On Liturgy: Responding to Poverty according to the Liturgical Narrative

Kendra Buckwalter Smith

I was coming home one day when my neighbor popped her head out of the window to say hello, as she often does. When she asked my plans for the rest of the day, I told her I'd be working on a column about poverty and liturgy. "Oh, I have some thoughts about *that*," she responded. My neighbor identifies as an atheist and she has a certain level of intrigue about who I am and what I do as a pastor. I deeply appreciate conversation with her. I'm not actually sure what she perceives when I say the word "liturgy," but she has given me many glimpses into her own experience growing up in rural poverty. And as I learned that day, her experience with poverty does, unfortunately, have a rather sordid association with the church. She remembers receiving aid from different churches in her area pretty regularly—when the electricity was turned off, casting into darkness the stack of overdue bills; when a thunderstorm transformed the once small leak in the roof into a gaping hole; when the family yet again couldn't afford groceries. Her mother would from time to time make her way to a nearby church, explain their plight, and receive just enough financial support to fend off immediate crisis. My neighbor recalled,

> Of course, I always appreciated help from the church. But what I hated the most was the next Sunday. We'd all have to get dressed up in our very best clothing and make our way to worship at whatever church was playing our latest savior. At some point during the service, the pastor would make us stand up, and would parade us in front of the congregation, telling all the people exactly what our struggle was and exactly what the church had done to fix it.

She felt like a prop to make "these church people" feel good about themselves. She noted that the church always gave enough to help with a physical need in the moment, but that the price was a sense of dehumanizing shame, which only intensified the fear that too often undergirded her young life. I wonder if each church's celebration of the good they had done actually outlived the brief assuagement of her family's struggle.

I personally have not experienced quite that level of self-aggrandizement showcased in worship. But I do think that a kind of othering can easily creep into our liturgical engagement—an us-versus-them mentality that perpetuates unjust power structures rather than embracing the wholeness and reconciliation offered in Christ. Othering is a process of differentiation and demarcation, an establishment of a power dynamic through which those experiencing poverty are treated as inferior to the rest of society.

Jesus is quite clear that this is something we should guard against. In the parable of two men who went up to the temple to pray, the Pharisee—a poster child for othering in the context of worship—stood tall before God, offering thanksgiving that "I am not like other people," while the tax collector bowed down, crying out for mercy upon his sins. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted," Jesus proclaimed (Luke 18:9–14). And when Jesus and his disciples encountered a man blind from birth, the disciples asked, "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him'" (John 9:1–7). Jesus beckons us to recognize the dangers of propping ourselves up on the backs

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of others. For in doing so, we participate in systems that impoverish and exploit, rather than in Christ's ministry that is for all people.

Often, we identify ourselves by comparison to those around us. The way in which we view the world determines the way we act within it. The church viewed my neighbor merely based on what she lacked and identified themselves by what they were in a position to do for her. In fact, they needed my neighbor's family and people like them to remain in poverty in order to maintain their self-identification as powerful and generous. And that kind of response to the world will only ever exacerbate the poverty of our own soul and the souls of those we would claim to help.

In the Reformed tradition, our very order of worship forms us into a different relationship with the world. The liturgy is not about establishing ourselves as the powerful who have the ability to fix another's problems. Rather, it is about pointing to the One who is already at work righting all that is wrong in the world. It's about discovering our own opportunities to participate in that work and finding those experiencing poverty to be our partners in that participation. It's about extending our view beyond an us-versus-them dichotomy to a recognition of all people as those who are simultaneously caught in the systemic realities of a broken world yet invited to participate in Christ's work of dismantling those realities.

Each time we gather for worship on the Lord's Day, we do not begin with the naming of needs, but with adoration of the creating, sustaining, redeeming God who calls us to worship. Like the prophet Isaiah, we become profoundly aware of the incongruity between God's goodness and the world's brokenness, which leads us to repentance (Isa. 6:5). Yet we don't even pray our confession before first being explicitly reminded that God has already forgiven us and that we are already claimed by Christ. The Call to Confession assures us of who God is and who we are, thus providing the freedom and grace to more fully participate in God's will for this world. We learn to view ourselves in light of who God created and calls us to be. We approach our own needs in light of what God has already done and continues to do. And we become better equipped to view our fellow humans and approach the needs of the world in that same light. As prayers of confession come only after adoration of God and a naming of who we are in Christ, prayers of intercession come only after the reading and proclaiming of God's Word. It is when we have remembered and named God's promises for this world, recognizing the disparity between those promises and the reality of the world's present experience, that we make our petitions for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. So too does our offering only follow and grow out of this recognition, our own gracious giving out of gratitude for God's gifts.

I'm so grateful for my neighbor—for her strength, wisdom, and love. And I have no doubt that God has always been at work placing people in her life to recognize her gifts and encourage her, opening up opportunities for her to discover her own dignity and drawing her into a life of compassion for and support of those around her. I delight in the assurance that neither her identity, nor anyone else's, is found in the differentiating power dynamics of a broken world, but rather is found in the God who proclaimed, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). Thanks be to God that when the church fumbles in its call, God continues to be at work. May we discover ourselves and all whom we encounter as blessed participants in that work.

On Music: Privilege, Poverty, and Musical Practice

Phillip Morgan

I was recently asked after the televised services for George Floyd, "Why do Black churches always use a Hammond organ?" The answer I gave was a simple one. "Black churches have historically turned to the electronic Hammond organ because they're cheaper."

For weeks after, I pondered that question and began to think of all the ways many predominantly white congregations don't seem to understand the worship and music practices of Black congregations because they refuse to see their privilege and deny historic Black poverty. For many churches, not having the resources would never be the primary factor in determining how they worship for generations. African Americans, on the other hand, have always worshiped with that reality. The music born of the Black church, traditional Negro spirituals and gospel, are the creative works of people who have historically had little or no material possessions and have seldom been afforded the benefit of what is often considered musical "training." But even without these tools they have crafted what has become a significant part of the church's song.

Traditional Negro spirituals and the blues were born and passed through the oral tradition, sung by one person to another person. The enslaved people who first sang them owned nothing and were considered themselves to be property. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, laws were passed in the South making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write. In spite of this, a rich musical tradition was born. Even after it became lawful for African Americans to become literate, the method of learning and sharing music—that is through an oral tradition—remained the standard practice.

During the Great Migration of the early twentieth century the descendants of former slaves moved to the North, taking almost nothing with them except this music that had been passed on to them. Bernice Johnson Reagan once said, "To study gospel one had to study the Great Migration." In their new cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, they expanded on these musical styles and created what we know as jazz and gospel music, still creating music with their ear, not Western notation, as the major compositional tool and sharing it with others by rote.

As congregations not steeped in this tradition begin to include more of these songs and musical styles in worship, I am often asked how to appropriately approach these songs. "How do you play and sing gospel music with integrity and authenticity?" is the most frequently asked question. My answer is that to really understand and live into the style of gospel music one must approach it intellectually as it was composed. Gospel, like the spirituals and blues that combined to form it, is an oral tradition.

Someone recently recounted hearing a world-famous choir for the first time and knowing that was the sound they wanted to spend their life recreating with ensembles. They said something like "I believe that if it's in your ears you can recreate it." That conversation came back as I was crafting this article. I remembered the first time I heard Chanticleer singing spirituals and gospel music. I was blown away. "Where the Sun Will Never Go Down" proved to me that it was possible to recreate the sounds passed down to me with groups of singers who normally sang European classical music and who had not been born into my religious tradition.

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Artistic Director Joseph Jennings said this in the liner notes of the album:

> With the spirituals it was necessary that I lay some basic groundwork for Chanticleer. One of the first things was to do away with the printed page. What happened was sort of experience-compression and transfer. Traditions are passed along generation to generation, but in this case within one generation but across cultures. Rote learning is a very foreign concept to 'trained' musicians and some of us found it very difficult at first, but as time went on the ears developed and certain idioms and voicings became recognizable.

The first step in their path to success was to get rid of their privilege as "trained" musicians and approach the music through the lens of those extremely talented individuals who composed without the benefit of their training.

I hope you notice that both Jennings and I have repeatedly put the word "training" in quotations. It is because we both know, having grown up in the gospel tradition, that understanding this music takes a lot of practice and training. I believe this is the primary obstacle that many musicians face in trying to embrace African American music. Seeing it as unrefined and untrained only reinforces the systems of racism and generational poverty that we seek to tear down by including a rich diversity of music in worship. Insisting that the music be fit into classical systems of musical knowledge is exactly what we are trying to eradicate.

As a child I learned classical music of the Western tradition playing Mozart and Chopin with my piano teacher. I also sat at the piano for hours with my grandmother's Roberta Martin and James Cleveland records and cassettes, listening and trying to recreate the sounds I was hearing until, like Jennings says, my "ears developed and certain idioms became recognizable." It is an incredibly difficult process but it is no more difficult than the struggles I first had playing Bach inventions and no less musical training!

I'm also totally aware that this process isn't always the most practical. I'm not trying to turn my Chancel Choir at Central Presbyterian Church exclusively into a gospel choir, so there are times when we don't learn this music by rote and we begin the process of tackling a new piece by reading it off the printed page. However, there are more times when singing this style of music I have used a hybrid method filling in the cracks of the printed page. After a great deal of experience with the style, those idioms are heard naturally by my choirs who sing mostly anthems from the European classical tradition. Here are some suggestions to try with your own choirs.

1. Pick a piece from the African American gospel tradition for use in worship, either a piece to be sung by a choir or as congregational song. A brief list of classics from the gospel tradition includes the following:

    - Lead Me, Guide Me, *Glory to God* 740
    - Soon and Very Soon, *Glory to God* 384
    - If It Had Not Been for the Lord, *Sing the Faith* 2053
    - Give Me a Clean Heart, *Sing the Faith* 2153
    - There Are Some Things I May Not Know, *Sing the Faith* 2147
    - Oh, Give Thanks to the Lord, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* 72
    - God Be with You, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* 212
    - Lord, Help Me to Hold Out, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* 165

2. If you begin with the printed page, do not be bound to it. Use it only as a blueprint and know that it is truly gospel when you've added something from your ears and heart.
3. Listen to a great recording of the piece repeatedly and try to recreate what you hear. At first, you'll need to do this in very small pieces.
4. Listen to other music by the composer/performer. Find the differences and similarities. This is how the gospel idioms become familiar.
5. Experiment with methods of teaching yourself and others to recreate what you're hearing.

On Preaching: Blessed Are the Poor . . . in Spirit?

Buz Wilcoxon

Blessed are the poor . . . in spirit." The difference between the first beatitude in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is impossible to miss. Matthew's addition of the phrase "in spirit" has often felt to me like a splinter protruding from the text. I know there are myriad ways of reading and preaching this passage that open us to the spiritual dimensions of poverty and to the dehumanizing effects of suffering on the soul as well as the body. Yet, sometimes this move to spiritualize poverty feels like a cheap, easy deflection from addressing real suffering by generalizing it to include everyone. Is the addition of "in spirit" almost like an ancient version of "All Lives Matter"? Instead, Luke's prophetic Messiah proclaims, "Blessed are the poor." Period. In doing so, he invites those of us who are not poor (such as myself and the vast majority of the congregation I serve) to see God's blessedness in real human bodies other than our own. It pulls us out of ourselves, out of our modern, middle-class idolatries, out of the half-truths of an overly spiritualized gospel that ignores the social, economic, and political realities of the real world into which Christ has come.

Presbyterians have an embarrassing history with regard to this tendency to spiritualize the gospel message and the ministry of the church. The doctrine of "the Spirituality of the Church" was a foundational principle upon which the PCUS (the old Southern Church) was founded in 1861 in order to justify ecclesiastic secession over the issue of slavery. The architect behind the formation of a separate Southern Presbyterian denomination was the brilliant professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, James Henley Thornwell. Thornwell helped to shape and express a Reformed Southern viewpoint that was rooted in the religiously paternalistic patterns of a society built on slavery. "The Spirituality of the Church" proclaimed that slavery was an issue for the government to decide, and therefore, the church and its members should be silent on this matter and on any other matters beyond the realm of ministering to souls.[1]

At the first General Assembly of the new Southern Church, Thornwell was assigned the task of writing a letter to all other Christian churches around the world explaining and defending its stance on slavery and its reasons for breaking away from the national Presbyterian church. This letter contains the clearest explanation of that Southern theory of the "Spirituality of the Church." It states that the church and the state are two completely separate, opposite, and unrelated bodies that ought to have nothing to do with one another:

> The State is a natural institute.
> The Church is a supernatural institute.
> The State is designed to realize the idea of justice.
> The Church is designed to realize the idea of grace.
> The constitution of the State is determined by human reason.
> The constitution of the Church is divine revelation.
> The State aims at *social order.*
> The Church aims at *spiritual holiness*.
> They are as planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences [will be] disastrous.[2]

The letter continues to explain that since the Bible does not explicitly prohibit slavery, the church has no grounds on which to debate it. Since slavery is

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only a civil issue, it should be left only to the civil government to address, and the church should keep its mouth shut. Only evangelism aimed at saving souls was permissible for the church to consider—nothing having to do with the justice and well-being of those souls in this life. Blessed are the poor . . . in spirit.

We certainly have much to confess from this part of our history, and in this season of national reckoning around race and the hurtful heritage of slavery, we need to wrestle with the long-term implications of this tendency to spiritualize suffering. Thankfully, however, that is far from the end of the story. A century after Thornwell, another great Southern Presbyterian theologian emerged, who held the same chair of theology at Columbia: Shirley Guthrie. In good Barthian fashion, Guthrie's decades of teaching and writing reminded the church of its calling to engage the full witness of the Scriptures and the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In doing so, Guthrie would speak about true Christian spirituality, the "Spirituality of the Church," in ways that sought to move beyond the sinful shortsightedness of the past:

> Truly spiritual people . . . are recognized not just by how much they pray but by how much they pray for the world. They are recognized not just by how much they "praise the Lord" for what "the Lord has done for me" but by how sensitive their praise makes them to the needs and hurts of other people and the protection of the natural environment in which they live. They are recognized not just by how much they read their Bible, but by how their Bible reading influences their business practices, political commitments, and social relationships. They are not recognized just by their testimonies to how God befriended and came to their aid when they were lost in sin, but by the way they befriend and come to the aid of other lost sinners.
>
> A spirituality that retreats form the world into a self-serving safety of private religious life (either alone or in the company of other religious people) is a false spirituality that *flees* the Spirit of God. True Christian spirituality cheerfully and confidently plunges into the life of this world, for there is where we meet the Spirit of the God of the Bible who is as at work not to save us from but in and for the sake of the world."[3]

Deep down, I know that Matthew is right. In many ways we are spiritually impoverished and in desperate need of hearing the good news of blessedness. But Luke is also right. All of us, rich and poor, need the scandalously particular reminder of God's blessing to those whom the world has turned its back on. The true spirituality of the church is founded not on some otherworldly generalized religiosity but on a righteousness that focused on this world—a real-life spirituality that is formed by the real life, the real death, and the real resurrection of Jesus Christ, who came "to bring good news to the poor." Period.

Notes

1. For a full discussion and critique of this "distinctive Southern doctrine" see E. T. Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961).
2. "Address to the Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the Earth," in *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* 1861–1965 (Atlanta: Office of the General Assembly, 1966), 26–37. Emphasis mine.
3. Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 300.

On the Arts: Poverty and Liturgy

Lauren Wright Pittman

One evening, my partner and I were walking in Anderson as a man approached us. He began the interaction as I've experienced before, as though he had no right to speak to us, as if his presence was an inconvenience. He apologized for bothering us and then began to explain his approach. As is often the case in these moments, I felt uncomfortable, and my privilege led me to questions and assumptions about this man's intentions and needs as though I had this man figured out, as though I had a right to determine what might be best for him. I scrolled through these thoughts in a matter of seconds, and then he said, "I am an artist. I was wondering if you had any money to spare. I don't have enough for another canvas." A rush of warmth went through my body. This man and I were instantly connected. He held out his most recent painting, which reminded me of the bayous of Southern Louisiana, a place that defined me. It was clear to me that this man needed more than art supplies. Yet, I knew we both understood the act of creating to be essential to life—to who we are as created beings. I thought about the stacks of canvases in my studio waiting for paint, and the fact that this man, like me, needed tools for creative expression as much as he needed food, water, or shelter.

Most of my life I've placed judgment on the calling I felt to be an artist—a calling as strong as my call to ministry. It felt like a selfish desire that I'd need to let go in order to more faithfully serve others. Through seminary and my ordination process, I passionately fought to be true to myself as an artist, while I internally devalued my passion as a distraction from more "noble" ministerial paths. As I began to write this article, this devaluing emerged as I wrestled with the relationship between art and poverty.

Instead of continuing to spin unproductively, I decided to talk with my aunt, LeeAnn Love, whose passion lies at the intersection of art and poverty. LeeAnn Love is cofounder and art therapy program director of MyCanvas, a mobile youth community arts program based in Nashville, Tennessee, whose mission is to offer basic art skills to at-risk youth. This program seeks to support identity development, healthy coping skills, and community resiliency through artistic creation and expression.

MyCanvas offers a series of music and art workshops to underserved youth in their own neighborhood. The workshops are deeply relevant, offering opportunities for finding voice and processing difficult emotions. In early 2020, Nashville experienced devastating storms that were followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and demonstrations against police brutality and systemic racism.

MyCanvas takes these topics head on with the kids. For an upcoming workshop entitled "Transforming Pain into Beauty," LeeAnn and her colleagues will help the youth process the griefs, traumas, and losses of this year while creating a large sculpture of a phoenix rising from the chaos by utilizing debris collected from the storms. Kids will discuss, draw, paint, smash, stomp, build, and transform their pain into beauty.

One of the many beautiful parts of MyCanvas is that the workshops culminate in a community art show, hosted in the heart of the kids' community. The art shows bring people from all walks of life—wealthy art donors and collectors, the families and friends of the neighborhood, politicians, members of the police force, reporters—all to experience the kids' artwork and to hear their voices. Kids will often grab the hands of strangers to show them the work they did. As LeeAnn reflected on the shows, she

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beamed, thinking about the kids' sense of pride and their growing self-esteem. She called the art shows "a little microcosm of beauty." One might call it a foretaste of the Kin-dom of God.

As I reflect on our conversation, I'm struck by the basic human need of being seen, heard, and understood. With increasing disconnection and isolation in our society, we often don't see one another as whole people. This is especially true when we come into contact with someone experiencing poverty. We are tempted to see them as a mouth to feed, a body to shelter, or most devastatingly, a problem—not as someone with a voice, personality, imagination, and creativity who has needs for self-expression, someone to be heard and understood.

Creative expression is a basic human need. "Art, or at least the kind of meaning that art mediates, is a primary human need, without which we lose our sense of self-worth, our dignity, our relationships with one another."[1] Throughout my journey in finding my footing in ministry, I've seen how the church devalues the arts. We must do better in seeing, listening to, and elevating the voices of our neighbors who have deep, desperate, foundational needs. The church must provide opportunities for creative expression, because that can help us connect more deeply with ourselves and one another.

As a pastor, the most discouraging part of our conversation was learning about the difficulty MyCanvas has navigating the relationship between the arts community and the church. The church has attempted to place faith-based programming expectations onto MyCanvas, which proves challenging given the therapeutic and multifaith environment in which they work. In response, secular organizations often refuse arts grants to faith-based organizations. This rift between the church and the arts community is creating unnecessary obstacles for this important work to flourish.

I wonder what it would look like for the church to repair its relationship with the arts community. How would the church need to change in order to fully value creative and emotional expression as essential and prioritize these opportunities for their communities to more holistically explore their faith and life together?

If we as the church are to truly love our neighbor as ourselves and freely share the love of Christ, we must see, affirm, and support the wholeness of our neighbors, especially those in need. Our neighbors are not simply mouths to feed or bodies to shelter. We need not make assumptions about their needs, as though we have the right to determine what is best for them. Instead, if we can repair the broken relationship to the arts community and remove external pressures and church-focused expectations, the church might be able to create space and opportunity for engagement with our neighbors as multifaceted people with needs beyond physical sustenance, growing us into the vibrant, life-giving, other-affirming community God has called us to be.

Note

1. Deborah Sokolove, *Sanctifying Art: Inviting Conversation between Artists, Theologians, and the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 99.

Amy E. Gray