

Book Review – “Reviving Sacred Speech” by Gail Ramshaw

Gail Ramshaw’s latest book, “Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language,” (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2000) is a second edition of “Christ in Sacred Speech” which was published in 1985. In the introduction, Ramshaw explains that her publisher wanted to reissue “Christ in Sacred Speech,” which had been out of print since 1994. She decided that she had learned too much in the last fifteen years to allow the work to be reissued without some “Second Thoughts”. As a result, Ramshaw has added an essay at the end of each chapter to elucidate her more recent knowledge of the topic at hand. She also added a “Second Thoughts Bibliography” to offer readers the benefit of her more recent study.

The book contains ten chapters: Liturgical Language as Speech, Liturgical Language as Sacred, The Paradox of Sacred Speech, Names for God, Metaphors for God, Sacred Speech about Time, Sacred Speech about Place, Sacred Speech about Objects, Sacred Speech about the Assembly, and Learning Sacred Speech. Each chapter builds on the reality that liturgical language is “speech mated with symbol and accompanied by music and ritual...which occurs in the assembly before God.” Ramshaw asserts that “the liturgy is rhetoric, communal speech of formal eloquence. The liturgy is metaphoric, its words, phrases, and sentences functioning within a creative tradition as the symbols of our faith. Thus, to analyze the meaning of liturgical speech we must ask questions of rhetorical purpose and of metaphoric meaning.”

Through the extensive use of Biblical references, examples from the traditions of the church, and, where appropriate, historical

background outside the boundaries of the church, Ramshaw illuminates the development of the liturgy. In the "Names for God" chapter, she discusses the significance of the various names for the Triune God, how they have been passed down to us and how we might best use them to enliven the corporate life of the church today.

Throughout this chapter, as well as the rest of the book, Ramshaw struggles with the significance, or lack thereof, of gender in our liturgical language. In her section on the Holy Spirit she writes: "We find it difficult to talk about God as person without implying sexuality. Since the Scriptures do not name the Holy Spirit with any images of anthropomorphic sexuality, we find it hard to picture the Holy Spirit, and artists resort to a bird or a puff of cloud...Our asexual yet personal naming of the Holy Spirit illustrates better than does the language of 'Father' and 'Son' our theological sensitivity to the nature of divinity."

One particular paragraph in the chapter on "Sacred Speech about Objects" encapsulates Ramshaw's love of and concern for liturgical language as she discusses the language of the Eucharist: "As we receive the bread and the cup, words repeat the promise that Christ is made known in this breaking of bread. Roman Catholics say simply, 'The body of Christ, the blood of Christ.' United Methodists and Lutherans add, 'given for you.' Episcopalians include the metaphors 'the bread of heaven' and 'the cup of salvation,' adding Hebrew images of manna and Seder cup to the Greek terminology of body and blood. Here is liturgical language at its purest. We have not even full sentences, only phrases that, when spoken as the people commune, name the bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ. There is no explanation. There are not even verbs. We have only the words of faith, language used strangely. The bread does not look like body, the wine does not taste of blood. This is not

literal language. It is supreme metaphor, not as image contrary to fact but as religion, reality re-created by the power of the resurrection.”

After reading “Reviving Sacred Speech” I have two questions. Ramshaw professes allegiance to her Lutheran background and yet waffles a bit – or so it sounds to me –about that heritage, especially with regard to Christology. She talks of Lutherans attending “to Christology with fierce denominational fervor” in her introduction, but I was disappointed that she offers Trinitarian language as a feminist antidote to “a too-male Christology.” Because Ramshaw has the scholarly, liturgical and Lutheran background, I had hoped for a feminist Christological answer to the patriarchal corruption of our understanding and worship practices.

I can understand the need to press beyond the doctrinaire shibboleths of denominationalism, but it seems to me that soft pedaling the Christology of this tradition is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. The centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, theology of the cross and the distinction between law and promise, are the centerpieces of what the Lutheran church has to offer the church catholic. As endearing as the hymnody, piety and heritage of the various Lutheran communions may be to some people, it is our Christology that can continue to be our distinctive contribution to the ecumenical world in which we now live. I have no quarrel with Trinitarian language, but no one, feminist or not, gets to the Trinity except through Christ.

My second question arises from our multi-cultural world (particularly the African-American congregation I serve) as well as the instantaneous communications (if you’re reading this, you’re part of that world wide revolution) which continue to push us toward the global village. As we become more and more

aware of the multitude of hymnodies, pieties, and heritages that churches around the world have to offer, does Ramshaw's definition of liturgical language and its proper function continue to hold true? "The liturgy is rhetoric, communal speech of formal eloquence. The liturgy is metaphoric, its words, phrases, and sentences functioning within a creative tradition as the symbols of our faith." The need within some traditions for spontaneous utterance and movement which signal the Holy Spirit's presence seems at odds with the idea of "communal speech of formal eloquence." Are these spontaneous expressions of faith outside the confines of the liturgy, an interruption of the proper flow of the service, or are they part of the "creative tradition" that enlivens our corporate worship to the glory of God? Or in the words of an 89 year old friend of mine, "How do we keep the church a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints?"

Robin Morgan

An extended Postscript from Ed Schroeder

Robin had this review mostly done when serendipity surfaced. Gail Ramshaw came to our town this past weekend for a board meeting of the North American Liturgy Conference. Gail is currently president of the conference, a signal that she really is numero uno (numera una?) in that crowd. After her sessions with the liturgy-pros she came over to our house for Sunday lunch. Robin came down from her northside parish after the liturgy, and they and Marie and I talked and munched for two hours before Gail headed for the airport to get back to Philadelphia. It was a power lunch of high delight. Could even have been a foretaste of the feast to come.

Of course, Gail and I rehashed our days at Valparaiso University

in the 60s. [Yes, I was indeed the false prophet who told her she'd have no future if she went into liturgical scholarship. Despite my own "senior moment" about the episode, she had incontrovertible evidence which I did indeed remember.] She and Robin did some weaving of life histories and talked shop on items Robin mentions above. And there was laughter throughout.

Not till dessert did I pick up another one of Robin's items above, Gail and her Lutheran heritage. She is not trying to undo it, she says, but to cherish it and capitalize on it. Evidence from this book (p.161): "Someone more Lutheran than me (can this be possible?) said [such-and-so]." I asked: Why does the proper distinction between God's law and God's gospel (aka promise), surely a core axiom of Lutheran theology, never surface in this volume—or in other stuff from you that I've read? When you call yourself unashamedly Lutheran, what are you telling your audience?"

She: *Hmmm. That's a very good question. I have no immediate answer. I'll have to think about that.* **Me:** *(Doubtless taking her silence as space to be professorial again—thereby back-sliding to the sixties in our common history) In Luther's commentary on Galatians, Paul's own big essay on the difference between God's law and God's promises, he notices that these two messages from God have different grammars. And educated as he was in the ancient skills of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, he goes on to describe the differences.*

In your analysis of sacred speech, Gail, you are always using the terms rhetoric and metaphor as your fundamental building blocks, and doing so with the technical meaning of each term. If you had distinguished the rhetoric & metaphor of the gospel from the rhetoric and metaphor of the law—and I know you know what I'm talking about since you aced those "Lutheran" exams I inflicted on you at Valpo—if you'd done that, wouldn't we have

a very different book about sacred speech? I think so.

She: *Good point. I'll have to think about that, and I'll get back to you later.*

Soon it was time to sign the guest book and say farewell. Robin took her to the airport. An hour later the phone rang.

She: *I'm boarding in one minute. I've been thinking. I'm Lutheran this way: Christ and the cross is for me always the bottom line. That's it.*

Me: *Can't complain about that. Let's keep the conversation going.*

Two spots I'd hope to touch in those future chit-chats:

- 1. If Christ and the cross is the Good News, what is the Bad News? What gets trumped by such Good News? One proposal from Paul is that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting our trespasses against us." So God's trespass-counting—aka God's law—gets trumped by what God is doing in Christ. And that leads to the following thought.*
- 2. Trespass-counting and reconciling have different grammars, logics, and rhetorics, don't they? E.g., GRAMMAR. The grammar of conditional clauses vs. the grammar of consequent clauses. Law's grammar is: "If you do such-and-so, then God will do such and so." Au contraire the grammar of the promise: "Since God in Christ..., therefore you..."
E.g., LOGIC. Law's logic is the logic of moral equity. You get what you've got coming—both for good and for ill. Au contraire God's promissory logic. It reasons that we get what we don't have coming to us, good stuff that we don't deserve. It goes on to argue that God finds this*

logical—yes, right and righteous on God’s part—and concludes that it’s logically right and righteous for us to trust it. The law’s logic could never come to that conclusion.

E.g., RHETORIC, the art of persuasive speech. In persuading us to admit the truth of God’s X-ray of us, call it the language of the law, God uses one sort of persuasion. It arises from our own experience, our significant others, our personal perplexities, all sorts of stuff impacting us in daily life. Still we can deny the X-ray’s validity: “Not me.” If we just can’t see it, if we’re recalcitrant or blind, God’s final persuader is a tombstone, the ultimate two-by-four. Au contraire the other persuasion. God persuading us to trust the promise is categorically impossible with the 2×4. [Not surprising, the wood gets used for other “bottom-line” purposes.] “Beseech” is a primal vocable for this kind of persuasion. It’s invitatory, laudatory, look-see language. Never ever coercive. How can you arm-twist anyone into trusting a promise? You have to coax, cajole, say it again, plead, witness to its winsomeness to render a promise persuasive.

Yes, when it comes to the Gospel, friendly persuasion is REALLY needed. We do have biographical evidence—even if our eyes are only half-open—to corroborate the law’s rhetoric. The Gospel is so contradictory to all that. Persuading people to trust a freebie, a no-strings-attached-gift, borders on the impossible. For we all know from experience that there is no free lunch—not even from God. Even the grace of daily bread, along with all the other goodies of God’s creation, is a grace that obligates. Yet here the Gospel-persuader urges us not to trust our experience, but to appropriate the experience of Gail’s bottomline: Christ

and the cross. That is a different grace, a grace that liberates. Yes, even liberates from the consequences of unfulfilled obligations arising (daily!) from the gifts that come tagged "no free lunch."

Gail told us that her current study (next book?) is on trinitarian speech. I didn't say this at lunch, but I'll tell her now. [See, that lunch wasn't a freebie either!] "Exploit your Lutheran roots on this one, sister. Show us the relevance of brother Martin's Gospel-rhetoric about God, that the Trinity is Gospel-speech about God, not just "true facts" about the deity. You're our expert in rhetoric. Give us some pointers in your next book on God-as-gospel and the blessed beseeching, the friendly persuasion, coming our way from that God—and that Gospel."

Peace & Joy!

Ed