

Play-by-Play Liturgy, Part Two

Colleagues,

This week, as promised, we bring you the final half of Pr. Todd Murken's play-by-play liturgy. The first half came two weeks ago, in [ThTheol #734](#). If you saw [ThTheol #735](#), you'll know that we devoted last week's entry to remembrances of Todd, who suffered a fatal cycling accident very soon after we published Part One of his liturgy. Since then our inboxes have seen a steady stream of your prayers and notes of remembrance. Thank you for these. We will pass them all along to Todd's widow, Julie.

I didn't know Todd, but in rereading his liturgy tonight I was struck with the clarity of his voice as he preached the vital good news of the gospel—the core idea that, while we on our own can produce only poor and bitter grapes, Christ fills us up with his own sweet and saving wine.

As you'll remember from Part One, Todd's liturgy features a running commentary by fictionalized versions of the American football commentators John Madden and Al Michaels. The conceit may be artificial, but it's grounded in Todd's insight (for which he credits his former professor, George Hoyer) that the worship service can be understood as a series of "plays"—the Catch, the Give, the Share, and, finally, the Live. We left off last time at the end of the gospel reading. Today's entry begins with the sermon, whose texts are Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isaiah 5.1-7) and Jesus' closely related parable of the wicked tenants (as told in Matthew 21). During the sermon, Madden and Michaels fade temporarily into the background. The law and gospel take center stage, and Todd's own preaching voice comes through. Thanks be to God for that voice, and for the good words that it spoke.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

PLAY BY PLAY LITURGY

What would John Madden and Al Michaels Say at Lutheran Worship?

[Part 2]

Pr. This morning's readings are so clear as to need little explanation, except of how they speak to us.

They are both about God insisting on his rights: insisting that we return to him what we owe him, and showing how he destroys people who don't. Isaiah says that the Lord is going to remove his protection from Judah so that it will be looted and ruined by its military enemies. I suppose Isaiah realized that the people of Judah would never believe the Lord would do such a thing. So Isaiah uses this clever parable to get the people to pronounce judgment on themselves. The Lord did everything for his vineyard, but it did not yield back to him what he wanted and deserved.

Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants does the same thing: he gets his hearers to pronounce the sentence of "a miserable death" on the tenants. But the tenants in the parable represent those who have just challenged Jesus, the very ones who will kill the Son: the "chief priests" and "elders of the people." Leaders bear a special responsibility to be sure God gets his due from the people. Jesus' warning today goes especially to us pastors and bishops, and also to parents, governors, and presidents of companies.

So, has the house of Israel, has the human race yielded to God

the good grapes he deserves? There is both a No and a Yes to this. I must tell you the No, first, so we appreciate the Yes. No, we have not given God his due. Not Green Bay, not the USA, not Grace Lutheran, nor the whole race. We do not worship him as we ought with overflowing hearts. We do not endure suffering patiently with unworried confidence in God's care. We do not gladly serve him in all things. We take for granted, neglect, and even abuse his blessings: our families, our jobs, the earth, our abilities, our bodies. We do not keep the commandments as we owe him to do. We yield too many wild, bitter grapes.

But there is also a Yes answer. At least one of us, one human, one Israelite, namely Jesus the Christ, did yield to God the good grapes God deserves. He yielded God perfect obedience unto death, even death on a cross. He yielded God perfect trust that he would raise him from death. Sweet, good grapes!

We might say, "Good for him, but what does that get us?" Plenty. We get his reward. Yes. God will treat us as well as he treated Jesus: resurrection to life, glory and seats at the heavenly banquet. Because we, fellow believers, are in Christ. By our believing in him and being baptized into him, what is his is ours. We get full credit for his production of righteousness and obedience. We get to share, just as if we had yielded grapes as sweet as his are.

And it gets even better. We are even starting to yield sweeter grapes ourselves. Yes! For we take Jesus into us, in the Lord's Supper, and he sweetens us. As we receive Jesus' forgiving blood, the wine made of his good grapes, God is no longer an impatient landlord but becomes instead our Father. So now we can focus not on obeying God out of fear, to keep up with the rent, but rather on yielding him good works, good grapes, for love of his Son who paid all our rent, in advance, by his suffering and blood. We produce these good grapes with the confidence of

kindergartners making Mother's Day gifts: such kindergarteners do not trust in the quality of their work for their gifts to be accepted, but they trust in their mothers' love. And it is exactly that, our trust in Christ, that makes our worship and service sweet to God, a pleasure to him, as no overdue rent could ever be. That's how drinking Jesus' wine makes us yield sweeter grapes.

God demands his due, the good grapes of obedience. He gets them, not from us, but from the vine of Jesus' cross. Because we belong to Christ by our faith and baptism, we get full credit for what he has done. And as we drink the wine from the cross, trusting Jesus' blood, our bitterness is changed to his sweetness, and how good we taste to God. Amen.

JM Wow, that's what I like about worship, it brings you right into the face of God.

AM Which is not necessarily good news. The face of God's impatience with those who are behind in their obedience was made very clear. Just because that is so biblically true, it is hard to listen to.

JM Yeah, but it is just that that makes the Gospel so precious!

See, preaching is for faith. Sermons are not to make people good, but to make them believers (and then the goodness will come, too). There is a Lutheran game plan for preaching faith into people. It's kind of a reverse. First you preach God's Law, not only what we should do, but also how the Law condemns us for not doing it. We are not talking about mini-sins that only need a mini-Jesus. The real Law of God puts us to death! And then you preach the Gospel, how Christ died for our trespasses to save us from this condemnation. You preach how his death is good for more than mini-sins, it's strong enough to cover all! We have been reconciled to God by the death of his Son, the same Son who

rose to give us eternal life. This is how you preach for FAITH. This is how you preach to make people believers, not merely to make them good. In fact, without faith, we can't really be good.

AM But now the people are standing to sing again.

JM Yeah, I love this part. See the people have just made a Catch, right? The Word in all its glory has been Passed to them, by God through the minister, and they Catch it. Next thing, though, now THEY say it. THEY sing it to God, or to each other. They are repeating, or confessing, what they have just received.

Cong. sings Hymn of the Day, "Salvation unto Us Has Come"

Apostles' Creed

AM What would you say, John, is the creed a Pass or a Give?

JM It is definitely a Give. I mean, the folks are giving their faith to the Holy Trinity, putting their trust in him, pledging their allegiance to him. They Catch the Word from him and so Give their faith to him.

Like the rest of the liturgy, the Creed is mostly phrases from the Scriptures. By the way, did you know that the Creed is one of the most recent additions to the Christian liturgy?

AM No, how long has it been included?

JM. Less than a thousand years.

Pr. Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and all people according to their...

PRAYERS

Pr. The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Cong. And also with you.

The peace is shared.

AM That must be one of those Share plays you were talking about.

JM Right! The SHARE is where the people are giving to each other. But they are not just saying "Good Morning out there!" What they Share in the Liturgy is always something divine. It is the LORD'S peace they are sharing here.

AM And what a privilege it is! No wonder they have such a good time.

JM You know, now we are in the part of the liturgy that the church did not inherit from the synagogue. What the first Christians did was add the Lord's Supper to the synagogue service. And the Lord's Supper begins with the "kiss of peace," that the disciples received from the Lord on Easter, and that Paul mentions in his letters.

OFFERING is assembled.

AM The offering: another Give play, obviously.

JM Yes, but also Share. When the Church began, the offering was bringing bread and wine for the meal, and the leftovers were given to the poor and needy.

But you are right, now it is a Give play. It is an offering, a sacrifice, given to God. It is not a sacrifice to win God's favor: Christ did that for us so totally-how could we add to that! This is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a gift of pure love from us to God.

AM That's why the believers are so generous: for pure joy. What are we going to see next?

JM As the offering-bread and wine and money-is presented, a

joyful song is sung, part of Psalm 51 or, this morning, Psalm 116.

AM But isn't there also an important prayer?

JM Sure, and in the offertory prayer these people are going to offer not just things but themselves to Christ and his kingdom. That is a major Give. That is huge.

AM Speaking of big, then comes the prayer called the Great Thanksgiving.

JM Yeah. "Lift up your hearts" has been part of Christian liturgy for 1850 years and may go right back to the apostles! Then comes the Holy, Holy, Holy, which is from Isaiah but includes the shouts of the Palm Sunday crowd: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

AM But the Holy, Holy is prefaced by something the minister says or sings that includes themes from the season like Advent or Easter. What is that preface called?

JM It's called The Preface. Then comes the Eucharistic Prayer. I need to explain this. See, Jesus took bread, thanked God, broke and shared the bread, and then said "Do this." So the Church does it. We bless God the way Jesus and all Jews did that night: they blessed him for creation and life, for choosing Abraham and Israel and for their whole history, and they asked the Lord to come and save them. Of course with that ancient Jewish thanksgiving the Church includes thanks for Jesus Christ's death and resurrection! Then we break the bread and share it, just like he said to.

AM So this is a Give play, Giving thanks to God.

JM Yeah, but you know, I almost want to say that at least by the time the Communion comes it is just everything. See, the

Communion is the fellowship: the believers, the Father, the Son, the Spirit, they are all together having a great time. You've got Jesus there giving his body and blood and forgiveness and everything. You've got the people there Catching it, but even their act of Catching in faith Gives him praise. And, of course, they are Sharing with each other. I mean, it's great.

AM Any special music coming up?

JM Yeah, they sing "Lamb of God."

That's what John the Baptist (I like that guy) said about Jesus. Starting about 700 A.D. the pope had it sung at the breaking of the bread.

AM Looks like they're coming with the offering.

Offertory is sung.

Offertory prayer is prayed.

Great Thanksgiving

Lord's Prayer

Lamb of God

Communion

Post-communion blessing

(As the table is being cleared)

AM Looks like it's all over, John.

JM Not really. See, liturgy or worship is not just about what happens here. There is one more important play I have to talk about. It is the Live play. That starts now. Now we all go out and believe what we've been told, and live like we believe it. That's a struggle, but that is why the liturgy has so much Passin' and Givin' and Sharin': to get us ready to live out the whole week as God's people.

You know, a great Lutheran, Soren Kierkegaard, said that when he

leaves worship he doesn't ask "How was it?" but "How did I do?" That's really what it's about. The Passing, the Giving, the Sharing: it's not just words, it actually happens, it is what we do. That's what makes this a great liturgy.

AM Indeed it has been. And we will all be back again, next week, right here, for another great liturgy between the Holy Trinity and his people at Calvary Lutheran Church. Until then, for John Madden, I'm Al Michaels; have a great Live play this week.

Post-Communion Prayer

Benediction

Sending Hymn

Dismissal

Pastor Todd B. Murken, Ph.D.

Grace Lutheran Church

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