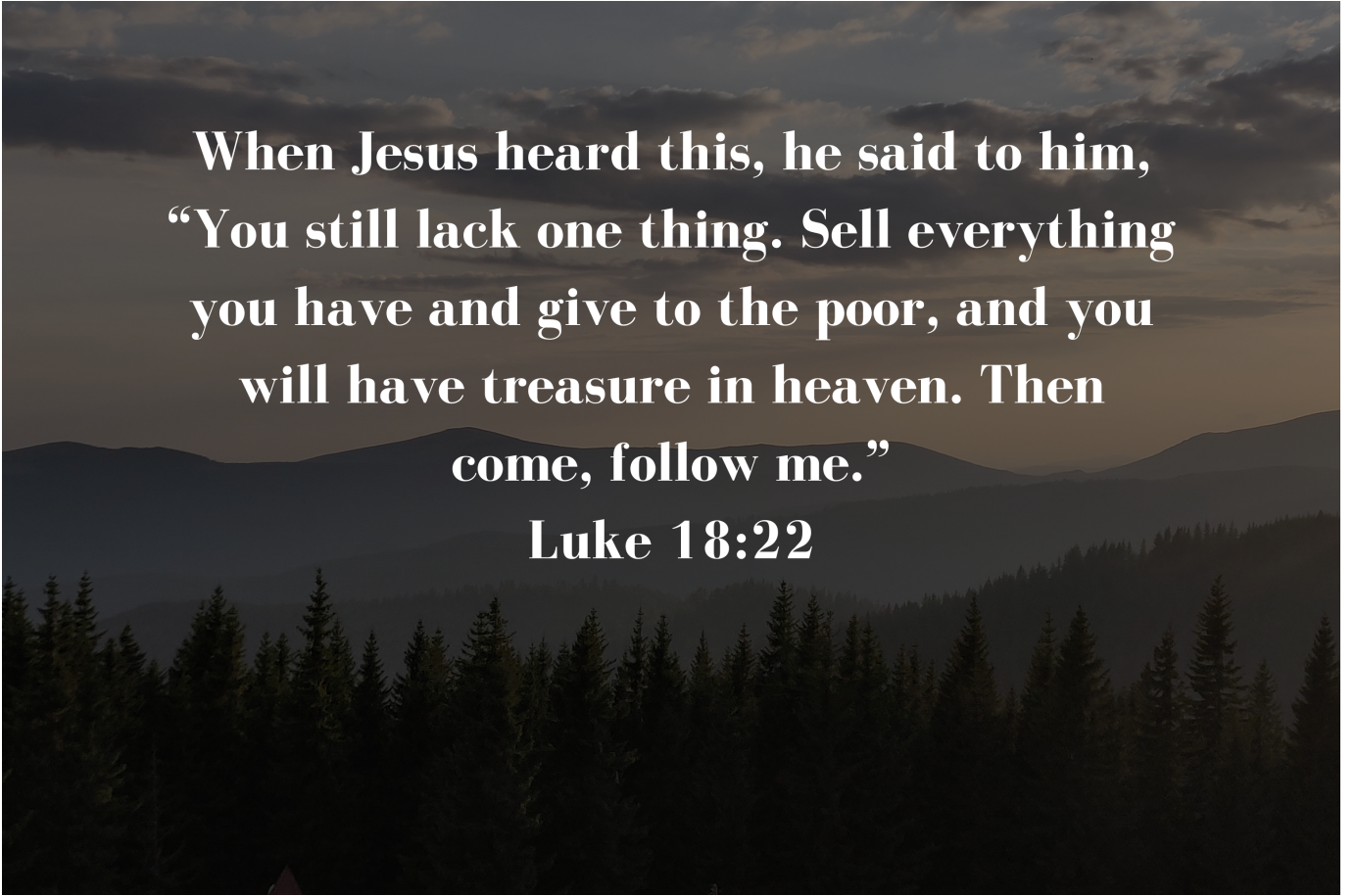


On Performative Utterances



When Jesus heard this, he said to him,
“You still lack one thing. Sell everything
you have and give to the poor, and you
will have treasure in heaven. Then
come, follow me.”

Luke 18:22

Luke 18:22 (from Canva)

Co-missioners,

Today Carol Braun takes up an issue that grates on more than a few of us, we suspect. It's one of those hot topics in our current culture wars that gets Christians sniping at each other too. Carol will push us all to think more carefully about the matter than we tend to, and with greater charity than we're prone to exercise.

Now that's a push to thank God for these days.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

On Performative Utterances

by Carol Braun

My husband is a professor at a small liberal arts college which recently welcomed its newest class of incoming students. Soon after they arrived, the first-years were given two documents: a land acknowledgement, which identifies the Indigenous peoples on whose ancestral homelands the college stands; and a slavery acknowledgement, which notes the sources of the college's wealth that benefited from the exploitation of enslaved people. Such documents have been coming into wider use recently in the United States, and not just on college campuses. The ELCA, for example, published [a land acknowledgement for use at its 2022 Churchwide Assembly](#), and it has published [a guide](#) for member congregations who want to write land acknowledgements of their own.

My husband attended the panel discussion that presented the college's two acknowledgement documents to the incoming class. Afterwards he came home with some questions for me as the churchgoer in our marriage. He had noticed echoes of liturgical language in both documents—especially the verbs, many of which wouldn't sound out of place in communal worship: “we acknowledge,” “we honor,” “we recognize,” “we commit to.” Musing on what role the two documents might play in the life of his college community, he wanted to know exactly how such “we” statements get used in church. Does a leader speak them on behalf of the individual congregants? Or on behalf of some other group or entity? Or are such statements always made in unison by the congregation? A flip through my hymnal confirmed the hunch with which I replied: that we congregants sometimes make our

“we” statements in unison, but when such statements are made instead by a leader on our behalf, we get to assent by speaking or singing an affirmative response—an amen, a closing verse, etc.

The conversation got me thinking. Land and slavery acknowledgements and their ilk are often disparaged (from both sides, so to speak) as being “performative”—a descriptor which in this context seems to mean, more or less, “empty, hollow, superficial.” On this view, the people who say or publish such acknowledgements are *performing*; they’re putting on a bit of a show, hoping it will suffice. Words are cheap, as they say.



J. L. Austin —
<https://iep.utm.edu/john-austin/>

But the verb clauses that show up in land acknowledgements and liturgies alike are also performative in a more technical sense—the one used by J. L. Austin, a twentieth-century British philosopher of language whose charming essay [“Performative Utterances” \(pdf\)](#) I first learned to love in college. In Austin’s formulation, a performative utterance is a special sort of utterance which itself accomplishes the action it describes.

For example, "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*"—in saying it, you do it. Similarly, "I promise to take you to the park," or, "I do [take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife]." Or again, "We acknowledge that we are gathered on the sacred homelands of peoples X, Y, and Z."

Austin is quick to point out that merely making the utterance is not always sufficient to accomplish the act in question, or at least not to accomplish it successfully. Marrying isn't just saying a few words, he notes, and saying a few words isn't marrying. Performative utterances can go wrong and thus "fail to come off" in various ways, but the going right or wrong isn't quite a matter of truth or falsehood. If I promise to take you to the park but have no intention of doing so, it's not that I haven't promised; it's that I haven't promised *sincerely*. This is a faulty performative utterance because, by convention, the utterance "I promise" is designed for use by people intending to follow through.

As a churchgoing Christian I'm inclined take performative utterances seriously because I experience their power at the start most every Sunday service. "*We confess* that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves," etc. And the minister's response: "*I declare to you* the entire forgiveness of all your sins." The confessing and declaring are accomplished by being spoken—and *successfully* accomplished, provided the requisite conditions hold. (More on that later.)

This brings me back to the question of the "we" in the liturgy's "we confess," and the "we" of a land or slavery acknowledgement's "we acknowledge." For what purposes are these utterances designed, and what conditions do they imply or require of the people included in the "we"?

To consider acknowledgements first: I've seen various purposes

and powers ascribed to them. Land acknowledgements in particular are sometimes framed as expressions of gratitude. For example, in the introduction to the ELCA's aforementioned guide, Vance Blackfox, Director for Indigenous Ministries and Tribal Relations with the ELCA, describes the reading of a land acknowledgement as "a ritual of respect and gratitude for the land and our Indigenous neighbors." I've also seen acknowledgements described in terms of their power to mark and unite a community of people around a set of shared beliefs. For example, in a recent *Atlantic* piece called "[How Social Justice Became a New Religion](#)," Helen Lewis writes, "Many common social-justice phrases have echoes of a catechism: announcing your pronouns or performing a land acknowledgment shows allegiance to a common belief, reassuring a group that everyone present shares the same values." Still another purpose comes up a bit earlier in the introduction to the ELCA's guide: land acknowledgements, writes Blackfox, "play a crucial part in combatting the erasure of Indigenous peoples."

No doubt all three of those purposes are served to some extent by the writing and reading of land acknowledgements. For now I'd like to focus on the idea of combatting erasure. When we speak of the erasure of Indigenous peoples, we might be referring to peoples which no longer exist because their members were killed, scattered, or assimilated by the invaders who took over their homelands. But we're probably also referring to an erasure of Indigenous peoples from our public discourse, or from our private thoughts, with consequences for the actions taken and not taken by institutions and individuals.

It seems entirely plausible to me that land and slavery acknowledgements owe their existence to a sense of erasure from discourse and thought. We notice that we're not in the habit of acknowledging our unjustly acquired advantages, publicly or in our own minds. In the case of displaced Indigenous populations,

we non-Indigenous Americans may suspect that there are people alive today, including descendants of those who used to live where we live, who are worse off because of the unjust actions that led ultimately to us living here instead of them. We consider that maybe if we thought about this fact more often, we might finally do right by those people a little more. And so the acknowledgement gets written and read, in a sincere spirit of trying to atone for sins.

All this still leaves open the question of how we should use such documents, and how best to interpret their “we.”

If we consider an institution’s land and slavery acknowledgements to be seeking atonement for sins, then I find that they make most sense when we interpret their “we” as the voice of the institution. Otherwise, there’s a strange displacement of the sin being confessed. The institution is itself made up of people, but its identity transcends the collection of individuals in it at any given time. If I interpret a land acknowledgement as a public confession or declaration of repentance by the individuals who are present in the group—along the lines of the confession of sins at the start of worship—then it feels like a confession of sins I didn’t commit: forced removal of some people, enslavement of others, *by someone else*, long before I was born. It feels right for an institution to acknowledge its real complicity in those sins—to try and establish an institutional consciousness of them which will live for now among the individuals currently making up the institution but will also transcend those individuals and persist when they leave. On this interpretation, an acknowledgment document is an institutional statement of values and priorities, serving to guide its policies and practices—in ways, one hopes, that extend beyond utterances into actions.

It might be useful to read such a document at the start of a

meeting where institutional decisions are being made. If read at the start of worship, though, it strikes me as important to set such a document clearly apart from the brief order for confession and forgiveness. The latter is a different kind of thing altogether: a public confession of our individual sinfulness, and our individual helplessness in bondage to sin, followed by that wildly lavish declaration to each of us, individually, of the entire forgiveness of all our sins—a performative utterance whose condition for coming off successfully lies out of our hands and squarely in God’s.

That said, from my Christian perspective there’s not just an institutional sin but a personal sin, too, at the root of all those acknowledgements. It’s the same personal sin that prompted the confessions of privilege that flowered on social media in 2020, which Lauren Michele Jackson analyzed bitingly in a *New Yorker* piece called “[Kim Kardashian and the Year of Unchecked Privilege-Checking](#).” The sin isn’t that we the privileged were born into privilege, however ill-begotten. The sin is that we’re not giving it all away.

Jesus is clear about this. There’s just one thing left to do, after you’ve kept the other commandments: take all you have and sell it and give the money to the poor and follow me (cf. Luke 18:22). Lower yourself, *for real*. Put yourself last, *for real*, and your treasure will be in heaven.

In polite society this kind of moral stricture sounds insanely radical. Surely (we tell ourselves), surely we’re justified in taking care of ourselves and looking out for our own. Surely we can learn to spend our wealth and leverage our privileges responsibly, and we’ll probably do more good that way than by giving it all away. But written on our hearts is another point of view altogether, nagging us when we pause to listen, leaving us ill at ease as long as we know that others are suffering

while we are comfortable, and that we could be doing more to increase their comfort by giving up some of our own.

Having paused for a moment to listen to that voice, more often than not we make like the rich man who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life: we turn away from such thoughts, grieving, for we have lots of stuff and we sure as hell don't want to give it all away.

It's here that the Gospel steps in to save us in the form of Christ crucified, to catch us back up into God's arms even as we try to slink away. As our Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce, put it in the [text study on Lazarus and the beggar](#) that he cited here in [his post of two weeks ago](#), the getting of that Gospel starts with "a forthright confronting of one's ultimate poverty and helplessness"—a recognition that we're in need of salvation from sins we're far too feeble to atone for on our own. In this saving light, we can bear to acknowledge the emptiness of what Jerry described in that post as "the common pretension that, really, we can do what this Lord requires of us, and do it we will if and when we get around to it." I'm reminded of the wan pledges sometimes found near the ends of acknowledgement documents, in which "we commit" to vague actions in service of justice.



Carol Braun

In my darker moments I sometimes muse that the Gospel must sound to some non-Christians like an imaginary solution to an imaginary problem. If we don't posit a judgmental God, we don't need to be saved from his judgement. But it doesn't seem to work that way for most people. (This idea was explored recently in a powerful little essay, "[Forgiveness Without God](#)," by David Clay for 1517.org.) We humans feel God's judgement even if we don't believe that there's a God who does the judging. Hence all those performative utterances: the confessing, acknowledging, committing—verbs of repentance that yearn for a word of forgiveness in return.

The Gospel provides us with that Word, backed up by the authority of Christ crucified and risen.

As a Christian, I can recognize statements like land acknowledgements and confessions of privilege as sincere and meaningful expressions of a good and true impulse to turn away from sin and injustice. I can also recognize the limited abilities of such statements to accomplish all that they set out to do. I can lay my sins on Christ who has already borne them willingly to the grave and has risen into new Easter life that I get to tap into each time I receive that word of forgiveness. So

unburdened and enlivened, I can move past the futility of my own attempts at righteousness. I can carry on in spite of them—inspired to spread that Easter life around in whatever meager ways I can manage to my fellow humans, all equally precious to the God who lowered himself to draw us all to him.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community