



St. Paul's Church, Chestnut Hill 150th Anniversary Speakers Series

The Rev. Dr. Gordon W. Lathrop

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Strong Center, Open Door:

The Churches Toward the Future¹

Sometimes, a few words may stand as a genuine symbol for a whole movement. In spite of all the dangers of slogans, a fragmentary text becomes itself an appropriate symbol, a "watchword," a "parole," a "losung," In the twentieth century movement for liturgical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, the famous phrase from a 1903 motu proprio of Pius X has functioned in this way. The indispensable source of the true Christian spirit for "all the faithful," this letter tells us, is "active participation in the holy mysteries."² Indeed, when "the holy mysteries" are taken to mean the actually enacted signs of the liturgy as full of the presence and reality of the triune God, and when "all the faithful" is taken to indicate the full, local congregation, then this call for "participation" may be seen as representing the leading edge of reform in the liturgies of all the Christian churches in the twentieth century, not just that of the churches in communion with Rome. The classic phrase from a Roman letter has become an ecumenical treasure, illuminating an abiding truth about "church" for us all.

It is as if the phrase became a watchword. That watchword could be seen as receiving the nineteenth century history of liturgical recovery and calling for that recovery to turn now toward

twentieth century ecclesial and, cultural concerns. Without the turn represented by this phrase, the nineteenth century movement could and did run out in a variety of phenomena which late twentieth century liturgists regarded as misdirections: romantic ceremonialism, imaginary reconstructions of the middle ages, or the use of the liturgy to support either ultramontaniam or extreme nationalism. But with this turn, the liturgical movement could remember the original genius of its social-critical search for community³ and turn the strength of its historical recoveries toward the well-being and mission of participatory local assemblies. Pius X's phrase may be seen to bear fruit in that remarkable text of the Second Vatican Council:

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his church, especially in the liturgical action. . . . By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when someone baptizes it is really Christ who baptizes. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the church. He is present, finally, when the church prays and sings, for he promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."⁴

But the phrase from the motu proprio may also stand for much of the agenda of the parish communion movement in the English church or the best of the liturgical achievement of the Church of South India or the agenda of the Associated Parishes in the Episcopal Church of the United States or the ecumenical work of the Liturgical Conference in North America or the deep goals of the Prayer Book of 1979 or of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* in 2006: full and active participation in the mystery of Christ. I am hoping that St. Paul's Church, at its 150th anniversary, will recognize joyfully the ways in which this theme and watchword has marked your own liturgical changes and your own liturgical life in the last part of the 20th century.

Here is another such watchword. It was adopted by the ELCA and several Reformed churches with which the ELCA came into full-communication at about the same time that full-communication was being established between the ELCA and the ECUSA: “mutual affirmation and admonition.” The phrase was first used in the Formula of Agreement between these churches to enable them to talk with each other about the Holy Communion in the midst of a history of

disagreement, while at the same time moving on toward actually sharing the holy Supper across these long dividing lines. I am hoping this afternoon, that in an entirely different context you have asked me to join your celebration precisely because you wished for me — a Lutheran pastor and professor, long your neighbor and, I hope, your friend — to speak to you in a certain mutual affirmation and admonition at the close of this anniversary celebration, as you turn gladly toward your future.

In order to do so, here is yet another watchword. There are, after all, yet other brief phrases which may also be worthy to stand as symbols of the liturgical movement, like that one of Pope Pius X, by which we may evaluate the present state of the movement and its on-going goals, by which we may think about the future of the churches. I want to propose one again, which almost anyone who knows me will have heard before. It is a text drawn from the remarkable life of the “grundtvigian” Danish Lutheran church^v as that church tried to establish itself in the upper midwest in nineteenth century North America.

The small grundtvigian Danish church in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century North America -- eventually organized as the Danish (later American) Evangelical Lutheran Church -- was intensely creative. Under its aegis, many folk-schools were founded, and robust new hymns and a vigorous new interest in world music were added to its Danish hymnic heritage. Still, its contributions to American church-life were overshadowed and submerged, first in a bitter and church-dividing battle over the "Word of God"^{vi} and then in a continuing and nearly all-consuming concern about the nature of the preservation of Danish language and folk culture in its new setting. Nonetheless, this church did preserve for us this little text, capable of becoming a symbolic watchword for the best Lutheran contribution to the ecumenical liturgical movement, the Lutheran contribution to mutual affirmation and admonition.

The text is found in one small settlement of Danish immigrants in northwestern Wisconsin, begun in 1869 in Polk County around Little Butternut Lake, and called West Denmark. Seven churches were ultimately built there, a folk-school briefly thrived, and, from 1887-1892, the first theological seminary of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was housed in the folk-school building. One of the congregations of this community was (and is) called West Denmark Lutheran Church. In the steeple of the church building of that congregation there hung, until a tragic church fire in the 1985, an inscribed bell, with the inscription speaking, in the manner of classic bell inscriptions, as if in the first-person of the bell. It is this inscription which concerns us:^{vii}

Til badet og bordet,

Till bønnen og ordet,

Jeg kalder hver søgende sjæl.

To the bath and the table,
to the prayer and the word,
I call every seeking soul.

The inscription is obviously Lutheran; it is an existential, pastoral re-use of the church-definition of the Augsburg Confession:

". . . at all times there must be and remain one holy Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel."^{viii}

And it is that definition now turned toward invitation and the maintenance of an open door. Indeed, I would argue that late twentieth-century Lutheran liturgical renewal has come to be exactly about a variety of matters implied in this little inscription: one thinks of the vigorous

accents on sacramental recovery, on Sunday as the day of word and table, on church as assembly around the “means of grace,” on liturgy and evangelism, and on liturgy’s open door to culture found in many, world-wide Lutheran circles.^{ix} But the grundtvigian insights have nonetheless remained, as Joseph Sittler wrote, "a rich and little known strand in the ethos of Lutheranism,"^x and they are in need of wider presentation.

The inscription itself is clear. The bath and the table are the central, church defining actions to which people are invited. They are the gift and institution of Jesus Christ and the heart of Sunday assembly in the crucified and risen Christ. They are "means of grace," and "church" is there when these are the central actions. Participation in them will be participation in the mercy of the life-giving Trinity. Every Sunday assembly called together by this bell will be an encounter with this life-giving water -- "creeping back to the font," Luther called it -- and a celebration of the meal of this table. "The bath" is our introduction to this assembly, and we come past the bath -- are in the reality of the bath again -- whenever we are in the assembly. And "the table," occurring as the heart of the Sunday assembly, is the repeatable part of baptism. In such a way, the bell calls us to "church."

But then the prayer is also a gift of Jesus Christ and also a way in which humankind is held in the triune life of God, in God's very embrace.^{xi} "The prayer," bønnen, is, most properly, the Lord's Prayer, that prayer given by Christ and, by the power of the Spirit in the assembly, full of Christ. The Lord's Prayer, of course, is always prayed as part of coming to the bath, prayed at the bath in that Lutheran liturgy of baptism which the Danish church inherited, prayed throughout all the churches as part of the catechetical inheritance of the baptized. The Lord's Prayer gives us words for being in and of the bath. Furthermore, the Lord's Prayer gives us words for being at the table, at that place of the bread and forgiveness of God. It is always

prayed, in all the churches, in the liturgy of the table. But then "the prayer" is also all prayer, understood in this same way as spoken in the power of the Spirit in and with Jesus Christ before the face of God. The Lord's Prayer, the prayer of the bath and the table, holds us in the life of the triune God and forms us into intercessory prayer for all the needy world. Prayer, by this understanding, is both the presence and work of the triune God and the ministry and work of the assembly.

The word, then, is the very living word of God sounding throughout all of this assembly, in the grace-filled words of baptism, the supper and the prayer: "I baptize you . . .;" "this is my body . . . my blood . . . given for you;" "give us this day the bread of the Kingdom;" "forgive us . . . as we forgive." "The word" is the biblical word come alive when bath, table and prayer are seen as the hermeneutical key to the scriptures. This was, of course, the very point at which the Danish church in North America faltered, when faced with the fierce biblicism of the American frontier. It is a point on which the churches, faced with renascent biblicism, must not falter again.

To all of these events on Sunday the bell invites every seeking soul: this is a meal for the hungry, as both Luther and Augustine would say. In fact, it is clear that the bell inscription envisions only "seeking souls" as potentially interested, invited ones here. All of us are seekers, in need of coming once again -- and again -- to faith. What happens in the assembly is addressed to seeking humanity, in touch with the actual realities of human life and the actual quests for meaning and for life that mark the depth of our days. This seeking character of our lives corresponds to what Lutherans regularly call "the law." The event of the assembly needs to take that law seriously and respond with what Lutherans call "the gospel." Then the very accessibility and existential importance of what occurs in the assembly is underscored the more by the words

"bath" and "table," rather than more ecclesiastically appropriate words. The central events of the Sunday assembly are in critical but lively continuity with human experience and culture, with archetypal and recognizable human events like bathing and communal eating, just as were the meals of Jesus and the primitive Christian use of a great bath to mark the eschatological new beginning and the constitution of the eschatological community. The bell envisions that one comes through the door to a recognizable and attractive event: a real bath, a real meal, prayer before God, and in it all a word that matters for life.

Two other things, less clear, are also implied by the bell inscription. The first involves the role of music: just as the bell calls, musically, rhythmically, to bath, table, prayer and word, so also the music in the assembly itself is not some other, fifth thing. Rather, in the very manner of the Deutsche Messe of Luther and of the Danish Højmesse, music is the very mode in which the congregation gathers around and participates in the central matters of the assembly. It is not, ought not be, something else.^{xiii}

The other matter is perhaps the most important. The bell remains rather mysterious as to why "every seeking soul" should come to the assembly. The content of the living word, the nature of bath, table and prayer, the presence of the fullness of the gospel and the mercy of the triune God are only known in the experience of the assembly itself, not in talking about the assembly nor in simply hearing the sound of the inviting bell. The actual, participating assembly -- as long as it is indeed focused on bath and table, prayer and word -- is the enacted theologia prima of the Christian church. There, experiencing this primary theology which engages our seeking, one understands why. It is as if the bell says, "come and see." But then the "I" of the bell can be seen as something more, something mysterious as well. It is, of course, the bell itself, the actual ringing, inviting sound, so common in a Danish or an old Danish-American

community. But it is also the Spirit of God, working on, in and under all these human means, constantly re-constituting the church.

This nineteenth century bell inscription can be seen as having a remarkable continuing resonance with some important notes in the Christian scholarship and the ecumenical liturgical renewal of the late twentieth century. The inscription itself can be read as a kind of prophecy which spoke on the basis of a central ecclesial heritage. Since the bell was engraved, many churches have been recovering baptism as the foundational act of Christian identity and of the Christian assembly. At the same time, many churches have been recovering a practice that makes baptism appear much more clearly as a bath. And the remembrance of baptism throughout the church year and at each Sunday gathering has come to have a widespread importance. Eucharistic practice has similarly been much influenced by reflection on meals: meal regularity and frequency, meal hospitality, meal prayers, the remembrance of the hungry, the use of genuine food, the altar as a communal table, the continuity with the meals of Jesus. Scholarship has found that the actual earliest intention of the Lord's Prayer, and not only its traditional ritual use, may have envisioned the meal in the church and the mutual announcement of absolution: bread and forgiveness were the presence of the eschaton now, founding and focusing the assembly called "church."^{xiii} Furthermore, scriptural scholarship sometimes sees the genre "gospel" as implying and presupposing the baptismal and eucharistic assembly.^{xiv} And, in regard to the "seeking souls" and culturally accessible conceptions of bath and table: the central questions in vigorous liturgical theology in our time include the nature of theologia prima and the appropriate relationship between liturgy and culture. This is not just a Lutheran text, at least not in its current resonances.

"To the bath and the table, to the prayer and the word, I call every seeking soul." This inscription is a text also capable of deepening and organizing the ongoing efforts of contemporary ecumenical liturgical renewal. Were we to take the bell inscription seriously, make it our own, ring it, as it were, at the door of all of our own assemblies, I think it would imply at least these things. Dear people of St. Paul's Church, this is the affirmation and admonition.

1. We will need to see to it that our Sunday assemblies are actually centered in bath and table, accessibly present in the heart of participating communities. We will need to see to it that our buildings and our music, our leadership and our liturgies support this centrality and do not obscure it. This eucharistic recovery is to be affirmed here, in this congregation.

2. We will need to accentuate again the awesome importance of Sunday, the "day full of grace" precisely because it is the day for this life-giving assembly.

3. We will need to encourage each other to continue to work on an existential, sacramental interpretation of scripture in the assembly, an interpretation which addresses all of our honest seeking with life-giving, grace-filled images. We need a word which bathes, a word which we can eat and drink and so live.

4. We will need to work on a kind of participation which is lively -- in singing, praying, bathing, eating and drinking -- but which does not exclude. The participants are not insiders. All of us, including the ministers at the center of the circle, are seekers. That will need to come to expression in our actual celebration. The theme will be: strong center, open door. Everyone should be welcome. All of our eucharists must be "seeker services." The idea of having separate, market-targeted "liturgies" is such a bad idea. At the same time, we will need to reconstitute the way of the bath as a genuine and strong way — the catechumenal way — in

which people can come more deeply into the purpose and life of the assembly. Again: strong center, wide open door.

5. We will need to see again -- and learn again to articulate clearly -- that the God whose life-giving grace for the world lives at the heart of this assembly is triune. The Spirit calls and gathers seeking humanity into the mystery of Christ in the assembly, and so before the face of the One who sent Christ among our wretched need.

6. Then we may be freed to see that "liturgy" always involves a diversity of cultural gifts -- in diverse song and diverse texts, diverse human patterns of assembling and departing -- gathered around the central things -- word, bath, prayer and table -- as they are arranged in a meaningful order. Such a freedom will give us tools for authentic liturgical change.

7. In that freedom, we may be newly and lovingly (if also critically) attentive ourselves to human culture and the deep human questions. The liturgical assembly is set in the midst of God's beloved world, and it requires honesty, not pretense or lies. And the door also open outward.

8. And we will be urged to recognize as churches all those assemblies which gather, in their diversity, around the living word in bath and table. We will need to send to them and receive from them signs of our lively communion. Perhaps we may even dare to establish common local baptistries -- local houses for the bath -- and common local catechumenal processes. So Nicolaj Grundtvig himself wrote:

It is indeed high time that all of us who will, in Spirit and truth, be Christians, should . . . hold out our hands to one another, and to all the faithful who sleep in the Lord, over the font, and exchange the kiss of peace before the altar, and should in the one Bread and the one Cup . . . let all disputes over doubtful questions drop . . .^{xv}

We will also need to admonish these churches -- and ourselves -- toward the maintenance of this lively center to our gatherings. In that regard, the counsel of the Faith and Order consultation at Ditchingham (near Norwich) in 1994, sounds grundtvigian:

. . . the patterns of word and table, of catechetical formation and baptism, of Sunday and the week, of Pascha and the year, and of assembly and ministry around these things . . . do give us a basis for a mutually encouraging conversation between the churches.

Churches may rightly ask each other about the local inculturation of this ordo. They may call each other toward a maturation in the use of this pattern or a renewed clarification of its central characteristics or, even, toward a conversion to its use. . . . All the Christians in a given place, gathered in assembly around these great gifts of Christ, are the whole catholic church dwelling in this place.^{xvi}

9. And since all of us are seekers, we may learn to see as well, that none of the orders of our ministers is without flaw. All of them are defective, given our disunity and their calling to guard the unity of the flock. Then we will learn again to welcome all ministries as they serve the living word in the assembly and to find together again in the ministry of bishops a sign of linkage between assemblies and a sign that all the assemblies in a given place have a vocation to be as one assembly around bath and table, prayer and word.

10. And those of us who are Christian scholars will then have a special vocation to two things: to see to it that the Bible and theology are read in the light of the bath and the table and to see to it that the door of this assembly stays open to every seeking soul. The first involves the sacramental, existential hermeneutics of which we have already spoken. The second calls us to turn our scholarship to mission, to the care for the cultures that surround us and to care for the earth, and to the encouragement and protection of the authentic and profound welcome that a

celebrating Christian assembly must give to anyone -- from among racial, linguistic or sexual minorities, neglected outsiders, women separated from baptismal dignity -- who is drawn to the grace of the triune God. Again Grundtvig writes:

When it happens that the priests stand at baptism as Zion's watchers in the power of the Spirit, and the bishop stands at the altar truly representing the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, while the congregation gladly lets the light shine in good works, and the learned keep watch over the book with their lamps lit from the flame on the altar and keep watch that the church has open doors for going out as well as for coming in, then is everything in Christian order and then is the Lutheran Reformation complete.^{xvii}

Such work by priests, bishops, scholars and the assembly itself is, of course, more than “Lutheran” in some narrow sense. It is the very work so richly needed among us all in an authentic, churchly mission to the present world.

"To the bath and the table, to the prayer and the word, I call every seeking soul." Put that West Denmark text next to the "word" of Pius X and you have a shared ecumenical treasure. In fact, it may be that the grundtvigian bell inscription puts the concern of the famous Roman motu proprio with greater clarity and greater existential pungency. Then put those two words next to “mutual affirmation and admonition,” and you have the contribution one Lutheran may make to your remarkable celebration.

Gordon W. Lathrop

¹ Portions of this lecture were first published in *Worship* 75:1 (January 2001).

² See R. Kevin Seasoltz, *The New Liturgy: A Documentation 1903-1965* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 4, and James F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today* (New York: Paulist, 1995), 78.

³ See R. William Franklin, *Nineteenth Century Churches* (New York: Garland, 1987).

⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 7 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1963), 6-9, translation altered.

^v For Bishop Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, his writings, his extensive influence on the Danish church, and his importance for contemporary liturgical renewal, see A. M. Allchin, *N. F. S. Grundtvig: An Introduction to his Life and Work* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1997).

^{vi} For one account, see Enok Mortensen, *Stories From Our Church* (Des Moines: Committee on Publications of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, 1952), 94-109.

^{vii} The origin of the bell is unknown, but Edwin Pedersen, a parish historian in Luck, Wisconsin, believes that in the nineteenth century it first hung in the Danish church in Hutchinson, Minnesota, and came to the steeple of the second West Denmark church building in 1938.

^{viii} *Confessio Augustana* 7, quoted from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 42.

^{ix} See especially the volumes produced by the Lutheran World Federation international study of worship and culture: S. Anita Stauffer, ed., *Worship and Culture in Dialogue* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1994); *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996); and *Baptism, Rites of Passage and Culture* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1998). See also Thomas Schattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), and the statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on "sacramental practices:" *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: 1997).

^x Joseph Sittler's notes, quoted in Philip Hefner, "Theology and Creation: Joseph Sittler and N. F. S. Grundtvig" (unpublished paper, 1995), 10.

^{xi} Christian Thodberg, "The Importance of Baptism in Grundtvig's View of Christianity," A. M. Allchin, ed, *Heritage and Prophecy: Grundtvig and the English-Speaking World* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1994), 140-142.

^{xii} This insight belongs especially to Cantor Mark Mummert of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

^{xiii} See, for example, Robert Taft, "The Lord's Prayer in the Eucharistic Liturgy: When and Why?" *Ecclesia Orans* 14(1997), 137-155.

^{xiv} Gordon Lathrop, “Worship in the Twenty-first Century: Ordo,” Currents in Theology and Mission 26:4 (August 1999), 292-302.

^{xv} Kirkens Gienmæle, quoted in A. M. Allchin, N. F. S. Grundtvig, 110.

^{xvi} The Ditchingham Report, 7-8, in Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., So We Believe, So We Pray: Towards Koinonia in Worship, Faith and Order Paper 171 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995), 7.

^{xvii} Skal den Lutherske Reformation virkelig fortsættes? (Copenhagen: Schauberg, 1863), 115-116, quoted in Allchin, Ibid., 118; translation altered. About the learned, Grundtvig says: “og de Skrift-Kløge vaage over Bogen med Nat-Lampen tændet ved Alter-Lyset, og vaage over at Kirken har aabne Dørre, til Adgang saavel som til Indgang . . .”