speaking – or ritually formulated - thanksgiving replaces or displaces sacrifice.

Now, the term leitourgia, which also conjures up certain preconceived definitions. When we hear it, we immediately think of prayer, preaching, and sacramental life. But, if we look at the use of the word leitourgia in the Bible, we discover something surprising.

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), leitourgia is used exclusively for the cultic or ritual service rendered by the Levites particularly in the Temple. It was a word designating an official action in conformity with the levitical laws. Private worship had its own vocabulary – latria or doulia.

In the New Testament, it’s use is less common. Leitourgia is not used to designate what we commonly understand to be the liturgy. In the NT, it is used to designate an ethical action – in particular it is meant “to minister” as in 2 Cor. 9:12 : “for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgiving to God.” In other words, the distinction between leitourgia and diakonia is blurred. They both denote service or describe service in the world and both are rooted in thanksgiving, eucharistia.

Leitourgia is also used to describe Jesus’ role as mediator – this is the “more excellent ministry” (in Hebrews 8:6). It is not used as a synonym for ritual or for worship in the NT. In fact – and this is perhaps a significant point – the word was avoided because it was so associated with the prescribed legal,

² Loren Halvorson, *Diakonia: A Study of the Church’s Ministry* (unpublished study for the American Lutheran Church, 1960), 2.

“ritualistic” actions. What is interesting to me as someone thinking about what liturgy “means” is that the witness of the NT suggests an effort to rid the word of its ritualistic connotations.

There is a distinct effort to shift the metaphor of worship. In a broadbrush stroke and certainly open to much critique, I will suggest that a classic metaphor for public worship or liturgy is “receive and give back” or “take and give” schema, a contract (*do ut des*). Believers (worshippers) receive a gift – liberation, forgiveness, or even material gifts such as bountiful crops, etc. – and in return they give something back – a sacrifice, a commitment, a vow, worship. This metaphor is still popular in Christian spirituality and understandings of worship. However, in the NT, we witness a move away from such a sacrificial metaphor. Yes, “something” has been given – the gift of Christ – but the people can do nothing in return. The only possible action is one of service to the neighbor, in other words, to minister.

Emmanuel Levinas, the Jewish-French philosopher, has highlighted this dynamic characteristic of leitourgia. Leitourgia should be understood in the original meaning of the early Greek polis, according to which liturgy means the giving away of capital to the community without any return foreseen.³

In this sense, at in its etymological origin, the liturgy is a dynamic. The “gift” received knows of no return gratitude. As gift, God’s grace – the Christ event – exceeds anything that human beings could offer in return. The only response is thanksgiving, a thanksgiving expressed as a solidarity, a communion, a bearing of and with the neighbor. The response is liturgical. It is perhaps the only ethic to which a baptized person is committed. Luther writes in *The Babylonian Captivity*, “For we have vowed enough in baptism, more than we can ever fulfil; if we give ourselves to the keeping of this one vow, we shall have all we can do.”⁴ But that is a vast topic and for another lecture, another time.

Leitourgia and diakonia embrace this double movement, one and the same, as the Te Deum and the Kyrie, towards God and towards the neighbor.

II. Luther’s reform of the liturgy

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (first published, J. Vrin, Paris, 1949).

⁴ LW 36:74-75.

Luther's own framework for the liturgy revolves around this double movement: always towards God and towards the neighbor. In the preface to the German Mass, Luther develops his now famous statement in *The Freedom of a Christian*. "A Christian person is a free sovereign, above all things, subject to no one." (...) "A Christian person is a dutiful servant in all things and subject to everyone." In the German Mass, Luther applies this powerful paradox of freedom and responsibility to the liturgical order.

1526. It's been almost 10 years since the 95 Theses. The Reformation has taken hold in many German provinces and cities but Luther has not yet composed a liturgical order. He did adapt the Latin Mass in 1523 but only so slightly. He hesitates to write a new "evangelical" order of worship. It's like an evangelical hesitation. Why? I believe he hesitated because he saw the danger: that people would welcome it, yes, but then they would say, "See, this is how it should be done!" Or even years later, people would reclaim it as the true and most authentic form – very much what we see with the struggle concerning the Latin Mass. Finally, however, Luther ceded to the pressure because there were so many new liturgies being composed and not all of them particularly helpful. Based on the mass of his day, Luther translated and composed the German Mass but not without stating, in the opening line of the Preface, "Do not turn this into a rigid law."

Luther understood the human tendency, arising out of human need, to quickly turn a ritual order into an eternally established law or security. Luther understood that, when the liturgy becomes such an established order, the focus is once again on the accomplishment of the task rather than an abandonment in thanksgiving. The liturgy – and therefore spirituality – becomes once again sacrificial rather than sacramental.

And it is at this critical junction and danger, that Luther makes his observation of the double movement of the liturgy. He observed all around him many contemporary liturgies popping up and writes:

"Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before others as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers—as is the way with Christian liberty. For most use it for their own advantage and pleasure and not for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor."

The liturgy can too easily be used for one's own advantage, such as creating a good feeling or a spiritual warmth, when, in its heart, leitourgia should direct

us to both God and neighbor. Therefore, when it comes to reforming the liturgical order, the question to be posed is simple. Does this reform glorify God and does it direct the community towards the neighbor? In other words, does this liturgical reform translate the Gospel? Does it break down the barriers we build around us? Does it leave us, as Luther suggests, undressed at the font with only faith (that glorifies God) and love (for neighbor)? Does it nurture these two – faith and love? Or is it just pleasant songs and rituals that mean nothing, clinging cymbals that ignore justice?

[Footnote – you will have noticed that I have used the expression “liturgical order.” I use this on purpose, rather than the word “worship.” It’s an important distinction to make and the clue for us to distinguish them is found again in the German Mass. There, Luther uses the word *Gottesdienst* but he uses it in two different ways.

This German word does not translate well into English. It is ambiguous for it can mean service to God or God’s service to us. It has often been uncritically translated as worship. Luther however uses it in two ways. There is the concept with which we are perhaps most familiar. The concept of worship denotes the believer’s stance or disposition towards God in any given moment, both public and private. But Luther also uses the word to refer to a public practice that structures an assembly’s worship in Word and sacrament. This is in fact the predominant use in the Preface of the German Mass. Luther emphasizes the importance of an order or pattern – not for its own sake but for the sake of proclamation. A “liturgical order” is not in opposition to evangelical freedom, rather the contrary! It is the expression of a freedom that embodies a responsibility. An order, in fact, helps us live in that freedom according to the Gospel.

Worship can happen in many ways. But the public proclamation of the Gospel in Word and sacrament follows, for Luther at least, a particular liturgical order. People may have been disappointed when he finally published the German Mass for it was nothing but a simplification of the Catholic mass with some of Luther’s own compositions for singing added to it. The only major change was in the liturgy of the sacrament. Here though is a wonderful example of how Luther takes an old pattern and makes it speak something new... literally turning everything around.

Here we begin to see that the pattern, the liturgical order we engage is inherently theological. The liturgical structure expresses something about God and God’s relationship to us. Liturgy forms an assembly, it can shape believers into a Gospel community, into a community that has God and

neighbor, faith and love, at its center (or it cannot... it can also shape a community into a hermetically-sealed, happy with themselves, closed door group). The challenge for us as presiders and leaders and planners of the liturgy is to ensure that the liturgical order shapes a community into a Gospel way of living in the world, into a church with open doors. Liturgy and life are entwined, deeply intermingled in each other. End of footnote]

III. Liturgy shaping a porous community

Building on Luther's insights, I wish now to focus on three ways in which the liturgy shapes community towards the neighbor.

First of all, perhaps not that evident but nonetheless important, proclamation cannot be confined to preaching the Word. This simple fact is perhaps shocking to some – especially in North America where I come from – with its fixation on preaching and the cult of the preacher. The gospel however is both preached and distributed. This is Luther's own way of expressing it. In fact, we need to pay as much attention to the liturgical order as a proclamatory even as we pay attention to preaching.

This requires asking what the liturgical order, the rituals employed, the use of space (yes even chairs and pews), the position of bodies, the music and the arts, what are they communicating? Are they translating the Gospel or something else? For example, if you are a presiding at the liturgy, do your ritual actions – even where you stand in the sanctuary or worship space - focus attention on yourself as presider or does it focus attention on God's gifts in the midst of the worshipping assembly? Does praying focus on the needs of the community or is it attentive to the cries outside the walls of the church?

One way to deflect attention from one's self as presider is to highlight the central symbols, to map out a street plan for the assembly moving from confession and baptismal remembrance at the font to reading at the lectern to praying in the midst of the assembly and then to presiding at the table. For example, not all presiding needs to happen at the altar. Embodying ritual action in a liturgy does not draw attention to the presider, nor even to the symbols, but to the heart of the liturgy, Jesus Christ, who lived, preached, ate among us, who stepped into our suffering, died and rose again. At the heart of worship is the Paschal Mystery that transforms life.

The liturgical order is an event that places the faithful community at the heart of the Christ event, into the life, death and the resurrection of Jesus, into the

dying and rising made true in baptism. And it does so not just with words as in the sermon but in actions, in gestures, in prayer, in thanksgiving, in lamentation, in song. The liturgical order as a whole is engaging us in this event – the Christ event for us today. [Torslunde Altarpiece]

Secondly, the liturgical order witnesses to a mystery, the mystery of life that is stronger than death, to a goodness that is stronger than any evil. The liturgical order is meant to free us to live that goodness in and for and with the world. It engages us in the *Te Deum Laudamus*, this movement away from “me” towards God and neighbor, from self-centeredness to being “for others.” It is a baptismal movement: dying to self and being raised to new life, that is, to participation in both the suffering and the life of Christ, dying to self, dying to all the barriers I build up around myself and being initiated into a communion with God and with all humankind. This baptismal movement is liturgically embodied as a community experiences Scripture, admonition and comfort, prayer, table fellowship and being sent out.

The liturgical order doesn’t just narrate this baptismal movement, it’s not about an abstract dying and rising, nor about simply learning it. Luther once exclaimed: the Devil knows the biblical narrative much better than we can ever know it, his problem is that he can’t understand that it is “for him.” He can’t understand Scripture as event.

Liturgy is an event connected to the life of the community, to the life of a society, with all its tensions, challenges, anguish, anxieties and pain poses a challenge for us: if liturgy is to be connected to life, to justice, to peace, to reconciliation, to creation, it will necessarily be a language that is both contextual and counter-cultural. And it will require constant renewal through a dialogue between gospel and the local community to whom the Gospel is addressed. [Today, it is a fervent prayer for peace, for a just peace in Ukraine and the world. It is a gospel that proclaims Jesus is a refugee.]

Unfortunately, the rituals of the liturgy can tell other stories besides the mystery of the cross. For example, they can too quickly equate the cross with national identity or some other cultural value (perhaps self-expression, individualism, prosperity, or “creativity” take primacy?). As we plan worship and enact it, vigilance is always required. Are we just repeating the same pattern, week after week, without much reflection on how our rites relate to the Scripture of the day? Are we creating closed communities that are happy with the way things are without asking what is Gospel today? Again, the challenge posed consists in asking do our songs, our festivals, our melodies, our prayers shape community into a river of justice?

The liturgical order itself, in its basic structure, gives us the means to hold this tension and recognize the temptation that opposing narratives present. The liturgical order holds the community in a certain tension, it is called: Word and sacrament. This structure, underlined in Augsburg Confession Article 5 (God has chosen means where God will always be present creating faith), embodies the Paschal Mystery. It holds gift and discipleship together. God's justifying act is gift and power, that is, as gift received and obedience, discipleship embodied, called into the world.

This liturgical structure comes to expression in some basic, biblical things to translate the Gospel. These central things are not earth-shattering nor are they esoteric. They come from daily living... There is a bath and water. There are words and prayers. There is a table and meal-sharing. These are simple, everyday things, that Jesus uses to live and communicate gospel – with words and through physical, material elements. How do our rituals connect to these daily things? [For example, is bread used for Holy Communion? Does it taste good? Story of my daughter.]

Church tradition has designated these daily things by certain religious terms: preaching, baptism, Holy Communion, mutual admonition and comfort, ministry, prayer and thanksgiving, and most notably the seventh mark of the church that Luther added, the holy possession of the cross, that is bearing the suffering of the neighbor.

Word and sacrament reorient life, shaping communities towards the world.

Thirdly, the liturgical order is a spiritual discipline. It opens a space of humility. And here, we may be surprised. For Luther, the liturgical order is necessary because, though we may be baptized, we are not yet Christian (and he includes himself in this verdict)! “[S]uch orders are needed,” Luther writes, “for those who are still becoming Christians or need to be strengthened.” A liturgical order is like an exercise of faith, a spiritual discipline that shapes our lives according to the Gospel, dismantling the barriers that keep the stranger out, stripping away our inner walls of fear, of shame, or of privilege, inviting us into the joy and freedom of the Gospel.

IV. Liturgical Pattern and the Sacrament

The pattern of the liturgy is simple: Gathering – Word – Meal – Sending

- 1) Gathering us in for many places. We enter via the font. Remembrance of our identity. A time of transition – bringing us to a place of adoration.
- 2) Listening to God’s story – hearing Law and Gospel in these stories – being invited into that pattern by the preaching and the singing. All of this movement leading to prayer (Luther) and the sharing of peace.
- 3) In our need, we come to the Meal (Luther: we demand the sacrament) where we receive Christ and all the saints, the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, communion.
- 4) And then sent, as broken body into the world to discover God again already waiting for us.

This pattern engages us on all levels of our existence – in our joy and in our deep need. It takes our stories and places them in God’s story reorienting us into the world. Our prayers, the preaching, our songs, our rituals are all attentive to this flow as the Spirit shapes a cruciform community. [This embodied pattern has been deeply challenged by COVID. We do not have time in the context of this conference to explore this impact but we must ask how are the decisions we are making today regarding virtual worship or communion shaping faith communities in the future?]

I also do not have time to spend on each of these actions of the liturgical pattern but I would like to focus on the Meal and the meaning of the sacraments as they relate to our theme of leitourgia and diakonia.

In the many reforms of worship that Luther accomplished, the one characteristic of the liturgy that he maintained and, in fact, strengthened, was the relationship between Word and sacrament. The “and” is critical. It is not one without the other. The celebration of the “mass” was not to be solely focused on the celebration of the sacrament with people only watching nor was it to be the opposite extreme, which started emerging with the Reformation, that is, worship centered around preaching where the sacrament was subsumed to the sermon, if not completely eliminated.

Holding Word and sacrament together underlines creaturely reality. Human beings are not simply minds or cognitive entities. They know and think but they also imagine, sense, feel, decide, and judge using their five senses. As we have seen, Gospel is not only the Word spoken but it is also the Word distributed – touched, tasted, seen, encountered. It is perhaps most succinctly defined in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article 13.

God moves our hearts through the word and the rite at the same time so that they believe and receive faith just as Paul says [Rom. 10:17], “So faith comes from what is heard.” For just as the Word enters through the ear in order to strike the heart, so also the rite enters through the eye in order to move the heart. The word and the rite have the same effect.⁵

As word and rite, as a full enactment in the midst of a collective body, the liturgy points to this mystery – the one person of Christ, human and divine. In the bread and wine and promise, the community encounters not the historical Jesus nor an imaginary Christ but God who calls a community into an exchange. This dynamic of the sacrament is perhaps most vividly portrayed in the Gospel of Luke and the Resurrection story of the Emmaus disciples.

You know the story well. After listening to Jesus “preach” to them on the way, with their hearts burning, though they still do not recognize Jesus. They invite the unknown traveler to stay with them. They share a meal. Jesus, as guest, took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened but then he vanishes. The disciples cannot hold on to him. They cannot enshrine him. He passes over them and thereby invites them into a continual exodus.⁶

Jesus’ presence is known not as a body on a cross but as a body given, poured out in praxis, with others, in a communal action that always points beyond itself. His presence is known in the act of sharing a meal, bread and wine. The notion of real presence – that communion which constitutes Christ’s own being, human and divine – is not an object to be adored or contained (whether in a tabernacle or in a small group of friends) but a praxis that is called to seek always new beginnings, new possibilities.

In his treatise *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ*, Luther explains the “true significance” of the sacrament not as the “forgiveness of sins” but as a true fellowship that is bound to the forgiveness of sins. Luther places the emphasis on communion. Forgiveness is broadened beyond the individual experience and reality, beyond the personal relationship with God (though never denying that relationship) to the communal. At the table, believers are drawn into God’s reconciling activity.

⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article 13:5.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, Les pèlerins d’Emmaus in *Christus* 4 (1957), 60.

Luther writes, “The significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints. This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again, all sufferings and sins also become common property and this love engenders love in return and [love] unites.”⁷

In the sacrament, something happens. Christ comes with the whole company of believers. The community participates in the “happy exchange”: all spiritual possessions of Christ is shared with all and in exchange Christ and the community take up all sufferings and sins. Misery and tribulations are laid upon Christ and upon the community of saints.⁸ A praxis of burden-bearing is established.

So it is clear from all this that this holy sacrament is nothing else than a divine sign, in which are pledged, granted, and imparted Christ and all saints together with all their works, sufferings, merits, mercies, and possessions, for the comfort and strengthening of all who are in anxiety and sorrow, persecuted by the devil, sins, the world, the flesh, and every evil. And to receive the sacrament is nothing else than to desire all this and firmly to believe that it is done.⁹

The sacrament of the eucharist imparts Christ and all saints together. Luther will almost never mention “Christ” without adding “and all the saints.” Christ becomes Christ-for-us in the communion of believers and the participant in the sacrament – in *leitourgia* – is once again directed to that other mode of existence, that dissemination of Christ, the dissemination of Christ’s presence in the other. Incarnation and community are inseparable. The neighbor and the believer are both caught up in the gift of God’s continual dissemination through liturgical repetition, through the celebration of Word and sacraments. Through the participation in the eucharist, believers are made one with Christ and all the saints in their works, sufferings and merit.¹⁰

Union with Christ is not the inception of an individualistic piety (Jesus and me) or a new spirituality. When believers are “conformed” to this disseminated Christ, they are conformed to the neighbor in suffering and need. This *conformatas Christi* is a diaconal con-formation and identity. Luther

⁷ LW 35:50-51.

⁸ LW 35:54.

⁹ LW 35:60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

writes, “Again, through the same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity.”¹¹

The key word here is not “take upon ourselves” but “through the same love.” This love first took upon itself all need, this love revealed itself through death, through dissemination, this love draws the faithful to take upon themselves the sufferings of others. What the believer receives in the celebration of the eucharist is Christ with all his saints, that is, what continually returns in the movement of the liturgy, is Christ, human and divine, Christ and the other, the neighbor in need and in blessing.¹²

Christ’s presence – real presence – in the sacrament confronts and disrupts the ideas worshippers wish to make of God. In that quiet, cozy moment of reception, when the bread and the cup are shared, the individual may imagine this communion with Jesus but real presence disrupts that imagination. Not a white sparkling Jesus returns to commune but the neighbor, in all shapes and sizes and conditions, greets us. Real presence directs us to an absent presence (or a real absence), the neighbor who is not in the community’s midst but is perhaps knocking at the door. Real presence is then not a doctrine or reserved in a rite or held tightly within the walls of a community but becomes embodied as praxis in the community. The real body of Christ draws us into a unique communion, into diakonia.

V. Prayer and action

As can be seen, Luther (and I will add Melanchthon) were both deeply concerned about liturgical practice as a vehicle for the Gospel. They were deeply concerned that, in the reform of liturgical practice, the pattern and the rites serve proclamation, that giving of Christ.

The things we do, the ceremonies, the rituals we engage, have a purpose: they translate the advent of Jesus Christ in our midst. They proclaim his life and death and resurrection in our midst. They bring us to an encounter – not with

¹¹ LW 35:58.

¹² Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2009), Chapter 6.

a story, not with a narrative, not with knowledge – but with a person, with Another, with Jesus Christ, and therefore with the neighbor.

As practitioners of the liturgy, we are called to tend that encounter. Finding ways for that immeasurable goodness to be revealed, that justice roll like a river and be made real in the lives of people.

In conclusion, I wish to mention one passage from the Apology of the AC. It is a surprising statement and, I believe, summarizes in one sentence much of what I have argued. For Luther and Melancthon, in the liturgical order, we learn Scripture but not as knowledge rather as experience. In the Apology, Melancthon writes... “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray.” Apology XXIV The Mass, 258.

At the heart of the liturgy is the experience of faith and fear. Faith – that deep down trust in God’s promise that God self, the Holy Spirit, imparts to us. It is the embodiment of the First Commandment: we have nothing else in life but God. We have nothing else that we can rely upon but faith alone. All of life is drawn from faith.

And then there is also the experience of fear – that deep recognition of our need, that existential recognition that we cannot capture God or contain God in one story, in one representation, in one ritual act, that our liturgies, and our hymns, our music-making not matter how beautiful or perfectly enacted are all failed liturgies and songs. The experience of fear is the experience of being held by mystery (God holding us rather than we holding God). We come with hands outstretched and in that recognition, God’s promise creates community, a community that is continually open to the world.

The liturgical order is an event, an encounter, an experience that creates faith and fear and finally leads us to prayer. Prayer! Prayer is God’s action deep within us, the Holy Spirit, deconstructing all the walls, the barriers, everything we have constructed and leading us ever deeper into that vision of the world, the community, of our own life as God has intended it. Liturgy leads us out of our-selves and into the world.

That is the purpose of a liturgical order, leading us to prayer that continually breaks open our community towards the neighbor, continually embodying the promise for all. We saw this happen in the 1980s in the former East Germany. “Communal prayer led to a procession, literally walking out into the street. Not a procession where people “want only to see and to be seen,” but a

procession that was prayer itself.”¹³ Prayer went out into the street, attuned to the cry of those in the street.

From prison, Bonhoeffer writes: “Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.” [Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 389.]

The faith community, practicing leitourgia, rooted in the gospel, rooted in a vision of peace and reconciliation, engages a very simple activity: prayer. The world sees this activity as ineffectual, even useless. But the faith community embraces powerless means. Prayer and love for neighbor: this action points always beyond the walls of the community (Lange, 67). This dynamic of the liturgy is diakonia. In prayer and action, a new adventure begins.

¹³ Dirk G. Lange, *Today Everything is Different: An adventure in prayer and action* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 2021), 60.