

Lord's Supper Liturgies

Colleagues,

Last week's gift from a bunch of you supplying the celebrative text for the 500th edition of ThTh is still being "processed" by yours truly. Count it all joy! is the apostolic adage that's fitting. The presence of the word promise (8 times—I counted!) in your prose was kudos enough to commemorate half-a-thousand postings. Hype tossed in my direction I enjoyed, but sought to be humble.

I don't expect to complete another 500 and make it all the way to a thousand, because more and more body parts have been wearing out during the first half-thousand. But I'll resist giving you an "organ recital" to name those parts, and I won't predict anything, nor tell you when I intend to retire from this strange and wonderful vocation. Instead, think of this: just for fun I've counted ahead 500 weeks on the calendar—and then added ten more. Guess where I landed. October 31, 2017, the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting the 95 theses. So here is a prediction: ThTh #1010—if, d.v., the tradition continues—will itself be dated "Reformation Day 500."

So let's start heading toward 2017 with a look at the Lord's Supper Liturgy in our new "cranberry-colored" ELCA book of worship, "Evangelical Lutheran Worship" [ELW]. In the ELW a new item has come in for regular Sunday repetition in the communion liturgy. In the first few months of using it at our parish communions there was so much that was new that I didn't notice it. But now I have. It wasn't there in the old "green" Lutheran Book of Worship [LBW]. Nor, so far as I know, was it present in any of the "even older" books used in the PCBs [predecessor church bodies] that merged to form the ELCA a generation ago. It's in the eucharistic prayer.

After the words of institution and the versicle/response where the people sing "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again," we pray thus: "Remembering, therefore, his salutary command, his life-giving passion and death, his glorious resurrection and ascension, and the promise of his coming again, we give thanks to you, O Lord God Almighty, not as we ought but as we are able; we ask you mercifully to accept our praise and thanksgiving and with your Word and Holy Spirit to bless us, your servants, and these your own gifts of bread and wine, so that we and all who share in the body and blood of Christ may be filled with heavenly blessing and grace, and, receiving the forgiveness of sin, may be formed to live as your holy people and be given our inheritance with all your saints. To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory in your holy church, now and forever." After which the people respond with the triple Amen. (Settings 1 and 2 – pp. 109, 131) In the remaining eight settings for the Holy Communion no eucharistic prayer text is proposed. The rubric says "The presiding minister continues, using an appropriate form."

The words that perplex, and then vex, are "not as we ought but as we are able." No big deal? Boilerplate? Throw-away line? I don't think so. Seems to me these nine words diminish the Gospel. Here's how. Let's take the scenic route.

When the (now "old") LBW was being put together 30 years ago, there was debate about the Lutheran-ness of a eucharistic prayer at all in the communion liturgy. Some folks were opposed to it, but they didn't carry the day. I had my own theological reasons for siding with that minority, but I wasn't in any place where my opinion made any difference. So the eucharistic prayer became LBW standard operating procedure. Seldom have I ever been celebrant in these 3 decades. I took it in stride, although occasionally twitching now and then as it was recited Sunday mornings. Sometimes I mumbled to myself the shibboleths of

Augsburg Confession theology that do not recommend placing Christ's body-and-blood promise to us within a text of our talking to God.

Those mumblings went something like this. If the means-of-grace called "Gospel-proclamation" (aka sermon) is God talking to us and not the other way round, then God "ritually addressing us with the promise" (aka sacrament)—as one of you said in last week's festival posting—is the same. The proper posture for receiving a promise is listening, not talking. That signals the posture of receptivity, not activity, even prayerful activity.

I don't always repress the impious thought that when the promissory words of Christ's creating the sacrament are embedded in a prayer we address to God, we are reminding God of what he promised. As though God might have forgotten. That is hardly what Jesus meant with his words "do this in remembrance of me." There is no recorded "lapse of memory" on God's part, but with us it happens day in day out. We are the ones who need to hear it again. So we should be listeners. We are the ones who need to be reminded of how God remembers us, namely, remembers us on the receiving end of the body and blood of God's own Beloved One. Yes, "eucharistia – God, I thank thee" is proper response—but hardly proper when the benefactor is passing the promise to us in word and ritual. To receive a promise it is the ears (the channel to human hearts), not the tongue, that is to be engaged. When it comes to the mouth, it is for eating and drinking, not talking.

But I digress. That was my spiel 30 years ago—though I think it still has merit.

Back to the ELW texts. Riled by the "not as we ought but as we are able," I snooped around some more and made other discoveries.

There are a number of items different in ELW's new "standard" version for the eucharistic prayer. For one, the "epiklesis," present in all three of the communion settings in the old LBW, is gone. That Greek word designates the "calling in, calling upon" the Holy Spirit to engage us in this liturgy. That's a major element in Eastern Orthodox liturgies. Hence the Greek name for it. The LBW's version—toned down from the heftier (and theologically possibly different) Orthodox version—said: "Send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, the spirit of our Lord and of his resurrection, that we who receive the Lord's body and blood may live to the praise of your glory and receive our inheritance with all your saints in light." This is gone in ELW's prose.

I think there are good "Gospel" reasons for its absence. I wonder what prompted the ELW experts to remove it. My reason would be that in the Lord's Supper—in the words of Augsburg Confession V—the Holy Spirit is already present and in action—by definition. No need to invoke the Holy Spirit via some other mode. 'Fact is, that was the Augsburg Confessors' critique of the Reformation Left-Wingers, the "radicals," the "Schwaermer." These folks expected the Holy Spirit to operate like a lightning bolt—zap!—without any patent "instrument" of mediation. Au contraire, said the Augsburgers: "Through the proclaimed Gospel and the sacraments, as through means, God gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear that Gospel."

For Augsburg-confessors it is almost frivolous to ask God to send the Holy Spirit right in the middle of a liturgy where God is doing just that. So epiklesis farewell. The Lord's Supper is ipso facto exactly such a coming of the Holy Spirit to those receiving it. Christ's promise "given and shed for you" IS the Holy Spirit present and in action. Epiklesis farewell!

That's what I thought until I took a closer look at the ELW.

The epiklesis returns in two alternate eucharistic prayers tucked in alongside the primary text, one for the time of “Advent to the Epiphany of our Lord,” and one for “Ash Wednesday to Day of Pentecost.” In the former the Holy Spirit is invoked once, in the latter twice. Why this back-sliding? For what theological reason? Is it a signal of no confidence that Christ will indeed keep his promise when we hear his invitation and do indeed “take and eat...and drink?” What—yes, what on earth—are we asking for in requests like these: “Holy God, we long for your Spirit. Come among us. Bless this meal.”

Might the Holy God not respond: “Hey, dummies, don’t you know what this Lord’s Supper is all about? What do you expect my ‘blessing’ to add to what I am already offering you in the very body and blood of my beloved Son? Have you forgotten what the bread-and-wine-and-word offer is? If so, check your own Lutheran catechism.” And when we do, what do we find? “What is the gift in the Lord’s Supper? Answer: We are told in these words ‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins.’ By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are GIVEN to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.”

To put it gently—not usually my strong suit—there is confusion about the gospel in the Lord’s Supper in the ELW’s liturgies even as they seek to promote and elevate eucharistic life in the ELCA. A Gospel-confused liturgy does not increase eucharistic piety.

And then there is the conundrum I started with above with the new words here highlighted: “Remembering, therefore, his salutary command, his life-giving passion and death, his glorious resurrection and ascension, and the promise of his coming again, we give thanks to you, O Lord God Almighty, NOT AS WE OUGHT BUT AS WE ARE ABLE.”

I wonder: how did the “not as we ought but as we are able” sneak into the eucharistic prayer in the cranberry book? It was blessedly absent in the LBW. I know that it’s standard prose in the liturgy of American Episcopalians. Is that one reason for its adoption into the ELW—in order to be ecumenically convivial?

To get to the theological reasons for saying “no” to these nine words may seem circuitous. But bear with me. The grounds are no less substantive—according to Lutheran theological rubrics—than they are for questioning the epiklesis in the Lord’s Supper celebration.

As soon as you are talking about “oughts” you are into ethics. In Lutheran ethics there are “law imperatives and Gospel imperatives.” “L.imps” are always reciprocal. There’s a pay-back linked to the imperative. “Do this good thing and you get a good reward. Do this forbidden thing, and you get punished.” The grammar is: “If ..., then . . .” “If YOU do such and so, then GOD will do such and so” in reciprocal fairness—tit for tat. We humans are the sentence-subject in the first clause, God in the second. God’s response is conditional depending on our performance.

“G.imps” are different. No less imperative, they do indeed say: “Do this, don’t do that.” But it’s no longer framed in reciprocal grammar. Instead it’s Gospel-grammar: “Because God . . . , therefore you . . .” Note also this reversal: God is in the first clause, we are in the second. “BECAUSE God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, THEREFORE be reconciled to God and to one another.” The first clause is the grounds for the second clause happening. Nothing conditional here. Just the opposite. No pay-back for performance. God offers something good, very good, unconditionally. We receive it as the freebie it is. No pay-back here either. Then comes the imperative: GO for it! You CAN do it. This ought is 100% fulfill-able.

Now back to the “ought” of thanksgiving in the Lord’s Supper—is it L.imp or G.imp? That question “ought” to be a no-brainer. Of course, it’s a G.imp. Is the ought of this Gospel imperative do-able—all the way—not just “as we are able?” Of course. Christ-connected sinners are fully “able” to do the oughts of G.imps. “Not as we ought but as we are able” violates the grammar—and the theology—of Gospel imperatives.

Just what are we telling God in the prayer text after we’ve just told him that we are indeed following Christ’s “remembrance” command—“remembering his life-giving passion and death, his glorious resurreciton and ascension”—when we then say our thanksgiving will not be as we ought, but “merely” as we are able? Is that a vote of no confidence in the just-remembered gift, or what? Votes of no confidence are votes of no faith. “Faith,” namely, sinners-trusting-Christ’s-promise, so say the Augsburg Confessors umpteen times, is itself “the highest worship,” 100% perfect thanksgiving. BECAUSE of Christ, THEREFORE this “ought” is indeed one that we are “able” to carry out 100%. To indicate that we can’t carry through on this grace-imperative is—to use one of Apology 4’s harshest critiques—“minimizing the magnitude of the grace of Christ.”

Some other spin-offs:

- A. All of the “grace-imperatives” in the NT are do-able. 100%. It’s a major point in the Lutheran Reformation, fundamental to the Gospel-grounded ethics confessed at Augsburg in 1530. By contrast Rome made no distinction between L.imps and G.imps. “Oughts” were all of one sort. All of them fundamentally “legal” in the grammar of reciprocity, all of them meriting reward, all of them understood under the rubric “not as we ought but as we are able.” All of them also coupled with seeing God as generically gracious. So much so that “to do what you are

able" (facere quod in se est, the Latin mantra) would suffice to merit God's favor. It all hangs, of course, on the 100% perfect worship/liturgy that "faith," first of all, IS—and then ongoingly enables. Right smack-dab in the middle of the eucharistic prayer, this "ought" is surely a Gospel-imperative. If with Paul we "can do all things through Christ who strengthens" us too, then this imperative is surely one of them.

- B. Not perfectly do-able, of course, are the "law's imperatives" in both OT and NT. For them the "not as we ought, but as we are able" might well apply, but in that case it would not be such a throw-away line, as it seems to be here in the eucharistic prayer. As though not fulfilling the "ought" would be not-so-bad, and God would be nice-guy and say "well, you did do it as you were able, so OK." That minimizes both God's law and God's promise.
- C. So, no surprise, here again it's an issue on the proper distinction twixt law and promise—the *cantus firmus* of the entire 60 pp. of Apology 4. Also with reference to worship. So there are law-imperatives and grace-imperatives, and to confuse them, though it happens a zillion times a day—also in Christian life and (sob!) liturgy—is a BEEEG mistake. The Gospel gets diminished.
- D. In the Holy Communion sinners who fall short every time on law-imperatives—right from the git-go with the super-impossible *numero uno* commandment—are being enabled not only to fulfill that otherwise impossible demand by their faith in Christ, but also the whole bevy of "new" commands that come under the NT Greek term "paraenesis," the Grace-imperatives.
- E. As mentioned above there's a sticky-wicket about having a eucharistic prayer at all in Lutheran liturgies. These nine words, however, seem to me to be asking us to swim the Tiber back to Rome—or the Thames to Canterbury—or

wherever. I don't think you can get those nine words about
eucharistic piety out of Wittenberg on the Elbe.

Peace and joy!

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