

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE LITURGICAL

An assembly bigger than what can
be seen, heard or felt



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What it Means to be Liturgical

Few people really understand what it means to be liturgical, in the best sense of the word. What does it mean to be truly liturgical?

It is crucial for us to understand why we do what we do within our liturgical life as a congregation, for it is our liturgical life which defines our community of faith. A commitment to liturgical worship means embracing a sense of style, grace, and good order which communicates the importance of the worship event; fully understanding, valuing, and experiencing what the church has prepared; encouraging participation in worship that attracts and uses all the senses.

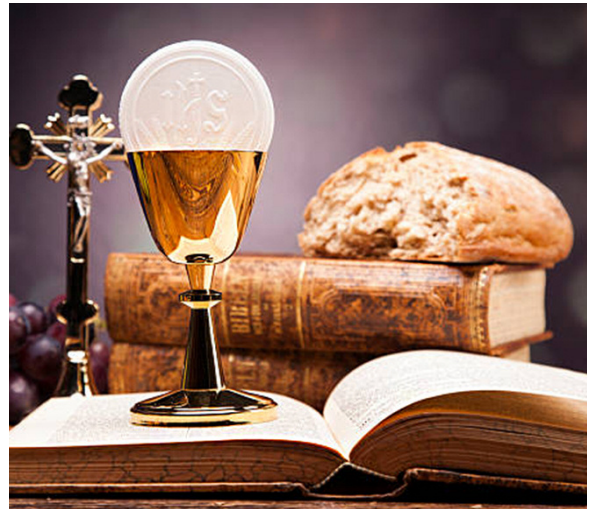
Understanding the Church

Being liturgical means being committed to an understanding of the Church, with a capital “C,” as the priesthood of all believers regardless of culture, language, race, time or place. We profess this understanding every time the gathered assembly recites the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed: “I believe in ... the holy catholic Church” or “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.”

“This means to take seriously the fact that the Church is not confined to one particular space on one particular Sunday morning. What our congregation does each Lord’s Day is merely one visible manifestation of the holy catholic Church, that body of all God’s faithful people regardless of time, location, denomination, culture or age. We are not alone in what we do. We are part of a link between the past and the future. We are a part of a connection between Christians in Central Pennsylvania, Europe, Africa, Asia and heaven. We can only begin to humbly understand this when we accept the realization that God exists outside of time and space. Time is a human creation which allows us to function in an orderly manner. Through our liturgy we are united to God—we enter God’s time—and therefore, are united to believers of all places and ages. If we seriously believe this, we must be committed to examining the traditions and practices of the faithful who have gone before us.

If we really acknowledge that the Church is bigger than our particular congregation or denomination, then a phrase such as “we need to create our own liturgy for it to be relevant” has no place. The liturgy has been created for us over many centuries. It is awfully daring of us to assume we can create something better.

This is not to say that the liturgy is stagnant. To be sure, it is constantly evolving with new modes of expressions, especially in the areas of language and music, but the basic shape, texts and character of the liturgy have been with us for a long time and, no matter how often worship leaders deem it necessary to deviate from the tradition, it keeps coming back and will continue doing so into future generations. The historic liturgy which has served the Church of all generations is our most visible and experiential link with that Church and all its members. With proper training, understanding and care, worship leaders need not abandon historic rites to create relevant worship. Liturgical tradition has within it countless avenues for variety, accommodating itself to differing situations, themes, cultures, ages and concerns.



Word and Sacrament

Secondly, to be liturgical means to be committed to the full Christian expression of worship, that is Word and Sacrament, each and every Sunday. To gather on the Lord’s Day and not share in the Lord’s Supper was unknown in the early Church and throughout history, including the Reformation period. When we receive the Body of Christ, we become the Body of Christ. When receiving God through both Word and the sacrament of Holy Communion becomes the heart and soul of a believer’s week, it is impossible to imagine a Christian life without that weekly communal celebration.

Involving One's Whole Being in the Worship

Jesus was much smarter than are we. He compensated for our ever-wandering human minds by providing us not only with the Word, in print and in verbal proclamation, but with sources of receiving the Word—Jesus—through the very tangible and physical means of bread, wine and water.

One who is liturgical will take this example seriously and, realizing that we are bodily creatures, seek out ways of involving one's whole being in the worship of almighty God. To worship only with one's ears and mouth is to greatly limit our human potential. Physical gestures such as standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, processing and making the sign of the cross (dare we follow Martin Luther's command?) all have their place in Christian worship, as do vivid colors, fabrics, and other art.

These physical expressions of worship have a vital place in well-balanced contemporary worship. The last thing anyone wants is a room full of robots all systematically making the sign of the cross and bowing in sync because someone has told them they must. However, if given the chance and the encouragement, many parishioners may come to cherish a more active, physical approach to worship without feeling self-conscious or embarrassed.



Participation by All

For many years, what most of us experienced on Sunday mornings could be described as a “one man show.” True, the choir had its few minutes and the congregation joined in a few hymns, the creed and the Lord's Prayer, but the pastor did everything else.

The word “liturgy” can be translated, “the work of the people.” That is why we now use the title “Presiding Minister” to define the chief role of the ordained in worship. He or she functions as a president

or chairman of a meeting—calling the assembly to order, fulfilling unique duties reserved for him or her by the nature of the ordained office, seeing that everyone participates as they are able, and wrapping the gathering up.

Lay members, as representatives of a congregation, assist the assembly in their worship with specific roles, such as: proclaiming Scripture, leading music, writing and leading prayers of intercession, participating in processions, assisting with communion, and so forth. The real “celebrants” of the liturgy, however, are the members of the assembly itself, functioning as a single body, not as a gathering of individuals.

The congregation in any one place is a symbol of the whole catholic Church, the Body of Christ. We worship, adore, sing, praise, listen, learn, share and receive the living God through Word and Sacrament together as a visible manifestation of the whole Church.

When anyone who is physically in the room chooses not to participate, they weaken this gathered Body of Christ. It is also for this reason that simple liturgical responses, such as “and also with you,” “thanks be to God,” and “Amen,” are so important. They are pregnant with theological meaning, yet simple enough for even the youngest Christian to grasp and use as a means of participation.

Use of the Lectionary

Another hallmark of liturgical renewal is a disciplined commitment to the use of the lectionary. This is really another facet of a universal understanding of the Church, because, for centuries, most Christians around this globe have been proclaiming the same, or at least, very similar, portions of scripture on the same days in the Christian year.

This is a remarkable experience! To think that the scripture readings to which we listened and pondered, sang about and celebrated last Sunday were the same ones that Anglicans in South Africa, Methodists in San Francisco, Presbyterians in Korea and Catholics in South America proclaimed, pondered, sang about and celebrated is exciting!

To use a lectionary fully is a discipline. It's not always easy, especially for the preacher. Many texts are uncomfortable for us today. Many texts seem to have nothing to say at a particular time. Yet, every sermon I've ever heard from a preacher committed to lectionary use has found insights pertinent to the current situation.

When the perfect words don't quite find their way to the lips of the preacher, thank God that we are assured of God's presence in Holy Communion. Word and Sacrament do not compete for centrality in our worship. They work together to provide spiritual nourishment and strength.

Lectionary use is also a discipline for the musician. Your favorite hymns or anthems may not fit the lessons for a day, but very often struggling with an uncomfortable or unfamiliar text will breed the freshest of musical possibilities. Musician and pastor working together to create a unified worship experience will find unlimited possibilities with the lectionary as their basis for work and study.

The lectionary can provide stimulating and reflective devotional material for all worshipers as well. Lutherans have always been committed to the importance of God's Word in worship and our lives. The lectionary ensures that we make use of the entirety of scripture. It is a vehicle whereby we allow the breadth of God to speak through us, rather than limiting the message to the worship leader's favorite, and most comfortable, passages.

Transcendent and Immanent

To be liturgical means to seek a balance between the transcendent and the immanent images of God. In our worship, we must create an environment that allows God to come to us not only as a friend and loving caregiver here and now, but also as a majestic ruler of all throughout eternity.

A broad range of images for God should find their way into our liturgical life. This implies the need for a careful evaluation of one's physical worship space and appropriately constructing the worship event in such a way as to compensate for a building's shortcomings. A grand Gothic structure can easily communicate a sense of awe and majesty, but issues of hospitality and nurture may need to be addressed through the conscious effort of worship leaders. A simple A-frame building, with little visual stimulation, may be an easy place to make people feel welcome and at ease, but to experience the transcendence can be difficult. The style in which we worship does communicate our beliefs. It is important that our worship truly be a vehicle for all the facets of our faith to be communicated.

Finally, to be liturgical means to admit that what we do when we gather as the Church is to celebrate a mystery. No human can fully

comprehend the fullness of God's grace and how it is communicated to us. Part of being a community of God's people is to realize that a life-long journey is taking place. Something important is happening and it may take a life time to fully grow into an understanding of the Christian experience. Even then, some things may never be fully explained.

That's where faith comes into play for the Christian. Our worship life must reflect this reality. We must accept the fact that what we do as God's people will not be completely comfortable or familiar all the time and certainly not on first exposure. We cannot misuse this understanding as an excuse to ignore or exclude visitors or potential members of the Church. We must be hospitable and welcoming, providing them with enough information and materials to allow them to participate as they are able. But the gathered faithful must communicate to them, with a gracious sense of spirit, that what we do together is important enough for them to come back time and time again.

The visitor needs to feel a sense of importance. They must know that the assembly they are witnessing is part of something bigger than what they immediately see, hear and feel. They need to be attracted to what we celebrate, even if they might not understand it all. They need to be intrigued and enticed into discovering the fullness and depth of Christianity. They need to realize their need to join us on the journey!

The liturgy is a vehicle through which this has been happening since the earliest days of the Church. If we are truly one Church with all Christians, then we need to learn that vital liturgical worship can allow God to speak to all people, regardless of age, culture, lifestyle, or their own place in the journey, whether they are newcomers to the faith or faithful members of the Christian community for many decades.



About the author:

Scott Weidler had been Associate Director for Worship & Music for the Evangelical Church in America from 1995. He authored this pamphlet while serving as Cantor at The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Lancaster, PA — a position he held from 1989 - 1995.