



Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Poverty and Liturgy
Volume 54.3

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*



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Poverty and Liturgy



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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

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Introduction

Kimberly Bracken Long

This issue of *Call to Worship* is devoted to exploring the relationship between poverty and the church's liturgical life. By looking at how we engage with Word, Sacrament, and various elements of worship, contributors lead us into deeper understanding and call us to more faithful discipleship. Kelly Latimore's striking icon *Homeless Christ* graces the cover, and Amy E. Gray offers art throughout the issue that is as compelling as the articles.

David Gambrell studies how the Psalms speak of poverty and illuminates the theological, liturgical, and ethical implications for Christian communities. Crystal Hall urges the church to consider the sociohistorical context of biblical passages concerning poverty as well as to read those texts with the organized poor. This view is illustrated by Melva Lowry as she describes her experiences working in the city of Baltimore, while Jerrod Lowry suggests practices for both individuals and congregations that help us address the poverty that is among us all.

Musician and hymn writer David Bjorlin examines the way we sing about poverty and "the poor," urging us to think critically about how we sing and preach, so that we might acknowledge the agency of those living in poverty and work toward a more just and equitable economy. Grace Pomroy opens our eyes to how we see our giving, inviting us to share a sense of solidarity with those in need rather than offering our charity. Writing as both an artist and a liturgical theologian, Deborah Sokolove looks head-on at the question of whether art is a luxury for the church, insisting that artistic expression is a primary human need and therefore necessary for the life and work of the church.

Several new books are featured in this issue of *Call to Worship*. Mitzi Budde introduces a new prayer book for those in prison and the people who love them, published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Accompanying her article are several works of art by Robyn Sand Anderson that appear in the book; you can see more of her work at www.RobynSandAnderson.com. Lolly Dominski provides an in-depth look at two books on the relationship between the Eucharist and the problem of hunger: Samuel Torvend's 2019 book, *Still Hungry at the Feast*, and Mary McGann's *The Meal that Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis*, published in 2020. Lauren Patrus-Betzel reviews Christopher Grundy's book about the relationship between Eucharist and violence, *Recovering Communion in a Violent World*. Finally, Maggie Gillespie's review of *Word of God, Word of Life* by Gail Ramshaw elucidates the author's deep and expansive understanding of the Revised Common Lectionary.

As always, our columnists have served up compelling and convicting thoughts on which to feast—and to which we must respond. I'm delighted to share two new hymns by gifted composers and authors David Bjorlin and David Gambrell, both of which are tremendous additions to the church's corpus of song. They are songs our churches need to sing—and songs we will want to sing.

The process of editing this issue has been an edifying one for me, and I trust that the time you spend with these authors, artists, and composers will be a blessing to you as well.

Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor



Amy E. Gray

Feature Articles

Prayer and Poverty: Seven Lessons from the Psalms

David Gambrell

The Psalms have been called a “school of prayer.” There is a threefold sense in which this is true. First, doxology. The Psalms teach us *how to pray*. Through three millennia of Jewish worship and twenty centuries of Christian liturgy they have given shape and substance to the practice of prayer. They continue to challenge us to expand the horizons of our prayer and provide language when other words fail us. Second, theology. The Psalms teach us *through prayer*. They instruct us in God’s wisdom, God’s will, God’s way. They convict us of God’s righteousness and justice, awaken us to suffering and sin, and inspire us to seek God’s purpose in the world. Third, ethics. The Psalms teach us *prayerful practice*. They show us how to live according to our faith and work according to our worship. They guide us in loving our neighbors even as we love the Lord our God.

This essay examines how the Psalms speak about poverty. In each of the sections below, I will seek to bear in mind all three senses in which the Psalms can be a school of prayer. First, *theology*. I will review references to poverty in the book of Psalms, listening for the word of God—especially through the voices of people who are poor. Second, *doxology*. I will consider the implications of the verses at hand for those who plan and lead worship, offering prayer with and for people who are poor. Third, *ethics*. I will reflect on what it means to enact or inhabit these prayers in public policy, in the church’s mission, and in daily living.

Excursus: The Lexicon of Poverty

There are several Hebrew terms related to poverty in the Psalter. These words have somewhat different facets of meaning, although they often seem to be used synonymously or interchangeably in the parallelism of Hebrew poetry.

The most frequently used terms involve a pair of word-forms derived from a common Hebrew root, AYIN-NUN-HE.

- *‘aniy* — “poor, afflicted,” an adjective found 30 times in the Psalms, is translated as follows in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible:
 - afflicted (4 times: Ps. 9:12, 22:24, 25:16, 102),
 - humble (1: Ps. 18:27),
 - lowly (2: Ps. 69:29, 82:3),
 - needy (2: Ps. 68:10, 140:12),
 - oppressed (1: Ps. 10:12),
 - poor (17: Ps. 10:2, 10:9 [twice in this verse], 12:5, 14:6, 34:6, 37:14, 40:17, 70:5, 72:2, 72:4, 72:12, 74:19, 74:21, 86:1, 109:16, 109:22),
 - weak (2: Ps. 35:10 [twice in this verse]), and
 - wretched (1: Ps. 88:15).
- *‘anaw* — “meek,” an adjective found 11 times in the Psalms, is translated in the NRSV as:
 - downtrodden (1 time: Ps. 147:6),
 - humble (4: Ps. 25:9 [twice in this verse], 34:2, 149:4),
 - meek (2: Ps. 10:17, 37:11),
 - oppressed (2: Ps. 69:32, 76:9), and
 - poor (2: Ps. 9:18, 22:26).

David Gambrell is associate for worship in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Theology and Worship and author of *Presbyterian Worship: Questions and Answers* (WJKP, 2019).

Another commonly used term is derived from a different Hebrew root, ALEF-BET-HE.

- *'ebyon* — “needy,” an adjective found 23 times in the Psalms, is translated in the NRSV as: needy (19 times: Ps. 9:18, 12:5, 35:10, 37:14, 40:17, 69:33, 70:5, 72:4, 72:12, 72:13 [twice in this verse], 74:21, 82:4, 86:1, 107:41, 109:16, 109:22, 109:31, 113:7) and poor (4: Ps. 49:2, 112:9, 132:15, 140:12).

Three other Hebrew words are with noting: *dal* (DALET-LAMED-LAMED), *dak* (DALET-KAF-KAF), and *rus* (RESH-VAN-SIN).

- *dal* — “poor,” an adjective found 5 times in the Psalms, is translated in the NRSV as: poor (2 times: Ps. 41:1, 113:7) and weak (3: Ps. 72:13, 82:3, 82:4).
- *dak* — “crushed, oppressed,” an adjective found 3 times in the Psalms, is translated in the NRSV as: downtrodden (1: Ps. 74:21) and oppressed (2: Ps. 9:9, 10:18).
- *rus* — “to be poor,” a verb found twice in the Psalms, is translated in the NRSV as: to suffer want (1 time: Ps. 34:10) and to be destitute (1: Ps. 82:3, as a participle).

These are the terms I have used for the purposes of the study that follows. The English texts below are from the NRSV, with words related to poverty **in bold**, followed by the associated Hebrew term [*in brackets*].

Lesson One: “I Am Poor and Needy”

Individual laments, found so abundantly in the book of Psalms, give voice to the prayers of people who are poor. The experience of poverty is frequently a primary subject of the lament, along with the intersecting conditions of illness and oppression. As the following examples demonstrate, poverty affects the psalmists’ relationships with others, self, and God. That is to say, poverty is a *social problem*, rooted in unjust systems of economic inequality; it is a *physical* and *psychological problem*, causing injury and anguish in body and mind; and it is a *theological problem*, calling into question the justice and mercy of God.

Often these laments are voiced as short, sharp cries of pain—urgent in their complaint and pointed in their demand for God’s intervention:

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and **afflicted** [*'aniy*]
(Ps. 25:16).

But I am **lowly** [*'aniy*] and in pain;
let your salvation, O God, protect me
(Ps. 69:29).

Wretched [*'aniy*] and close to death from
my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate
(Ps. 88:15).

Examples such as these demonstrate the alienation and isolation of poverty, so evident in the individual psalms of lament. The superscription of Psalm 102 distills the essence of these psalms: “*A prayer of one afflicted* [*'aniy*], *when faint and pleading before the LORD.*”

Some of the more elaborate petitions appeal to the compassion and honor of God by way of a common refrain: “I am poor and needy.” The psalmists stress their devotion and loyalty to God, and call on the Lord to respond accordingly:

Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am **poor** [*'aniy*] and **needy** [*'ebyon*].
Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you
(Ps. 86:1–2a).

But you, O LORD my Lord,
act on my behalf for your name’s sake;
because your steadfast love is good, deliver me.
For I am **poor** [*'aniy*] and **needy** [*'ebyon*],
and my heart is pierced within me
(Ps. 109:21–22).

Psalm 109:22 is evocative of Simeon’s words to Mary in Luke 2:35 (“... and a sword will pierce your own soul too”), one of several resonances between these psalms and the mother of Jesus.

A similar formulation, repeated in Psalms 40 and 70, contrasts the greatness of the Lord with the lowly estate of the psalmist:

But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who love your salvation
say continually, “Great is the LORD!”
As for me, I am **poor** [‘*aniy*] and **needy** [‘*ebyon*],
but the Lord takes thought for me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
do not delay, O my God (Ps. 40:16–17).

Let all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you.
Let those who love your salvation
say evermore, “God is great!”
But I am **poor** [‘*aniy*] and **needy** [‘*ebyon*];
hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
O LORD, do not delay! (Ps. 70:4–5).

By juxtaposing the lament with an acclamation of praise or affirmation of faith, the psalmist heightens the urgency and tension of the prayer.

The individual psalms of lament often anticipate God’s saving work, concluding with a vision of redemption. Note the clear harmony between the first verse (Ps. 35:9) and the opening phrases of the songs of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1) and Mary (Luke 1:46), along with the images of weakness and strength found in the canticles:

Then my soul shall rejoice in the LORD,
exulting in his deliverance.
All my bones shall say,
“O LORD, who is like you?”
You deliver the **weak** [‘*aniy*]
from those too strong for them,
the **weak** [‘*aniy*] and **needy** [‘*ebyon*] from
those who despoil them” (Ps. 35:9–10).

With Hannah and Mary, this psalmist insists that poverty is no accident of fate. It is a condition created by the active, ongoing oppression of the powerful and wealthy—cheating the vulnerable, stealing their resources, and profiting from their labor.

As the psalms of lament frequently offer a foretaste of thanksgiving, the psalms of thanksgiving typically contain echoes of lament, reverberating in memory:

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;

let the **humble** [‘*anaw*] hear and be glad. . . .
I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
This **poor** [‘*aniy*] soul cried, and was heard
by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble. . . .
The young lions suffer **want** [*rus*] and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good
thing (Ps. 34:1–2, 4–6, 10).

While some psalms only hint at God’s providence, this alphabetical acrostic spells it out: the Lord hears the cry of those in need and promises to deliver them from want and shame.

Theology. The Psalms connect the divine name—“I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14)—with the cry of affliction—“I am poor and needy”—as people in need call on the name of the Lord.

Doxology. The Psalms insist that the church’s liturgy give pride of place to the prayers of people who are poor, speaking (and singing) for themselves.

Ethics. The Psalms reveal the interlocking social structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality; they call us to seek wholistic, systemic solutions for the problem of poverty.

Lesson Two: “Do Not Forget the Oppressed”

The Psalms make demands on memory. “Remind” is exactly the wrong word. The Psalms are not sticky notes with worn-out adhesive. They startle us with a knock at the door in the middle of the night, to shake us and wake us. They call on us to remember who we are and who we are called to be. They even call on God to remember who God is:

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In arrogance the wicked persecute the
poor [‘*aniy*]—
let them be caught in the schemes they
have devised. . . .
[The wicked] lurk in secret like a lion in
its covert;
they lurk that they may seize the
poor [‘*aniy*];
they seize the **poor** [‘*aniy*] and drag them off
in their net. . . .

Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;
do not forget the **oppressed** [*'aniy/ 'anaw*].

. . .

O LORD, you will hear the desire of the
meek [*'anaw*];
you will strengthen their heart, you will
incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the
oppressed [*dak*],
so that those from earth may strike terror no
more (Ps. 10:1–2, 9, 12, 17–18).

“Who are you, God,” the psalmist seems to ask, “if you are not the giver of justice and deliverance to those who are oppressed?” And who are we, if we ignore the needs of our neighbors and persecute people who are poor? Certainly not the people of God.

Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs,
and an impious people reviles your name.
Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the
wild animals;
do not forget the life of your **poor** [*'aniy*]
forever. . . .
Do not let the **downtrodden** [*dak*] be put
to shame;
let the **poor** [*'aniy*] and **needy** [*'ebyon*]
praise your name (Ps. 74:18–19, 21).

In Christian imagination, “the soul of your dove” (Ps. 74:19) gestures to the gifts of the Spirit—gifts of God for the people of God, including people who are poor and oppressed.

Theology. The Psalms reinterpret Jesus’ command to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19): to share in Christ’s body is also to remember God’s care for those who are poor.

Doxology. The Psalms rewrite our eucharistic liturgies; if we fail to remember—and welcome—people who are hungry and poor, these are not prayers of the people of God.

Ethics. The Psalms reorient the church’s mission and ministry, as we are called to embody and enact our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession for the world God loves.

Lesson Three: “Those Who Consider the Poor”

How do you know a righteous person when you see one? The Psalms teach us that the righteous are known by how they treat people who are

poor. The final entry in Book One of the Psalter (Pss. 1–41) echoes the first words of Psalm 1 (“Happy are those . . .”) and foreshadows the Beatitudes (cf. Matt. 5:1–12; Luke 6:20–26):

Happy are those who consider the
poor [*el-dal*];
the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.
The LORD protects them and keeps them alive;
they are called happy in the land (Ps. 41:1–2a).

An acrostic wisdom psalm in Book Five (Pss. 107–150) picks up the theme:

[The righteous] have distributed freely,
they have given to the **poor** [*'ebyon*];
their righteousness endures forever;
their horn is exalted in honor (Ps. 112:9).

From beginning to end—or *Alef* to *Taw*—the Psalms teach that the law of God is justice, kindness, and humility; they commend the wisdom of all who live in this way.

This should especially be true for people in positions of authority, though experience teaches us that this is often far from true. In Psalm 18, a royal psalm of thanksgiving attributed to David, the king seeks to align himself with the mercy and judgment of God:

For you deliver a **humble** [*'aniy*] people,
but the haughty eyes you bring down
(Ps. 18:27).

The final psalm of Book Two (Pss. 42–72), attributed to Solomon, presents an extended meditation on the life of the righteous ruler:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king’s son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your **poor** [*'aniy*] with justice. . . .
May [the king] defend the cause of the
poor [*'aniy*] of the people,
give deliverance to the **needy** [*'ebyon*],
and crush the oppressor. . . .
For [the king] delivers the **needy** [*'ebyon*]
when they call,
the **poor** [*'aniy*] and those who have
no helper.

He has pity on the **weak** [*dal*] and the **needy** [*'ebyon*],
and saves the lives of the **needy** [*'ebyon*].
From oppression and violence he redeems
their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.
Long may he live! (Ps. 72:1–2, 4, 12–15a).

Note that the monarch's "presidency" will be judged by his response to the problem of poverty and attention to the needs of those who are oppressed. The acclamation "Long may he live!" (Ps. 72:15) is predicated on the promise of abundant life to people who are poor.

Theology. The Psalms show that a life of faithfulness to God involves generosity, compassion, advocacy, and action for the sake of those in need.

Doxology. The Psalms are a call to self-offering: dedicating our gifts to the glory of God and the good of our neighbors and sharing equitably in the resources of the earth.

Ethics. The Psalms extol the "blessed" life of personal responsibility and political engagement on behalf of poor people; they also have implications for the selection of leaders.

Lesson Four: "The Wicked Draw the Sword"

In sharp contrast to the righteous, the wicked are depicted as those who ignore or exploit people who are poor. Those who neglect or abuse others defy the will of the Lord and set themselves at odds with God's saving work in history:

[The wicked] shall be in great terror,
for God is with the company of the righteous.
You would confound the plans of the
poor [*'aniy*],
but the LORD is their refuge (Ps. 14:5–6).

The psalmists reserve harsh judgment for those who profit from the poverty of others. They warn of radical reversals on the day of the Lord:

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be
no more;
though you look diligently for their place,
they will not be there.
But the **meek** [*'anaw*] shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant
prosperity. . . .

The wicked draw the sword and bend
their bows
to bring down the **poor** [*'aniy*] and
needy [*'ebyon*],
to kill those who walk uprightly;
their sword shall enter their own heart,
and their bows shall be broken
(Ps. 37:10–11, 14–15).

This psalm again prefigures the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:5) with its repeated refrain, "the meek shall inherit the land" (Ps. 37:11; cf. vv. 9, 22, 29, 34). Like Psalm 109, it shares an image (Ps. 37:15) with Simeon's address to Mary (Luke 2:35); in this case, like Solomon's sword, the judgment of God will divide the oppressors from the oppressed.

God's concern for people who are poor is so well established in the worldview of the Psalms that even a false accuser will enter into evidence an allegation of the defendant's disregard for those in need, as this verse from Psalm 109 attests:

"For he did not remember to show kindness,
but pursued the **poor** [*'aniy*] and
needy [*'ebyon*]
and the brokenhearted to their death"
(Ps. 109:16).

The psalmist objects to this misrepresentation, testifying (as discussed in Lesson One), "I *am* poor and needy" (Ps. 109:22; italics added). The psalmist trusts that God will take the side of the one who is truly in need.

This wickedness of those who amass wealth and perpetuate poverty is clearly chronicled in Psalm 49, another wisdom psalm:

Hear this, all you peoples;
give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
both low and high,
rich and **poor** [*'ebyon*] together (Ps. 49:1–2).

God's wisdom is for all—but God's favor is with those who put their faith in the Lord and not in worldly treasures. Psalm 49 continues with a stinging indictment of "those who trust in wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches" (Ps. 49:6). Inequity and iniquity are bound together.

Theology. The Psalms convict us with the realization that economic injustice is sin, condemned by God, and for which we need forgiveness, even “as we forgive our debtors.”

Doxology. The Psalms demand new prayers of confession, acknowledging our neglect of our neighbors and our participation in unjust economic systems.

Ethics. The Psalms require a reckoning—a redistribution of resources according to God’s will, as real repentance leads to reparation.

Lesson Five: “The Lord Lifts Up the Downtrodden”

The psalmists show us who God is by singing about *what God does*—especially in relation to those who are most vulnerable. In this lesson, therefore, we pay particular attention to the verbs that accompany the vocabulary of poverty in the Psalms. How does God act for and with people who are poor? Examples abound.

Psalm 25 concerns the “pedagogy of the oppressed,” in the words of Paulo Freire’s 1968 work. God gives wisdom to people who are poor—insights that all must honor and heed if they seek to know the way of the Lord.

Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the **humble** [*‘anaw*] in what is right,
and teaches the **humble** [*‘anaw*] his way
(Ps. 25:8–9).

From the experiences of those who are oppressed, we may come to understand the justice and righteousness of God. As another psalmist proclaims:

I know that the LORD maintains the cause
of the **needy** [*‘aniy*],
and executes justice for the **poor** [*‘ebyon*].
Surely the righteous shall give thanks to
your name;
the upright shall live in your presence
(Ps. 140:12–13).

People who are poor have an invaluable perspective on the providence of God, as celebrated in Psalm 68:

Rain in abundance, O God, you showered
abroad;
you restored your heritage when it
languished;
your flock found a dwelling in it;
in your goodness, O God,
you provided for the **needy** [*‘aniy*]
(Ps. 68:9–10).

The beauty and glory of the Lord are also found among those who are oppressed:

For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the **humble** [*‘anaw*] with victory
(Ps. 149:4).

Psalm 149 emphasizes God’s delight—even and especially among the humble and hungry. For the Lord, people who are poor are not a problem to be solved, but a treasure to be cherished.

For the Lord, people who are poor
are not a problem to be solved,
but a treasure to be cherished.

One of the earliest affirmations of Hebrew Scripture is that God sees the plight of people in bondage and hears the cries of those in need (see Exod. 2:23–25). This statement of faith is reflected in Psalm 69:

Let the **oppressed** [*‘anaw*] see it and be glad;
you who seek God, let your hearts revive.
For the LORD hears the **needy** [*‘ebyon*],
and does not despise his own that are in
bonds (Ps. 69:32–33).

Throughout history, God’s saving work is intimately connected with the situation of people in poverty, as these two psalms suggest:

But you indeed are awesome!
Who can stand before you
when once your anger is roused?
From the heavens you uttered judgment;
the earth feared and was still
when God rose up to establish judgment,
to save all the **oppressed** [*‘anaw*] of the
earth. *Selab* (Ps. 76:7–9).

With my mouth I will give great thanks to
the LORD;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.
For he stands at the right hand of the
needy [*'aniy*],
to save them from those who would
condemn them to death (Ps. 109:30–31).

However we might understand salvation, the Psalms insist that it involves deliverance from poverty and oppression. Anything less is not faithful to the witness of Scripture.

The action of “lifting up” is strongly connected with God’s love for people who are poor, as these psalms show:

When they are diminished and brought low
through oppression, trouble, and sorrow,
[the LORD] pours contempt on princes
and makes them wander in trackless wastes;
but he raises up the **needy** [*'ebyon*] out
of distress,
and makes their families like flocks
(Ps. 107:39–41).

[The LORD] raises the **poor** [*dal*] from the dust,
and lifts the **needy** [*'ebyon*] from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of God’s people (Ps. 113:7–8).

The LORD lifts up the **downtrodden** [*'anaw*];
he casts the wicked to the ground (147:6).

Again, it is hard to miss the consonance with the canticles of Hannah and Mary, who rejoice in the God who “brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52; cf. 1 Sam. 2:7–8).

Theology. The Psalms assert that our knowledge of God relies on the testimony of people in poverty, speaking to God’s righteousness, justice, providence, and beauty.

Doxology. The Psalms inform the homiletical task by underscoring the proclamation of “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa. 61:1).

Ethics. The Psalms instruct that people of privilege must listen to and learn from people who are poor, honoring and heeding their wisdom.

Lesson Six: “I Will Now Rise Up”

And then God speaks. Accounts of God’s speech are relatively rare in the Psalms, but where they occur, they disclose God’s determination to deliver those who are oppressed.

“Because the **poor** [*'aniy*] are despoiled,
because the **needy** [*'ebyon*] groan,
I will now rise up,” says the LORD;
“I will place them in the safety for which
they long” (Ps. 12:5).

In Psalm 82, the Lord inveighs against injustice and implores mercy for people who are poor:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
“How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
Give justice to the **weak** [*dal*] and the orphan;
maintain the right of the **lowly** [*'aniy*] and
the **destitute** [*rus*].
Rescue the **weak** [*dal*] and the **needy** [*'ebyon*];
deliver them from the hand of the wicked”
(Ps. 82:1–4).

The Lord will not rest until there is justice for the lowly and abundance for those in need. As one of the Psalms of Ascent suggests, God’s house is a place of plenty:

For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation:
“This is my resting place forever;
here I will reside, for I have desired it.
I will abundantly bless its provisions;
I will satisfy its **poor** [*'ebyon*] with bread”
(Ps. 132:13–15).

When God speaks, there is a new creation: safety for the vulnerable, deliverance for the downtrodden, and food for the hungry.

Theology. The Psalms declare that the word of the Lord is liberation for those in bondage and new life for all who dwell in the dust of death.

Doxology. The Psalms shape the church’s benediction; God’s blessing announces release to the captives and good news for people who are poor.

Ethics. The Psalms redefine evangelism: we share the gospel by and speaking out for justice and speaking up for those who are oppressed.

Lesson Seven: “The Hope of the Poor”

Finally, in the Psalms there are occasional glimpses of God’s future—the coming realm of righteousness, justice, and peace, where there is enough for all.

The LORD is a stronghold for the
oppressed [*dak*],
a stronghold in times of trouble. . . .
Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion.
Declare his deeds among the peoples.
For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;
he does not forget the cry of the **afflicted**
[*‘aniy/‘anaw*]. . . .
For the **needy** [*‘ebyon*] shall not always
be forgotten,
nor the hope of the **poor** [*‘anaw/‘aniy*]
perish forever (Ps. 9:9, 11–12, 18).

We recognize and celebrate this new creation wherever justice is served, equality is accomplished, and God’s will is done.

For Christians, the vision is especially evident in Psalm 22, the song of the cross. The jubilant cry “May your hearts live forever!” (Ps. 22:26) recalls the acclamation of the monarch “Long may he live!” (Ps. 72:15) and prefigures the *Sursum corda* of the eucharistic liturgy.

For [the LORD] did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the **afflicted** [*‘aniy*];
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
From you comes my praise in the great
congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The **poor** [*‘anaw*] shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever! (Ps. 22:24–26).

Singing this psalm at the threshold of death and resurrection, Jesus invites hungry people to a heavenly banquet, where all will be satisfied with abundant life.

Theology. The Psalms expand our eschatological horizons, revealing that God’s will for creation, redemption, and salvation includes justice for people who are poor.

Doxology. The Psalms elevate the *Sursum corda* (“Lift up your hearts”) to a new purpose: the exaltation of the oppressed in Christian witness and worship.

Ethics. The Psalms enliven our work for equity by connecting it with God’s ultimate desire for heaven and earth.



Amy E. Gray

Poverty and “The Poor” in Congregational Song

David Bjorlin

Growing up in a white Pentecostal/Evangelical church at a time when praise and worship music was becoming *the* dominant form of congregational song for that context, “the poor”¹ were rarely mentioned in our prayers or sermons, let alone our songs. If we did sing about “the poor” or poverty, it was usually a spiritualized poverty that described our sinful state or our comparative poverty as human beings before the grandeur of God. When I began to understand the social dimensions of the gospel in college, I noticed that there were huge swaths of Christian social teaching that many of the most popular praise and worship songs ignored. Predictably, this led me to an uncritical acceptance of any song that had anything to do with social justice. So, if a song mentioned actual poverty at all, I reasoned, it must be good and right to sing in worship. Only later as I learned more about the complexities of both social justice and congregational song did I realize that not all songs about poverty are of equal value. Songs that mention “the poor” can be powerful acts of solidarity that lead to transformation, yet they can also be condescending acts used by the rich to experience a cheap form of catharsis that actually helps them avoid transformation.

Yet, it must be stated from the outset that I, in so many ways, am one of the rich. As a white, cisgender, middle-class male with a network of familial and social safety nets, I speak about poverty with both little experience of it and a fairly limited vantage point. So, rather than pretending to be an expert, I will discuss what I learned through my research for this article and raise several questions that this study asked of me as I explored what it might mean to sing with and about poverty and “the poor” in more holistic and liberative ways. To do

so, I will first use insights from various journalistic resources and style guides to problematize the descriptive language of “the poor,” while also raising potential counterpoints in particular theological, congregational, and hymnic contexts. Then, I will examine how we are already singing about poverty by examining two resources—Christian Copyright Licensing International’s (CCLI) Top 100 list (explained below) and the PC(USA)’s *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*—and exegeting how “the poor” are sung about in each. Hopefully, the questions raised throughout the study can help pastors, worship leaders, and congregants think more critically about how we sing about poverty in our particular contexts.

Methodology

Before beginning my study of these two resources, it is important to give a brief explanation of my methodology. I chose these two resources in part because they represent at least a few different, and sometimes divergent, traditions within the PC(USA).² More obviously, *Glory to God* is the official hymnal of the denomination and therefore represents a body of song that the PC(USA) officially sanctions and promotes. CCLI, on the other hand, is the largest copyright licensing company that represents mostly contemporary (and mostly white) praise and worship music. The CCLI Top 100, then, is the list of the 100 most reported songs from churches using CCLI during a particular period. In many ways, it represents a popular and “unsanctioned” source of music for churches that might be less inclined to use a hymnal. While there are limitations to this method—particularly because of the lack of diversity within the CCLI Top 100—it not only gives the beleaguered researcher a manageable body of

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songs to study, but it also may show how the very whiteness of such a list might intersect with how one sings (or doesn't!) about poverty.

Second, I also chose to look specifically at the word “poor” rather than an exhaustive study of words or ideas that could denote poverty (e.g., “poverty,” “homeless,” “oppressed,” or “lowly”) not only because it helpfully limits the scope of the article, but also because “poor” has a complex association of biblical, theological, cultural, and linguistic connotations. Thus, focusing in on “the poor” is a helpful way to explore the various complexities of singing about poverty.

Should We Use “the Poor”?

Before exploring the two resources, we need to address a more basic issue: should we use the language of “the poor” at all? Several style guides now argue against its use for a variety of reasons. For example, the American Psychological Association notes that “poor” and “low class” both have pejorative connotations and “have historically served as implicit descriptors for racial and/or ethnic minority people.”³ Further, journalists Denise-Marie Ordway and Heather Bryant explain how too often stories concerning “the poor” are written *about* people experiencing poverty rather than *with* and *for* them.⁴ This might suggest that we should jettison singing about “the poor” in congregational song altogether, and indeed I would argue that in many of our contexts we should try and move away from an uncritical use of this language.

Yet, there are biblical, theological, and stylistic reasons why this argument is perhaps more complex in particular ecclesial settings. First, the biblical narrative is full of language of “the poor.” While not everything in the Bible is appropriate for song (I can think of many passages in Leviticus or Judges that would make for a very uncomfortable hymn sing!), using the language of “the poor” in our congregational songs helps make the connection between poverty and the biblical narrative more explicit. Moreover, in the Presbyterian and broader Reformed traditions that give the Psalms and psalm paraphrases a pride of place in corporate worship—psalms are replete with references to God’s care for “the poor” and anger towards those who would oppress them—it would be difficult, and perhaps unwise, to totally avoid the language of “the poor.”

There are also theological traditions, particularly liberation theology, where God’s “preferential option

for the poor” serves as a central sign of God’s work and reign. Singing particularly about “the poor” in these contexts is absolutely central to their faith tradition. Finally, perhaps the least theologically convincing but most practical reason for singing about “the poor” is the necessary economy of words in hymn- and songwriting. Because space is at a premium for writers working within a particular medium, “the poor” often seems an easier and more efficient option than something like “people experiencing poverty” (not to mention the particular constraints of rhyme scheme).

What is the social and theological location where I am singing about “the poor”? Is this language appropriate in that context?

Are there people in your congregation who are experiencing poverty? If not, perhaps it would be more appropriate to ask questions about the mission and vision of a church that would sing about, but not worship with, people experiencing poverty.

So, while the decision to drop “the poor” from the academic and journalistic lexicon might be fairly straight forward, the case is more complex in congregational song. Yet, it does raise certain particular questions: What is the social and theological location where I am singing about “the poor”? Is this language appropriate in that context? Are there people in your congregation who are experiencing poverty? If not, perhaps it would be more appropriate to ask questions about the mission and vision of a church that would sing about, but not worship with, people experiencing poverty. If so, how do they experience these songs? Are they liberating or condescending? Empowering or disempowering?

Second, in theological contexts where the language of “the poor” is not experienced as liberative, are there other ways we can sing about poverty? As those advocating for person-first language have noted, too often these descriptors—the poor, the needy, the homeless—de-emphasize the humanity and diversity of a wide array of people

and instead depersonalize and homogenize a group by emphasizing what they lack. Such an approach takes more creativity on the part of the songwriter, but it also may help the congregation to think about poverty and those who experience it in new and more life-giving ways.

CCLI Top 100

When searching for “the poor” in the CCLI Top 100 list, perhaps the most obvious initial conclusion is its relative absence. The word “poor” is mentioned only four times in the 100 songs, and in two of these, the more obvious reading of “poor” is a spiritual rather than economic poverty.⁵ Even when I expanded my search to look for more general themes of poverty, besides a few mentions of orphans or the “fatherless,” there is very little mention of poverty’s effect or condition. It is telling, but perhaps unsurprising, that the most popular of the largely white and evangelical corpus of songs sing little of actual poverty.

Further, even the two songs that seem to mention economic poverty do so in potentially problematic ways. In the Irish folk band Rend Collective’s popular “Build Your Kingdom Here,” the second verse asserts that their hunger and thirst is “to see the captives’ hearts released, / the hurt, the sick, the poor at peace.”⁶ While at first seeming to be a poetic gloss on Christ’s inaugural sermon in Luke 4:18–19 (itself based on Isaiah 61:1–2), a comparison of the two shows how the song spiritualizes and weakens Christ’s radical call. Christ proclaimed,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

The song, on the other hand, locates captivity in the “heart” and asks for “peace,” not freedom or liberative good news, for the poor.

To be fair, the same charge could be made against the author of the Gospel of Matthew, whose version of the Beatitudes begins with “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*” (5:1) rather than the more direct Lukan opening, “Blessed are the poor” (6:20). While spiritual poverty has both a long biblical

and historic tradition, another question to ask is whether spiritualizing poverty is used as a means to avoid singing about economic poverty. This spiritualization of “the poor” can unintentionally turn our gaze away from actual poverty in and around our congregations and often ignores both our role in causing poverty and our call to alleviate poverty through more just ways of living.

Matt Boswell and Matt Papa’s “His Mercy Is More” raises another potential issue when singing about the poor: the vastly different connotations the word can carry. So, when they write that God “welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor,”⁷ what do they mean by “poor”? If economically poor, should this be included in a list with “the vilest”? And lest one thinks this is only a problem encountered in praise and worship music, the same question could be asked of the opening of Joseph Hart’s ubiquitous “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy.”⁸ Could this title suggest that the poor and needy are in such a state because of their sin? In an interview with Michigan Radio, linguist Ann Curzan notes that one of the problems with saying “the poor” when referring to people experiencing economic poverty is exactly these different connotations the word can carry. She gives three:

1. people who don’t have enough resources to meet their needs
2. bad or shoddy quality
3. pitiable, as in “oh you poor soul”⁹

The difficulty, Curzan argues, is that “even if you don’t mean to pull up those connotations, when you say the word poor, the way our brain works, all those meanings get activated.”¹⁰ So, even when we are trying to sing about economic poverty in just ways, the connotations with the word “poor” connote blame or pity. While ridding our vocabulary of the word “poor” might be difficult and even ill-advised for the reasons stated above, another question to ask is whether our mentions of “the poor” are unambiguous enough that these varied meanings are not unhelpfully elided. One example where this is done well is in the first line of José Antonio Olivar and Miguel Manzano’s “*Cuando el pobre*/When the Poor Ones,” where the meaning of “poor” is clear by the further descriptor “*el pobre tiene nada*/the poor ones who have nothing.”¹¹ Context makes clear that “poor” here refers to economic poverty.

Glory to God

Compared to the CCLI Top 100, the theme of poverty and “the poor” is much more central to the texts in *Glory to God*. Of the 853 hymns and songs in the hymnal, forty-three explicitly mention “the poor,”¹² and many more (close to forty depending upon the manner of counting) allude to poverty with different words: dispossessed, oppressed, lowly, needy, last, and so forth. While there are a few that spiritualize poverty,¹³ the majority speak clearly of actual economic poverty. Twelve are biblical paraphrases, including nine psalms, two versions of Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), and one rendition of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12).

Unsurprisingly, the thematic sections of the hymnal with the most mentions of “the poor” are “Jesus Christ: Birth” (7) and “Justice and Reconciliation” (7).¹⁴ In the Christmas hymns, “poor” is used both to describe Jesus’ state as a baby (“The cattle are lowing; the poor baby wakes”¹⁵) and humanity’s relative poverty (“What can I give him,

church’s ministry rather than as active subjects in the church of Christ and the work of God. While not completely overcoming the dichotomy, Daniel Damon’s “Together We Serve” reminds us that the welcoming church does not consist of a well-off group of people who help “the poor,” but rather it is already made up of “the scarred, the wealthy, the poor, / the busy, the lonely, and all who need care.”²⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most dynamic text to mention poverty is the aforementioned one birthed from liberation theology: “*Cuando el pobre/ When the Poor Ones*.” Here, the poor are not passive recipients but active agents of God’s reign: “*Cuando el pobre nada tiene y aún reparte . . . va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar/ When the poor ones who have nothing share with strangers . . . then we know that God still goes that road with us*.”²¹ So, another fruitful question these songs raise is whether our songs tend to sing about “the poor” as passive recipients of care or as people with agency who are already among us and singing with

“Cuando el pobre nada tiene y aún reparte . . . va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar/
When the poor ones who have nothing share with strangers
. . . then we know that God still goes that road with us.”

poor as I am?”¹⁶) to Christ. Yet, poverty is addressed most directly and effectively in Christmas texts when Christ’s incarnation is connected to his identification with “the poor” of earth. So, Christ comes in James Montgomery’s “All Hail to God’s Anointed” not only “to take away transgression” but also “to break oppression, to set the captive free . . . to help the poor and needy and bid the weak be strong.”¹⁷ Similarly, in Adam M. L. Tice’s “Jesus Entered Egypt,” the final stanza reminds us that just as the Holy Family sought refuge in a foreign country two thousand years ago, still “Jesus crosses borders with the wandering poor.”¹⁸

In the “Justice and Reconciliation” section, “the poor” are mentioned in several different ways, some more dynamic than others. Perhaps the most basic is the church’s call to alleviate poverty by ministering to “the poor.” So, H. Kenn Carmichael writes that the call of discipleship is “to serve the poor and homeless first, our ease and comfort last.”¹⁹ While no doubt true, these types of texts often imagine the poor as separate and passive objects of the

us. As Adam Tice asks in his article “What About the Woes?”: “Too often churches sing about the poor or to the poor as objects of external ministry. What might it look like instead to sing with the poor?”²²

Interestingly, eleven of these forty-three texts in *Glory to God* also contrast poverty and wealth in some way. For example, in Henry Smith’s praise song, “Give Thanks,” the refrain repeats, “And now let the weak say, ‘We are strong’; / let the poor say, ‘We are rich / because of what the Lord has done for us!’”²³ Here the poor and weak find their wealth and power in the work of God. Yet, in other texts there is a reminder that while God has promised to bless the poor, God has also promised to bring down the rich and powerful. This is the central message of Rory Cooney’s paraphrase of the Magnificat, “My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout (Canticle of the Turning).” Yes, God spreads lavish tables so that “the hungry poor shall weep no more,” but God’s justice also “tears every tyrant from his throne,” puts “the strong to flight,” and crushes the “spear and rod” of the conqueror.²⁴ This contrast between God’s work

among the poor and rich is important because, as Adam Tice again asserts, to sing truthfully and biblically about poverty, “we must consider not only how we sing about poverty, but also how we sing about wealth . . . [for] [t]he one who came to ‘preach good news to the poor’ also brought some bad news.”²⁵ Thus, another important question to ask when singing about “the poor” is “How are we singing about ‘the rich?’” This might include confession—like Martin Leckebusch’s “In an Age of Twisted Values”—where the congregation sings, “By our struggle for possessions we have robbed the poor and weak.”²⁶ It might also include a prophetic word of warning, like John Bell’s “Heaven Shall Not Wait,” which cautions us to remember that heaven will not wait for either “the poor to lose their patience” or “the rich to share their fortunes.”²⁷

Perhaps the final question is assumed,
but it must be asked: Are the songs we
sing about poverty integrally
connected to our commitment and
work toward economic justice?

Perhaps the final question is assumed, but it must be asked: Are the songs we sing about poverty integrally connected to our commitment and work toward economic justice? One of the clear themes throughout the biblical witness is God’s word of judgment toward those communities whose worship does not lead to a more just economy of life together. For example, after taking to task the people for their sins against the most economically vulnerable, the prophet Amos speaks the words of God, declaring, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:21, 23–24). Similarly, in his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul warns the church that they partake in the Lord’s Supper unworthily if some—the rich—eat and drink to excess while others—the poor—go hungry (1 Cor. 11:17–34). God’s story requires that we connect the work of worship to the work of economic justice. And while there is no one-size-fits-all approach to how each church does this in its local context,

singing about poverty should also lead us to ponder further questions in the life of our church like: Do we know the people experiencing poverty in our neighborhood? How does our church work to end the causes and alleviate the effects of poverty? How do our budgets reflect God’s call to economic justice? Is church leadership shared among people of different economic classes? While by no means exhaustive, such questions can help make sure that the words we sing as a community are embodied in the lives we lead with and for our neighbor.

Conclusion

Since starting my research on this article, almost every aspect of our lives has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are now in the phase where nations and cities, churches and schools are trying to figure out not only how to reopen safely, but also how to adapt to a changed world. We are also already witnessing the economic fallout from the virus on our national life as markets stumble, the already vast income gap between rich and poor widens, and unemployment soars. Those experiencing poverty—along with its various intersections of race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity—tend to be more at-risk for catching the virus and less likely to have access to quality health care when they do become sick.²⁸ On the global scale, the World Bank estimates that the virus will plunge anywhere from 71 to 100 million people into extreme poverty (less than \$1.90 a day).²⁹

If worship does indeed shape our theological and ethical frameworks, it is all the more crucial for churches at this particular moment to reflect critically on the ways poverty is sung (and prayed and preached) about in our worship services. If our songs sing about “the poor” only in a spiritual sense, or only as a nebulous group of people outside the four walls of the church building that we sometimes minister to for spiritual brownie points, we should not be surprised when our churches cannot grapple with weighty ethical questions like how we individually or collectively make or spend money. Yet, if we sing *with* those experiencing poverty, if we recognize their agency, if we understand that they might have been sent to save *us*, then perhaps we can begin to imagine new economies built on justice, mutuality, and sustainability. Perhaps, then, “God still goes the road with us.”³⁰

Notes

1. As will be discussed, the language of “the poor” itself is problematic, so I use quotations as a way to highlight the language while still problematizing it.
2. At the outset, I should also note that while I have great respect and admiration for the PC(USA), I am an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church, so I write as someone outside the tradition, with both its inherent advantages and disadvantages.
3. “Socioeconomic Status,” *APA Style*, American Psychological Association, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/socioeconomic-status>.
4. Denise-Marie Ordway and Heather Bryant, “Covering Poverty: What to Avoid and How to Get It Right,” *Conscious Style Guide*, December 10, 2018, <https://consciousstyleguide.com/covering-poverty-what-to-avoid-and-how-to-get-it-right/>.
5. The first—Tim Hughes’s “Here I Am to Worship” (2000, Thankyou Music)—sings of the Christ who “all for love’s sake became poor.” While this could be read as economic poverty, it is more likely the comparative poverty Christ took on by emptying himself of his divine prerogatives and becoming human. The second—Matt Redman’s “Heart of Worship” (1999, Thankyou Music)—states in the second stanza, “Though I’m weak and poor, / all I have is yours.” In light of Redman’s own social status, it would be difficult to read this as anything but spiritual weakness and poverty.
6. Chris Llewellyn and Gareth Gilkeson, “Build Your Kingdom Here” (2011, Thankyou Music).
7. Matt Boswell and Matt Papa, “His Mercy Is More” (2016, Getty Music Hymns and Songs).
8. Joseph Hart, “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #415.
9. Jennifer Guerra, “Poor vs. Low-Income: Does It Matter Which Word We Use?” *Michigan Radio*, June 10, 2015, <https://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/post/poor-vs-low-income-does-it-matter-which-word-we-use>.
10. Ibid.
11. José Antonio Olivar and Miguel Manzano, “*Cuando el pobre/When the Poor Ones*,” tr. George Lockwood, in *Glory to God*, #762.
12. “Away in a Manger” is counted twice because it is set to two different tunes, so there are forty-three total texts and forty-two different texts.
13. For example, the opening of the third stanza in “Savior, like a Shepherd Lead Us” sings, “You have promised to receive us, / poor and sinful though we be” (*Glory to God*, #187). Again, one can also note the problematic association of “poor and sinful.”
14. Followed by “Jesus Christ: Advent” (3), and “The Church” (3).
15. “Away in a Manger,” in *Glory to God*, #114.
16. Christina Rossetti, “In the Bleak Midwinter,” in *Glory to God*, #144.
17. James Montgomery, “All Hail to God’s Anointed,” in *Glory to God*, #149.
18. Adam M. L. Tice, “Jesus Entered Egypt,” in *Glory to God*, #154.
19. H. Kenn Carmichael, “Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples,” in *Glory to God*, #757.
20. Daniel Charles Damon, “Together We Serve,” in *Glory to God*, #767.
21. Olivar and Manzano, “Cuando el pobre/When the Poor Ones,” in *Glory to God*, #762.
22. Adam M. L. Tice, “What About the Woes? Singing about the Poor (and Wealthy),” *The Yale ISM Review* 4, no. 1 (2018), <http://ismreview.yale.edu/article/what-about-the-woes/>.
23. Henry Smith, “Give Thanks,” in *Glory to God*, #647.
24. Rory Cooney, “My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout (Canticle of the Turning),” in *Glory to God*, #100.
25. Tice, “What About the Woes?”
26. Martin Leckebusch, “In an Age of Twisted Values,” in *Glory to God*, #345.
27. John Bell, “Heaven Shall Not Wait,” in *Glory to God*, #773.
28. Abby Vesoulis, “Coronavirus May Disproportionately Hurt the Poor—And That’s Bad for Everyone,” *Time*, March 11, 2020, <https://time.com/5800930/how-coronavirus-will-hurt-the-poor/>.
29. Daniel Gerszon Mahler, Christopher Lakner, R. Andres Castaneda Aguilar, and Haoyu Wu, “Updated Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty,” *World Bank*, June 8, 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>.
30. Olivar and Manzano, “Cuando el pobre/When the Poor Ones,” in *Glory to God*, #762.

Divided We Fall: Healing Comes When the Whole Community Is Involved

Jerrod Lowry and Melva Lowry

Melva Lowry writes:

When I accepted the invitation to write for this series, I surprised myself. Ministering to persons experiencing homelessness and those with severe mental trauma is not where I feel comfortable. Like many, I feel disconnected to this particular population and I feel unsure about what to do or where to begin. Homelessness is not something that I think about because I was taught to be leery of those who are homeless. They were always projected as dangerous and unclean. My time as one of the Hands and Feet Fellows in Baltimore was spent doing community organizing work that challenged the beliefs that I had about those experiencing homelessness. I saw in my work that when the community comes together to listen and to support the needs of an individual, change can begin to happen. I worked alongside visiting groups and neighborhood leaders. I began to build relationships with the community, and I learned how to listen to what people said and to help them to figure out what they needed to feel whole in their neighborhood. Over these last two years as I served in Baltimore, I learned that healing comes when the whole community is involved.

See, there are many things that divide us: political stances, opinions around abortion, beliefs about sexuality, and conflicting opinions about how to address sexism and systemic racism. We are divided as a nation, but the ability to find resources to cope with mental trauma, jobs, and a safe place to live should not have a dividing line. Access to the aforementioned resources are basic needs. When these needs are met, people are able to become active members in their community and they are able to provide support for self and for others. When

Jesus said, “The poor will always be among us” (Matt. 26:11), he was not referring to impoverished persons who “choose” to live in poverty. The poor will always be among us because the community surrounding them is too divided to bring about the healing needed to those who need help. The poor will always be among us because state and national government policies fail to address the basic needs of those living in poverty. The poor will always be among us because our churches fail to address the varied poverty experiences of our parishioners. As the church, we should not wait for state and local resources to respond to the needs of those in poverty. Jesus calls us to act by seeking justice when policies fail to provide resources, by giving our time and presence within our communities, by fostering meaningful relationships with excluded community members.

While I was working in Baltimore, I learned about a man named Dwight. One summer a visiting volunteer group was doing a Scripture scavenger hunt when they were approached by a man inquiring about their activity. He was visibly homeless and he was sitting in the park under some trees for shade. The group and their adult leader felt comfortable stopping to respond to Dwight’s inquiries. Their conversation with Dwight ended up relating to a Scripture lesson about crossing boundaries they had just read the day before. The group was amazed and excited that their step to move beyond their comfort zone and embrace this stranger connected back to the lessons they were learning. Because this group took the time to be in a relationship with this man experiencing homelessness, they were better able to be in community with him and with the community that they were serving.

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How long will we, who have
so much, act like we are just
one step away from poverty?

Early this year, Dwight passed away. His death made the news.¹ Dwight Claxton was known by many in the neighborhood where the visiting group was walking that day. Though he never found a physical building to call home, Dwight was known by the community and embraced by it. Dwight was not just a nobody in a neighborhood; he was fully human and fully part of the kingdom of God. The specific reasons why he was homeless were possibly known to a few other people. The larger reasons that Dwight Claxton was unable to receive the support he needed to provide for himself lie in the politics that divide cities all over. Many places have seen mental health facilities lose funding and have increased restrictions to where affordable housing can be developed. How long will we, who have so much, act like we are just one step away from poverty? How long will we be afraid to share our resources, fearing that sharing will make us poor? How long will our thinking be lean and our willingness to embrace those in need be limited?

As Christians, we use Scripture as a historical record of Jesus' encounters and we are called to apply them to our current context. This is exactly what happened with the volunteer group and Dwight. They learned about Jesus' encounters with those excluded from their community and entered into a relationship with a man experiencing homelessness. This group crossed the boundaries between the housed and the unhoused. The Scriptures that this group had studied were the stories of the hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:43-48) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-26). In these texts both women were outside of their community. They were known by their neighbors, but they were not embraced or able to receive the support they needed. Once Jesus acknowledged them and listened to their needs, both women were embraced by their communities. By listening to Dwight and paralleling Jesus' response to the hemorrhaging woman and the woman at the well, this group lived Jesus' teaching to include the excluded. All of us are called to engage with others as Jesus did. All of us are called to love one another as a reflection of God's love for us.

During my time in Baltimore I also joined a founding board to begin an affiliate organization for Bridge of Hope. Bridge of Hope, based in Pennsylvania, provides wrap-around services to those who are homeless or at risk of experiencing homelessness. This faith-based organization calls for churches to provide support when local and state resources end or are not available to families. Bridge of Hope is calling out to the community to walk alongside and to bring healing to the poor among us. Though I felt inadequate to be a part of this affiliate Bridge of Hope organization, it required me to get in touch with my own parallel experience with homelessness. At one of our initial board meetings, we were asked to remember the time we first noticed homelessness around us. In that moment I recalled a previous conversation that I had just had with my aunt. We were talking about my time that would soon be ending in Baltimore as a Hands and Feet Fellow. My aunt commented to me that I was fortunate to have a family that supports me and that my family has the ability to support me in the midst of my transitional periods. For the last ten years I have been in temporary placements. In those ten years, my next move was never assured and neither was my next source of income. In every transition, I had to move back home with my family, which was not the life I had predicted for myself coming out of college seventeen years ago. My risk of being homeless was staved off by the simple fact that I had a supportive community to come back to, one that I could rely on for support. I had a place that would wrap their love and support around me and provide space for me to heal and figure out the next step. I was embraced by my community, not shunned or pushed out. I am lucky to have a supportive family, but this is not the norm and this is not possible for everyone who is one step away from homelessness. When individuals do not have the safety net of family or government support, then it is left up to faith-based organizations, church communities, or individuals to step in to bridge the gap. If we are truly the Christian community that Jesus has called us to be, we all have to get involved in the healing of those experiencing poverty.

Jerrod B. Lowry writes:

Who are the poor? When we talk about the poor, I bet that many of us have in mind a picture of poverty. We might imagine the poor as those living under bridges, in a shelter, or in cars. Some of us might picture veterans sleeping on park benches or standing on street corners asking for money. We may first think of women, men, and children pushing grocery carts piled high with trash bags containing all of their belongings. When we talk about the poor our minds likely shift to what might resemble obvious poverty—those clearly lacking financial resources and missing the basic needs: food, shelter, water, warmth, safety. Images like these are certainly aligned with the individuals that Luke’s version of the Beatitudes is likely referencing. On the other hand, a read of Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes leads me to consider a different image of the poor among us. Matthew’s version incorporates a twist that should broaden our image, our attention, and our ministries.

Luke’s version about addressing the poor leads us, motivates us, inspires us to engage in the well-being of those lacking the basic needs.

Luke’s version about addressing the poor leads us, motivates us, inspires us to engage in the well-being of those lacking the basic needs. Many of our churches address the needs of those that fit our image of the poor among us. We have food pantries to supplement limited nutritional resources. Our churches may participate in an interfaith program like Family Promise to address those lacking shelter, warmth, and security. We raise money, fill “blessing boxes,” and pray for the poor among us. While these programs do not lead us to engage in the deeper systemic issues as to why individuals in our communities are impoverished and how the cycle of poverty can be demolished, it is through programs like these that we care for our neighbors. These familiar programs are often the tools a congregation will develop or support in an attempt to engage the whole community to attend to the well-being of the poor.

However, Matthew’s version of Jesus’ Beatitudes speaks of the “poor in spirit.” The poor in spirit may not be addressed by programs like these. Yet Jesus says the poor in spirit are worthy of honor, blessing,

lifting up, having their needs addressed. Who are the poor in spirit? How might the community address the poor in spirit?

The poor in spirit like the poor may not have access to resources. They may be so beaten down by oppressive forces that they lack the will to fight for, defend, or care about the resources that are withheld. However, the poor in spirit may be those that have financial means and yet endure existential exhaustion. The poor in spirit could include Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) tired of trying to explain how “all lives matter” is used to silence calls for justice and ignores the painful realities of our lived experiences.

The poor in spirit might include clergy feeling like they don’t have time or the funds to address the needs of their own family. The poor in spirit might be pastoral voices that care for our congregations while forsaking their own self-care. The poor in spirit might include clergy threatened by official or unofficial church leadership to abandon initiatives that will bring about change “or else.”

The poor in spirit might include clergywomen who are tired of having to fight and defend themselves in spaces where they have been called to teach and preach about the love of God in Jesus Christ! It might include clergy women like those who have confided in me that they are tired of sexual advances from members of their congregations. The poor in spirit might include those that are tired of hearing people complain about their wardrobe (under their robes) the way members of congregations never seem to complain about the wardrobe of male pastors. The poor in spirit might include those tired of wondering why something is not done to address the gender wage gap in society-at-large and within the church in particular.

The poor in spirit might include congregations told over and over that they are dying, as if the proof of God’s love is based on congregation size. The poor in spirit might include congregations that have heard they would be more palatable if they were not so small, so rural, so urban, so LGBTQ affirming, so conservative, so traditional.

Who are the poor in spirit? The poor in spirit are among us. They are members of our congregation. They are pastoral voices. They are congregations. They are those that may have the resources that would prevent them from ever being confused as “the poor among us.” They dress nice. They smile big. And if asked, they will tell you they are fine.

Jesus says that it is the job of the faithful to lift, bless, care, and honor the poor as well as the poor in spirit. Our ministries should consider both. Our ministries should address the needs of both. The poor and the poor in spirit should find that communities of faith are committed to their well-being—to our well-being.

We are not condemning the work that individuals and congregations are doing for those we call “the poor.” We are asking all of us to reconsider, broaden, and address poverty in all and any of the ways it is present among us. We want to challenge everyone to inquire what is keeping the resources out of the hands of those who need it most. The poor will always be among us, but let us ensure that we are not the reason why this statement is true.

Individual Liturgical Practices

Here is a list of options to choose from to incorporate in your daily, weekly, or monthly liturgical practices. This list is not exhaustive. Get creative; step outside your comfort zone and try failing.

1. Self-reflection. Take time weekly or monthly to look in the mirror and remember the times you experienced deep need. Who embraced you? Who provided support or resources until you were able to do so yourself? How did you feel during this time?
2. We mentioned some Scriptures that are probably familiar to many. Take a moment to reread these Scriptures (Luke 8:43–48, John 4:4–26). Print them out and study each passage verse by verse.
 - A. Take different color pens, pencils, or markers and star the places where resources are mentioned or kept from the person needing them. Underline who is in need. Circle who provides the resources to the one in need. Make note of what is made possible once the person in need receives what they once lacked.
 - B. Read your church or community into the text. Who are the blessed? Who is the woman at the well? Who is the hemorrhaging woman?
3. Get involved. Once a month get involved with your local food pantry by volunteering time to pick up food or set up for food pick-ups.
4. Move beyond your comfort zone by rolling down your window at a red light and speaking to someone asking for money or food. Ask them their name and how they are feeling. If you pass the same person on a daily commute, grab an extra piece of fruit on the way out the door from time to time.
5. Study the demographics of your community and learn about the political issues and policies in place as it relates to homelessness and mental health resources. Do you know how your community was developed? Can you recognize where the boundary lines are or how they were established?
6. Build new relationships. Who do you see that you don’t have a deep relationship with? Invite someone new to share a meal or coffee (practice socially distancing or wait until when gatherings are possible again). Listen to what motivates them and share a part of your story as well.
7. Strengthen old relationships. Don’t settle for the standard “I’m fine” answer from your friends, fellow parishioners, or fellow congregants. Really check-in and set aside time to listen and be in fellowship with them.

Communal Liturgical Practices

Here are some practices that the whole church and community can engage in together. In order to model what Jesus taught the disciples, we must lead ourselves first in learning and growing together.

1. Read together *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp; *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* by Michael J. Gorman; *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi; *Building a Bridge* by James Martin.
2. Reflect together the ways that your community excludes persons, especially those who are not a part of your congregation.
3. Learn about your church history and how your neighborhood was developed over the years. What policies were put in place to exclude people? What policies or norms are still in place to exclude people?

4. Connect with the community. Go out and invite people living around your church to a fun relationship-building event and have a conversation with them by sharing your story and listening to their stories.

Prayers for the People

Gracious and loving God, help us to be your faithful disciples.

Too often we fail to see the struggles of our neighbors.

Too often we fail to consider how our comforts negatively impact our sisters and brothers.

Too often we allow our only response to be a quick word of prayer about “those poor people.” Forgive us for ignoring each other.

Forgive us for thinking ourselves too small or ill-equipped to advocate for justice and equity.

Help us, O Lord, to be your faithful disciples. Show us how to lift up, honor, and bless the poor and the poor in spirit.

May our churches be an oasis for those deprived of resources,

that we might be centers of hope and health. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Note

1. Lillian Reed, “A Teacher of Life,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-dwight-claxton-20200201-20200202-c4d1ln5m7fgqth2hnupt4xb6uu-story.html>.



Amy E. Gray

An Offering Invitation to Solidarity, Not Charity

Grace Pomroy

In high school I became close friends with two sisters from a wealthy family in my congregation. While I didn't realize their socioeconomic status immediately, it became clear as I spent time at their large home, joined them for lunch at their country club, and slowly drained what little savings I had by going shopping with them on the weekends. In conversations about their family's wealth, they often balked at the word "rich" saying, "We're not rich, we're blessed."

At the time this phrase rubbed me the wrong way, but I could never quite put my finger on why. Looking back, I can see the problem lies with the word "blessed." It implies their family was more highly favored and thus eligible to receive a larger portion of God's blessings, while others, like my solidly middle-class family, were not. While I fully realize this interpretation was not their intention, it was interesting to see how this ideology of wealth carried over into their beliefs about the poor and underprivileged. Although they were incredibly generous with the people and causes they cared about, they held a prevailing mindset that those with less privilege should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, and those who did not were simply lazy.

The words we use to describe our wealth and particularly how we see God in relationship to our wealth matters. It has a profound impact on us, our community, and how we live out our faith in daily life. It has an even deeper impact on the ways in which we worship together, what we "offer" in the offering, as well as how that offering is used. In this article, I'll explore how God calls us to view and use our wealth and the ways in which this impacts the language we use, the invitation we make, and the action we take with the offering in worship.

Regarding Wealth

One of the biggest mistakes we as people of faith often make in regard to our wealth is we forget that we are stewards, not owners. "Our" wealth has never been and never will be "ours." All that we have and all that we are belongs to God. The liturgy of the offering reminds us of this by quoting Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." God is the creator and we are the creations. We are first and foremost receivers, not givers.

While this may be easy to take in from a global perspective, it becomes a little more challenging when the conversation shifts to specific possessions. We know we have not earned creation, but what about our home, car, retirement account, and many other things? Yet, as the psalmist says, if the earth belongs to God *and* "all that is in it," then these things belong to God as well. If these things belong to God, we no longer have the freedom to use them "however we like." Instead, we need to carefully manage them and consider what God would have us do with them.

God has a lot to say about how we are to manage God's creation—particularly to those who have more wealth in their possession. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of instructions for how people of faith are to respond to poverty and injustice in their midst. In the Old Testament, God invites us to not be tight-fisted towards the needs of our neighbor (Deut. 15:7–8), to uphold justice for the needy and destitute (Ps. 82:3–4), to be kind to the needy (Prov. 14:21), and to hear the cries of the poor (Prov. 21:13). In the New Testament, Jesus further aligns himself with the cause of the poor, saying theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Luke 6:20)

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and anything we did for “the least of these” we did for him (Matt. 25:40). The Bible calls us to move beyond charity to solidarity with the poor. Solidarity requires us to examine the root causes of poverty and fight to eradicate such injustice.

Many have often quoted Jesus’ words “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me” (Matt. 26:11) to justify inaction in the face of poverty. This is Jesus’ response after the woman anoints Jesus’ head with the alabaster jar of costly ointment and the disciples wonder why the woman wasted the money instead of giving it to the poor. The Rev. Liz Theoharis reminds us that the disciples’ response fits with the dominant economic system of the time. The way to address poverty was “by doing charity work, by buying and selling and then donating to the poor, but never questioning how poverty was created in the first place.”¹ Yet Jesus’ response is a reference to Deuteronomy 15 where we hear there will be no poor among Israel if they follow God’s commandment. However, because the people will not follow these commandments, there will always be poor people among them. As Theoharis writes, Jesus “is not condoning poverty, he is reminding us that God hates poverty, has commanded us to end poverty by forgiving debts, by raising wages, by outlawing slavery, and by restructuring society around the needs of the poor.”²

Similarly, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. addresses this same issue in his discussion of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man did not go to hell because of his riches. The rich man went to hell because he “didn’t realize that his wealth was his opportunity . . . to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother. . . . He sought to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty.”³ As A. K. M. Adam puts it in his commentary on James chapter 2, “Whole-hearted faithfulness to God will always require of us whole-hearted faithfulness to the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters: to orphans and widows, to our naked, hungry neighbors, to wounded and broken left-behind bystanders.”⁴ Those with wealth are called to use that wealth to stand in faithful solidarity with their neighbor—actively breaking down the social and economic boundaries between the rich and the poor.

This view stands in stark contrast to the money belief held by so many in our world today that there is not enough to go around. People buy into a mindset of scarcity that says there will always be winners and losers, people with more and people

with less. As Lynne Twist writes, “We rationalize that someone is destined to end up with the short end of the stick. . . . We feel we have permission to discount them. When we believe *that’s just the way things are*, then we assume a posture of helplessness.”⁵ We give ourselves an excuse to continue hoarding our wealth with selective charity for the needy, knowing if we do not secure our own (and our family’s) financial future no one else will. Why examine the system of poverty when there will always be winners and losers and we are currently on the winning side?

The Bible reminds us that our possessions
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The Bible reminds us that our possessions are not our own. God’s abundance belongs just as much to our neighbor as it does to us. Jesus envisions a kingdom free from poverty and need and calls all of us to side with the poor, fighting to bring that kingdom to life in the here and now through solidarity, not just acts of charity.

The History of the Offering

This radical view of wealth can have a profound impact on how we experience and participate in the offering in worship. Before we can explore that impact, it’s important to understand the history of the offering and how the intentions have shifted over time.

The offering is an act of worship, an opportunity to express our love for God by giving up something we value. This is seen most clearly in the offerings in ancient Israel. No matter the kind of offering (drink, grain, animal, etc.), it was often given and then destroyed. The focus seems to be not on what happens with the offering after it’s given, but on the act of giving itself. As Mark Allan Powell writes, the offering “is a worship event that provides us with an opportunity for expressing our love for God in the purest way imaginable, by giving up something we value.”⁶ It is an opportunity to respond with thanksgiving and gratitude for what God has done for us by sacrificing something that is important to us.

First Chronicles 29 demonstrates this well. David is inviting people to give jewels, precious metals, and materials for the building of the temple. He

ends his invitation with these words, “Who then will offer willingly, consecrating themselves today to the LORD?” (v. 5). Even though the offerings may be physical, the focus of the offering is not the gifts themselves but the giver’s relationship to God. By giving, they offer themselves wholly to God.

In the New Testament, there is a distinct focus on collecting offerings to provide for the poor and needy. The believers held their possessions in common, selling them and distributing proceeds to those in need. Similarly, in Acts and Paul’s letters we hear about collections being taken for other faith communities who are in need. Later in the New Testament, James reminds believers of Jesus’ teachings about the importance of caring for widows and orphans (1:27) and living out one’s faith by supplying the bodily needs of others (2:16). There seems to be an outcry in the New Testament to use money and possessions to aid the poor in one’s worship community, other communities of faith, and beyond. These offerings seem less related to a specific collection and more focused on how one uses money and possessions to care and advocate for the poor.

“For centuries, Christians provided for others as they themselves came to the eucharistic table. Bread and wine were gathered, and deacons set aside the amount needed for the service. Then, the rest was distributed to the poor.”

—Martha Moore-Keish

Unsurprisingly, the early church followed in the pattern of the New Testament, with a focus on gathering together around the Eucharist and distributing contributions to the poor. The people brought food to be used in worship. The worship leaders “offered” prayers of praise and thanksgiving, in remembrance of Christ and in gratitude for God’s gracious provision. As Martha Moore-Keish writes, “For centuries, Christians provided for others as they themselves came to the eucharistic table. Bread and wine were gathered, and deacons set aside the amount needed for the service. Then, the rest was distributed to the poor.”⁷ The offerings were the food and the prayers, not the contributions.

From the third century onward the presentation of the bread and cup for the Eucharist became known as the “offering.” Moore-Keish writes, “Western medieval celebrations of the mass came to focus on the priest offering the eucharistic sacrifice on behalf of the people, and often for particular people, who did not have to be present to receive the benefit.”⁸ What started out as the act of preparing the table now became an act of priestly sacrificial offering.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther challenged this practice, reminding believers that the Eucharist isn’t a sacrifice the priest offers to God on our (or others’) behalf, but rather a benefit we receive from God. In 1549, the Church of England began defining the “offering” as a collection of money. By the mid-twentieth century, the offering had become a high ritual moment at most American Protestant churches featuring ushers solemnly passing plates, special music, and a procession as the plates were brought forward with pastors sometimes elevating them during the prayer—a practice that, as Moore-Keish notes, is “oddly reminiscent of a medieval high mass, with money rather than bread as the focal point.”⁹

With such a checkered history, what are we to make of the offering? How is God calling us to view our money and possessions in this moment?

Returning to the biblical text, it appears that a few different things are important. Throughout the worship service we are reminded of what God has done for us. During the offering we have the opportunity to respond in gratitude by offering something that is precious to us. This is not a time to put a spotlight on our own generosity, but rather to focus on what God has done for us and respond with joy. Similarly, the proceeds from the offering should be used to aid those in need. This is not to say that a portion of the offering should not be used to fund the church. In an ideal world, the church’s staff, infrastructure, and property exist to amplify the church’s mission to serve those in need in its community. The offering is a moment in worship when we can express our love for God and stand in solidarity with our neighbors in need.

Offering Language

If the offering is a tangible way to respond in gratitude to God’s love and stand in solidarity with our neighbors, the language we use ought to reflect this purpose. Many stewardship leaders have become fond of talking about giving out of “the abundance” God has entrusted to our care.

“I’m not sure the word ‘abundance’ is correct. Not everyone experiences God’s abundance in a material way. What about the poor, the underprivileged, the homeless? What abundance has God entrusted specifically to them?”

However, using abundance language as it relates to the offering can be a bit tricky. As a seminary student once pointed out to me, “I’m not sure the word ‘abundance’ is correct. Not everyone experiences God’s abundance in a material way. What about the poor, the underprivileged, the homeless? What abundance has God entrusted specifically to them?”

We do not all experience “God’s abundance” in the same way—particularly from a financial and material standpoint. While we all may be joint stewards of the abundance God has entrusted to us collectively through creation, the systems we have put in place dole out material resources to each of us as individuals in an inequitable way. The word “abundance” only works when we are talking collectively. To refer to our abundance individually is to imply that we all have more than enough financially and materially, overlooking those in our community for whom this is not true, and bypassing the intentional and unintentional ways we may be contributing to the systems of oppression holding them there.

Similarly, the word “sacrifice” can also be problematic for those who have already sacrificed a lot or those for whom there is nothing left to sacrifice. The story of the widow’s mite is often misinterpreted as condoning the sacrificial offerings of the poor. As Paul Penley writes, “The widow is a victim of oppression, not an example to follow. We typically assume Jesus said or implied, ‘Go and do likewise.’ But he didn’t. What did he say? He emphasized that the widow ‘out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.’”¹⁰ Just before we encounter this widow in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has called out the hypocrisy of the scribes, pointing out specifically that “they devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40). Jesus reminds us that the church should not encourage the destitute to choose between their own livelihood and generous giving.

Instead of “abundance” or “sacrifice,” I suggest that congregations use the words “sufficiency” or “enough.” These words are a bit more precise. While the exact dollar amount of “enough” will change from person to person based on cost of living, family size, life situation, and so forth, the word itself begs

the question of what is sufficient (just enough) for me and what belongs to my neighbor. As Rev. David Loleng writes, “Shifting from mindsets of scarcity or out-of-touch abundance, we should explore a mindset and theology of sufficiency. This approach can move us from fear and denial to creative possibilities in relation to our resources.”¹¹ Loleng invites us to consider God’s provision of manna as an example of sufficiency. Unlike the Israelites, though, those who hoard God’s abundance will not find their portion rotten the next day. The leader’s challenge is to connect these dots more broadly in our world today, reminding people of the real and lived ramifications of systemic injustice, elitist policies, and the daily actions of those who hoard their wealth in the face of their neighbor’s need. We find freedom when we stop individualizing Christ’s vision of abundant life and instead consider how we, together, can create an abundant life for all people. For those with more than enough, that requires the great task of calling their lifestyle, wealth, and possessions into question as they learn to stand in solidarity with their neighbors.

Lastly, the language we use should not “other” the poor. Too often mainline church leaders assume that everyone in their congregations is in the middle to upper class. These leaders talk about “the poor” as if they are outside of the walls of the congregation begging for help and not sitting in the pews right next to us. Even using language like “poor” or “rich” as I have used in this article can make it sound like it is “those people,” not “us.” Yet, according to the Pew Research Center’s 2014 study of income distribution by religious group, 61 percent of PC(USA) adults have a total household income of above \$50,000 per year, 15 percent are between \$30,000 and \$49,999, and 24 percent are below \$30,000.¹² To put this into context, in 2014 the poverty guideline issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for a family of four living in the contiguous forty-eight states or the District of Columbia was \$23,850.¹³ This means nearly a quarter of PC(USA) congregation members are living below the poverty line. Of course, every congregation has an entirely different context with a different socioeconomic makeup, but on the

whole, there are people across the socioeconomic spectrum in this denomination. Instead of using phrases like “the poor,” let us talk about those of us and our neighbors—whether next door or across the world—who are oppressed, underprivileged, and in need. Without these descriptors we risk objectifying the poor, reducing their personhood to their socioeconomic status, and avoid pointing to the systemic injustices that create and maintain poverty.

Offering Invitation

This attention to the language we use suggests new, more inclusive and creative ways of inviting people to participate in the offering. The *Book of Common Worship* describes this part of worship as an invitation to self-offering. “As those who have been claimed and set free by [Christ’s] grace, we respond with gratitude, offering him our lives, our spiritual gifts, and our material goods. Every service of worship shall include an opportunity to respond to Christ’s call to discipleship through self-offering.”¹⁴ In the offering, we are inviting people to open up their hearts and lives, not just their wallets, in thanksgiving for all God has done for them.

Yet, the offering, as it is currently lived out in most congregations, does not reflect this vision as fully as it could. First, the laser focus on financial generosity can detract from the idea that God desires our whole selves, not just the percentage of income we choose to give to the church. Second, the sole focus on monetary generosity can also leave those with fewer financial resources unable to participate (or participate as fully) in the offering. Third, those giving on a recurring basis online are not able to fully engage this moment in worship as they often have nothing to put into the plate.¹⁵ It is time for us to reframe the offering in such a way that all can participate equally in this moment.

A few years ago, a congregation in Minneapolis decided to reimagine the offering by having everyone write something on the front of a sticky note that they could offer along with their contact information on the back. They then stuck these notes up on one of the walls of the church. The offerings included things like tax preparation services, help with yard work, baked goods, and more. Then, during another part of the service everyone was invited to take one of the notes and use it to meet one of their needs. This opportunity underscores that the offering is about using what we have to connect with God and our neighbors.

There are many ways to reimagine the offering to be more inclusive and remind people of its true purpose. Here are three suggestions:

- Invite people to share stories of where they have seen God at work. Especially during a time of communal trauma these can be really uplifting reminders of how God is present.
- Invite people to name any privilege they have and nail it to the cross as a reminder to use it to fight systems of oppression and live in solidarity with neighbors in need.
- Invite people to bring something to worship that represents their vocation(s) and bring it out during the offering to invite God into this work and consider how they might use these skills to uplift the kingdom of God. The activity could change each week depending on the message in the sermon or the theme of the liturgical season.

Even with a more holistic approach to the offering, it is still important to include an opportunity for financial giving for those who want to do so. Some churches have moved to having a basket or box at the door and inviting people to give as they leave as part of the sending. As Moore-Keish notes, “By placing giving at the end of worship, as part of the sending, I suggest we are putting giving in its proper place—as a response to God’s gracious giving which has already nourished us through water and word, bread and wine.”¹⁶ In my congregation, various stations allow people to participate in the offering by lighting a candle and saying a prayer, engaging in an interactive offering activity like the ones listed above, and/or giving to the church using an iPad with a credit card reader attached. This method stresses that while money is important, it’s just one way in which we can offer ourselves to God. In an online worship setting, you might put a slide up at the beginning and the end of the service reminding people of the ways they can give. During offering, before a more inclusive activity, remind people why the financial offering matters, how to give, and where the money goes.

With the offering time in worship becoming more creative and inclusive, church leaders are both freed and challenged to talk about how God calls us to view and use our wealth, not just during the offering

but all throughout the worship service and beyond. I invite church leaders to address this in sermons, liturgies, small groups, and more. This should not be a one-time or occasional topic, but something that receives careful attention throughout the church year. Depending on the context, this approach may result in some push back. I have often found that people are more open to the topic of giving when leaders preface the conversation by emphasizing that they will not be asking people to give (more) money to the church during this sermon/service/discussion. People get most defensive when they feel like it is a “bait and switch” moment—when the leader is using this opportunity to talk about money just so they can fill the church’s coffers. When it comes to this, many people have “old tapes” playing in their heads about past stewardship sermons and conversations, so it may take a few tries for people to finally understand and trust the gospel message you are trying to convey. Be patient and persist in this work.

Action Taken

When the church receives money, it should model the gospel’s view of wealth and solidarity with the poor. Congregations, like people, can get caught up in the capitalist mindset that “more is always better” without considering how that abundance will be used to serve those who need it most. That’s why this conversation needs to begin with the congregation’s budget. As Janet T. and Philip D. Jamieson explain, the church’s budget is “a statement of faith in which they reveal that which is most important to them.”¹⁷ If the congregation seeks to view all wealth and possessions as God’s, not ours, and to live in solidarity with the poor, the budget should reflect this.

An overly simplistic approach might be to examine the percentage spent on missions and benevolence to see how much the congregation cares about this cause. However, this approach lets congregations off the hook too easily. Solidarity with the poor is about so much more than charity; it is about forging deep relationships with people living in poverty, standing with them even when it is not convenient, deconstructing the systems of oppression that create poverty, and joining with the poor to advocate for more just systems and policies.

Congregations need to more directly connect their money to God’s mission. Most congregations do not know “why” they exist or what work God is calling them specifically to do. This lack of

mission leads congregations to function more like community centers (focused on serving members) than mission centers (focused on serving neighbors). Congregations should spend time discerning God’s mission for them. This discernment process must involve the congregational community at large, not just those in leadership positions.¹⁸

Once a congregation’s mission is determined, a detailed process is required to decide how its budget, staff time, volunteer time, and property use align with that mission.¹⁹ The move to online worship during the current pandemic has helped many congregations to reexamine some costs and activities once seen as mandatory. As you budget, consider how you might take more radical action—like reparations—to stand in solidarity with those in need.

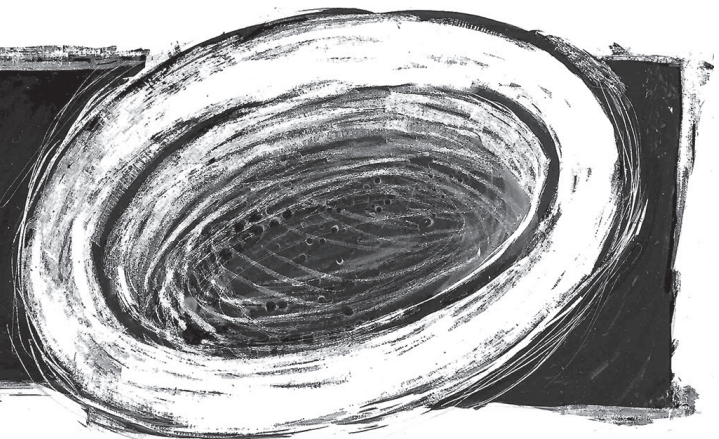
Finally, take a close look at how you are living out this mission. Are you funding service opportunities that objectify the poor and foster a white savior complex? Or, are you committing to creating a long-term relationship with those in need and forming an allyship that allows you to meet their immediate needs and address their larger systems of oppression? These are great questions to ask of organizations who receive benevolence money from your congregation. Be extremely cautious about service opportunities where members drop in to “help” their neighbors without really understanding their needs. As Liz Theoharis stresses, “It is about forging relationships of mutuality among diverse poor people to meet their needs.”²⁰ It is about creating a common table where the poor and rich meet together as equals, recognizing each other’s dignity, and providing for each other’s needs.

God calls us to question the ways in which we regard and use our wealth which in turn encourages us to question the language used, invitations made, and actions taken with the offering in worship. When we shift our view of money and possessions from “All of this is mine, I earned it, and I need more,” to “All of this is God’s; it belongs just as much to my neighbor as it does to me; how might God be calling me to live in solidarity with those in need?” it changes not only our participation in the offering, but our entire relationship with money. The result is not just an increase in giving, but a deeper questioning of how people of God are called to save, spend, share, and acquire money. We find ways to live out our love of God and neighbor not just through the offering plate but through all of the ways we use our money every day.

Notes

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10. Paul T. Penley, "The Widow's Mite: Good or Bad Example of Giving?" *Reenacting the Way* (blog), November 26, 2018, <http://www.reenactingtheway.com/blog/the-widows-mite-good-or-bad-example-of-giving>.
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13. "2014 Poverty Guidelines," ASPE, December 1, 2014, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2014-poverty-guidelines>.
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15. Often congregation leaders will respond, "But we create laminated cards for online givers to put in the plate." While these cards are a step forward, they do not solve the problem. As a long-time online giver, I often feel guilty passing the empty plate, especially as a young person who is already presumed to be a non-giver by older members of the congregation. The card allows me to assuage my guilt by demonstrating my gift to myself and others, but it does not allow me to participate fully in this moment of "self-offering" or help me to connect with the offering as an act of worship.
16. Martha Moore-Keish, "What Are We 'Offering' at the 'Offering?'" Rethinking Stewardship Conference, August 23, 2018, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, YouTube, 22:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwfiVifOryU&feature=youtu.be>.
17. Janet T. Jamieson and Philip D. Jamieson, *Ministry and Money: A Practical Guide for Pastors* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 101.
18. In chapter seven of *Ministry and Money* the Jamiesons describe how to lead a communal discernment process and the following budget process.
19. A word of caution: Some congregation members may use this as an opportunity to question staff salaries. Most times these questions emerge because these members do not understand how staff members spend their time. Take the time to educate people about how this time is spent and how it connects to the mission.
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Some are still hungry.



Amy E. Gray

Art and the Need of the World

Deborah Sokolove

*Author's Note: Major portions of this article were previously published as a chapter in my book *Sanctifying Art* and are used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers, www.wipfandstock.com.*

Too often our society tends to regard the arts as a frill, an elective add-on to make life more pleasant after the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and adequate medical care are met. There is much evidence, however, that this is a mistake. Art, or at least the kind of meaning that art mediates, is a primary human need, without which we lose our sense of self-worth, our dignity, our relationships with one another.

Art fills human need simply by being itself, by offering delight in a world that is often filled with pain, or a way to transcend that pain through creative expression. Every person who puts up a poster to brighten a prison cell, writes a poem in a homeless shelter, or sings or hums or whistles or simply listens to the music of others while doing work that might otherwise be mind-numbing, soul-killing drudgery knows in their body and in their spirit that art is a basic hunger, just as real as the hunger for food or sleep or love. During the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests, people carry signs and banners that use color and form and symbols to convey their anger and their hope, and use fencing that is intended to contain their protest as an art gallery to display those signs and banners as an inspiration and a message for others.¹

Art is a vehicle of meaning, one of the important ways that we come to understand the world. In recent years, many churches have begun to appreciate this simple truth, even as they struggle

with its implications. Many who know that the Word of God can be proclaimed and received more readily through the arts than through didactic words still often find it difficult to explain why time and money that could go to feeding the hungry or healing the sick should instead be spent on music, dance, drama, painting, or poems. Isn't art, they argue, just a lovely extra, something to be indulged in only after basic needs are met?

One way out of this quandary is to remember that our humanity is more than the sum of our physical needs. Human beings need wonder, meaning, and connection just as much as—or maybe even more than—we need food and water and air. Art marks us as human. Without the arts, we lose our sense of self-worth, our dignity, our relationships with one another. To deprive people of participation in the arts is to deprive them of their humanity. Indeed, when the need for food and other physical needs is not met, people often turn to the arts to help them cope with the deprivation. In circumstances where physical sustenance is lacking, the arts often provide spiritual sustenance, a way of finding meaning in what would otherwise be only chaos and terror.

Art is not just the complex, often-mystifying works that are found in museums and opera houses. It also includes the statues in public parks and streets; the images that fill the advertising, movies, and television shows that endlessly stream on smart phones, computers, and larger screens; and the go-go music blaring from the open windows of a car going past or trickling through the headphones of someone sitting on a bus, the guitar strumming a familiar tune on a neighbor's front porch, the drumming circle in a city park. The art that is part

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of everyday life shapes people in ways that it is difficult to subvert or often even name. The hymns sung in churches, as well as the songs and chants heard at protests the world over, are also art, finding their ways into hearts and minds through channels that are hard for reason to name.

The Arts in Public Life

Many years ago, I read an article that said something to the effect that the Russians took art much more seriously than the United States did, because they sent their dissident poets to Siberia, while we merely ignored ours. Today, there is profound evidence that people are beginning to realize the important ways that artworks shape the cultural imagination. As protestors insist on the removal of public statues, seeing them as daily reminders of oppression and bigotry, others see them as important reminders, honoring their heritage and history. Regardless of what side one is on in controversies over public art, it is clear that the way such objects shape what people experience and believe is a matter not just of conscious concern, but of great passion.

Murals in Belfast

Like statues and monuments, posters and murals are ubiquitous, if somewhat more ephemeral, evidence of the importance of art in public and political discourse. As Lauren Robinson, a librarian at the University of Louisville, writes in her article “Libraries and Turbulence: Poster Art during Social and Political Unrest,”

Posters adorn the walls of our streets, reflect our environment, color our imagination, shape our ideologies, channel dreams, excite desires, illustrate harsh realities, and can offer a voice to the voiceless. Posters communicate the principles and undercurrents that shape and govern a society due to their inherently cheap and mobile nature. . . . Posters can define generations, cross ethnic and sectarian lines, transcend literacy boundaries, and perhaps ultimately give viewers a different perspective of their own societies.²

The same could be easily said of the murals in many cities that remind communities of their past and point them towards the future. In Belfast, paintings on the sides of buildings and on the so-called “peace walls”—barriers between Protestant and Catholic

neighborhoods—are part of a hundred-year-old tradition memorializing sectarian and political violence. Like the controversies over removing statues and monuments in the United States, the conversation about whether to remove the peace walls and the murals that cover them has been marked by great passion on both sides. A report from the PBS NewsHour notes,

Belfast’s largest Protestant community, Shankill, is covered in murals that depict masked, gun-toting loyalist fighters. It is separated from The Falls—the city’s largest Catholic neighborhood—by a peace wall first erected during The Troubles. . . . Some residents say the murals mark an important part of Northern Ireland’s past and should not be taken down. But newer images and public art projects could help the communities move forward.³

Discussing “Building Peace through the Arts: Re-Imaging Communities,” a project of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and a consortium of other organizations, Anne Ward, Arts Council Community Development officer, noted, “Young children walking past [images of] masked gunmen has an impact on the local community. So, the program is all about the community wanting to transform . . . and creating a new Northern Ireland.”⁴ In Belfast, murals that once glorified violence are now being used to help people envision a peaceful future for themselves and their neighbors.

Yarn Flowers in East Harlem

While the desire to replace controversial artworks with new visions can lead to hurt feelings and even violence, creating images of delight in neglected neighborhoods can bring strangers together to form community. In East Harlem, yarn artist Naomi Lawrence works with local women to create huge, temporary, crocheted murals on the ugly chain link fences that surround schoolyards and too many empty lots. Lawrence is a fiber artist whose first effort in what is often referred to as “yarn bombing” was to cover the lampposts of Jesus Green in Cambridge, England, with colorful, hand-knitted, woolen “socks.”⁵ When she moved to East Harlem with her family in 2019, she used her skills as an artist and community organizer to invite neighborhood women to help her in projects using

acrylic yarn to create oversized 2-dimensional crochet flowers, trees and wildlife. The site-specific installations are sewn onto chain-link fences in parks and public spaces. . . . The first installation she created in 2014, *Blue Iris*, endeared her to the East Harlem community that she now calls home. Her installations take a few months to create but are generally approved by the city to stay in place for up to one year. They are often washed and refurbished to be reinstalled in various locations such as school playgrounds. Public engagement is a primary goal of each installation. The works become part of the urban landscape.⁶

The huge, colorful flowers, butterflies, and other natural forms that have come to adorn Lawrence's neighborhood are not simply a matter of self-expression, but rather the exuberant result of collaborative work with her neighbors. When she recently talked at my church about her work, Lawrence excitedly described how the women who work with her on her projects become community for one another, sharing their lives and offering mutual support as they crochet squares and other shapes and teach one another to refine their skills.

Since the large quantities of yarn necessary to create such works can be expensive, Lawrence looks for grants as well as permission from local authorities to display her works. Relatively fragile and always intended to be temporary, works such as the 12' x 24' *La Flor De Mi Madre*, on view from July 1, 2019, to July 1, 2020, at the corner of 1718 Park Avenue at 121st Street in East Harlem,⁷ enliven the urban landscape with beauty and often surprising humor. They speak to the yearnings, hopes, and memories of the women who open their hearts to one another and to Lawrence as they all struggle together to build a better world for their children.

The Arts and the Self

Projects that are smaller and often less noticeable than murals can be a critical means by which individuals find healing from trauma, create a sense of meaning and personal identity, and explore their spirituality. There is evidence that human beings have been using painting and drawing for nearly forty thousand years.⁸ While the exact purpose of the repetitive dot patterns, stenciled images of human hands, and depictions of animals found

in cave paintings in Indonesia and Europe is not known because this activity predates any written records of human activity, the simple fact that at least some individuals went deep into dangerous caves to make them suggests the importance that such activity had for them and for their people.

As philosopher Ellen Dissanayake puts it, "To take the arts seriously is to rediscover routes to belonging, meaning, and competence in a world where for many these are no longer part of the human birthright."⁹ Citing studies of nonliterate, tribal cultures, as well as the normal development of human infants, Dissanayake shows that what we call "the arts" are an intrinsic mode of communication and learning, an innate propensity common to all human groups. While the specifics differ, every culture uses dramatic story-telling, music, and dance of some kind not as a tacked-on extra, but as an intrinsic part of everyday life.

Poets in Prison: Write Night with the Free Minds Book Club

Writing is an art form that often becomes a pathway to freedom and wholeness. Freeing the minds of incarcerated young people is the mission of the Free Minds Book Club. The club came about through the making of a documentary about a young man who was on death row for a crime he committed when he was seventeen. As the filmmakers corresponded with him about a book that they were reading along with him, he said, "You know, my body may be locked up, but my mind is always free through books and writing."¹⁰

To help free the minds of other poets behind bars, Free Minds created Write Night as a monthly gathering of volunteers who offered their energy and writing skills to help incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youths and adults to awaken to their own potential through books, creative writing, and peer support.¹¹ At each event, one or more formerly incarcerated participants, known as Poet Ambassadors, would speak about how writing poetry and sharing it with people on the outside had helped them while they were still in prison, and how participation in the book club's job readiness training and violence prevention outreach, along with connections with the friends they had met through the program, had helped them after their release. Following this testimony, poems were distributed for comments that would be returned to the original authors. The sounds of laughter and

delight, as well as the sharing of tears and deep emotions, were an important feature of Write Night, helping the volunteers connect with one another, with the imprisoned authors, and with the Poet Ambassadors who came to share their stories.

While these lively gatherings are on hold, the program continues in a virtual format called “On the Same Page.” Volunteers are encouraged to read as many of the poems as they can, addressing the authors by their first name and signing off with their own first name. They are reminded that

this is not a grammar class. We are here to encourage and thank the author for sharing their work. Look for ways to connect with the poems—a favorite line, something you could relate to, or something that made you think. . . . This is a collaborative experience; you will see other volunteers writing their own comments . . . [adding] comments in the space around the poem . . . [which] staff will rearrange . . . as necessary . . . before printing and sending to the poets.¹²

The incarcerated poets who send their poems to Write Night find encouragement and hope through this collaborative, appreciative approach to the art and craft of poetry. Whether still in prison or having been released, they become equipped to achieve their education and career goals, and learn to become voices for change in communities that too often assume that they can never go on to live productive lives.

Poets without Homes: Telling Stories in Verse

While some people are living in literal prisons, others are imprisoned by mental illness, poverty, and homelessness. Many places that offer food, physical shelter, and medical care to people who live on the street also offer classes and workshops in the arts. It is not uncommon for the clients to find solace, inspiration, and a place of belonging in such groups even when their physical needs may only be marginally met. One such group is led by Cynthia Dahlin, a chaplain who offers a weekly poetry workshop for the women at N Street Village, a shelter in Washington, DC. At each session, Dahlin gives the women a different topic, suggesting that they write about their early lives, what is going on in the present, and their hopes and fears for the future.

Participants have twenty-five or thirty minutes

to write, allowing each other silence by waiting to talk until the last pen is down. When they are done, Dahlin invites them to share what they have written, reminding the others to refrain from making comments or asking questions. This, she says, provides the structure and safety that lets the women first write about their pain and then, over time, find their inner strength through the writing and sharing with one another. She points out that, although the topics may seem pedestrian on the surface, every week the writing brings a surprise. While the population is transient, many of the women remain long enough to bond with her and others in the group. As they learn to trust one another, the women of N Street Village tell the truth of their lives through poems and stories.

Performing a Life: Life Stories Workshop

Life Stories Workshops is another program at N Street Village in which the women learn to find their voices through the arts. Life Stories is an outreach of the Theater Lab School of the Dramatic Arts, a nonprofit institution whose mission is to transform lives through the theater, with summer camps, weekend workshops, and classes in acting, playwriting, and public speaking for children and adults at all levels of experience.¹³ At N Street, Theater Lab faculty give the clients basic instruction in script writing, storytelling, and improvisation techniques, allowing them to see their stories as something larger than their own, private tales of woe.

Over the course of one fourteen-session workshop in 2012, some of these stories were gathered into a scripted performance which was presented at the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater. A reporter who was present that evening writes,

After an hour of scripted scenes . . . the twin sons of Rose Shaw, one of the performers, took the microphone to say, “Mom, I’m proud of you.” They wept as they approached the stage to embrace the mother they’ve seen struggle with addiction their entire lives. Rose had told me during a conversation that she wanted to prove herself to her sons; this performance gave her the opportunity to do so. . . . The emotion shown through every scene and comment, with audience members saying, “I forgive you” and “Thank you for sharing our story.”¹⁴

About a year later, the women who had participated

in this workshop gathered again to look back on the experience and to reflect on what had happened to them since. Each of them said that participating in the Life Stories Workshop changed their life for the better, giving them the courage to finish their GED, to get their cosmetology license, to reconcile with their children, to resume their career as a singer-songwriter, to open a business, to live with dignity.

Documentary filmmaker Nicole Boxer-Keegan recorded the rehearsal process and the transformation of the participants as they found inner strength that they did not know they possessed through the process of working together to tell their stories as a dramatic presentation. The resulting film, called *How I Got Over*, asks, “Could telling your story save your life?” and answers with a resounding “yes!”¹⁵

Learning Life Skills through the Arts at Bokamoso

All over the world, many organizations invite young people to participate in the arts, knowing that while most of them will not become professional artists, all may gain the life-enhancing skills of reflection, self-criticism, visual-spatial abilities, and the willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes. In the bleak township of Winterveldt, just outside Pretoria in South Africa, participation in the arts at the Bokamoso Youth Center gives young people at risk not only a vision for a different future, but the means to get there.

Bokamoso includes programs in basic life skills development, AIDS awareness, and conflict management; counseling and social services; and a scholarship program which includes scholarship application support and study skills training. It also has a resource center offering textbooks, laptops, peer support, a place to study, and, for many, scholarships which allow them to continue their education. Such practical programs are undeniably important but are insufficient on their own. Participation in the Bokamoso performing arts program gives the young people a chance to tell their stories artfully through song, dance, and short plays. Taking their performances to other communities, they raise both awareness and money that helps to provide scholarships for the next group of young people.

While some of those who are in the performing group have theatrical aspirations, most do not. Through their participation in the performing arts program, they begin to envision a future in which they can work as engineers, advocates for battered

women and children, journalists, nurses, teachers, psychologists, or professionals in other fields. When Pearl Zondo, a member of the group that traveled to the United States in 2008, finished her matriculation exam at the end of high school, she was hit hard by the fact that she couldn't further her studies because her mother was the only bread winner, and she struggled to make ends meet. She wrote,

My dream of studying psychology and someday becoming a clinical psychologist began to fade away while I watched loneliness crawl into my future. I knew I had to find something to keep me busy and off the streets, or else I'd end up like most girls in my neighborhood—a mother of two at the age of 20, drug-addicted and probably HIV positive.¹⁶

Participation in the performing group helped Zondo regain her dreams and her self-respect. She continued,

I didn't believe that I could actually sing nicely until they clapped for me, danced with me, and cried when they heard what they call my “incredible” voice. These sisters and brothers did not only love my singing, they gave me a place to stay, food to eat, and clothes to keep me warm—for free. Still, they did not end there; they gave me love, a place in their hearts, and most of all funded my school fees.¹⁷

The affirmation that Zondo and the other members of the performing group gain from acting, singing, and dancing in front of hundreds of clapping, cheering supporters is a key part of their transformation from hopelessness to a confident trust in the future. Before that, however, comes the hard work of collaborating with their mentors and with one another to create the plays that tell their stories, the hours of practice that hones their remarkable voices, the attention to all the small details that turn their native talent and energy into a polished evening of theater. On their return to South Africa, the skills and habits of mind that they learn in this process help them succeed in the more formal education and vocational training for careers that will lift themselves, their families, and their community out of desperate poverty.

Images of Hope: A Ministry of Presence along the Border

It is desperate poverty and the constant threat of violence that drives many people from Central and South America to seek a better life in the United States. As U.S. policy stops increasing numbers of families who cross the border, the detention centers where they are held are often bleak and hopeless places. In 2014, mixed-media artist and ordained PC(USA) minister Helen Bousier headed a team of volunteer chaplains at one of these “family residential centers” near Austin, Texas.

Bousier brought art supplies into the detention center once every week or two over the course of two years, offering mixed-media workshops in the mornings and jewelry-making in the afternoon for the children and the mothers who accompanied them. Participation was voluntary, and families lined up excitedly when they knew that the first-come, first-served sessions were going to be held.

The emphasis in these sessions was on process rather than product, although most of the participants proudly wore the bracelets and earrings that they made in the jewelry-making workshops and often gave their mixed-media work to others as *Tarjetas de la Amistad* (friendship trading cards) or prayer cards.¹⁸ The mixed-media works were what Bousier describes as reflections or visual journals. The adults were encouraged to respond in writing to prompts or guiding questions before starting the art project, while the children had looser instruction.¹⁹ This time of verbal reflection gave the participants a place to begin their engagement with symbols and materials. Bousier recalls,

Favorite symbols . . . included butterflies (freedom), the dove (Holy Spirit), and flowers (new life). A stencil with the words “faith, hope, love” was also a favorite, as were the stamps and stencils shaped as women and children which symbolically represented themselves. The mothers particularly liked the custom-cut Spanish word stamps which I had carved from artist erasers and wine corks. Their favorites included *familia* (family), *justicia* (justice), *esperanza* (hope), *paz* (peace), *Dios* (God), *Jesús* (Jesus), and *amor* (love). They scattered the stamped words throughout their art, using them as labels or subheads to express key themes

which had emerged from the written layer. The “art part” took the written reflection to a deeper level and helped the women to identify their experiences analytically while simultaneously working at the gut level from the essence of their innermost selves.²⁰

Bousier notes that frequently participants would be overcome with tears as the images took form under their fingers. She and the other volunteer chaplains moved among them, comforting them as memories and feelings that had been carefully hidden away came to the surface. This was a deep, listening ministry for those who had been silenced by the immigration officials who had consigned them to detention.

These few hours a month of art making, memory, and hope served to restore the dignity and affirm the value of the women and children to whom Bousier and her team ministered. Even the staff told her, “You bring joy and hope to people who have lost everything.” Another said, “You’re a legend here,” adding that for days and even weeks following an art day, the mothers would ask when she was coming back. “Tomorrow? Is she coming back tomorrow? Next week? When?” Despite this affirmation of the value of this work, Homeland Security closed the art ministry on December 15, 2016.²¹

Art Is Food for Starving Souls

Seeing the transformations that can happen when people in situations of extreme difficulty are given the chance to participate in artistic experiences can change people in more privileged circumstances, as well. One afternoon a few years ago, a young woman sat in my office asking about art classes at the seminary. Trained as a lawyer, she told me that she had been working for a program that provides essential services—health care, legal aid, food, and shelter—to homeless people. She said that she believed passionately in the work that she was doing, but that she came to realize that the most important part of the program was not filling these practical, immediate needs, but rather the art experiences that were also made available to the clients. Given paint, clay, or other materials, and the time and space to explore what they could do, the people became more than the sum of what they lacked. They remembered who they were at the deepest, most spiritual and honest level, and became open to the truth of their shared humanity.

Now, my visitor told me, she wanted to learn to make art herself, to find out how to tell her own deepest truth in art.

This article gives only a few examples, a kind of sketch describing some of the ways that the arts give people a reason to live, the strength to carry on in the presence of terrible pain, or the ability to face death with dignity and peace. When the church feels forced to choose between ministry and art, it is important to remember that human bodies do not live long or well with hearts that are starving for meaning, for connection, for all the things that the arts do to help us live through the times of hardship and desperation.

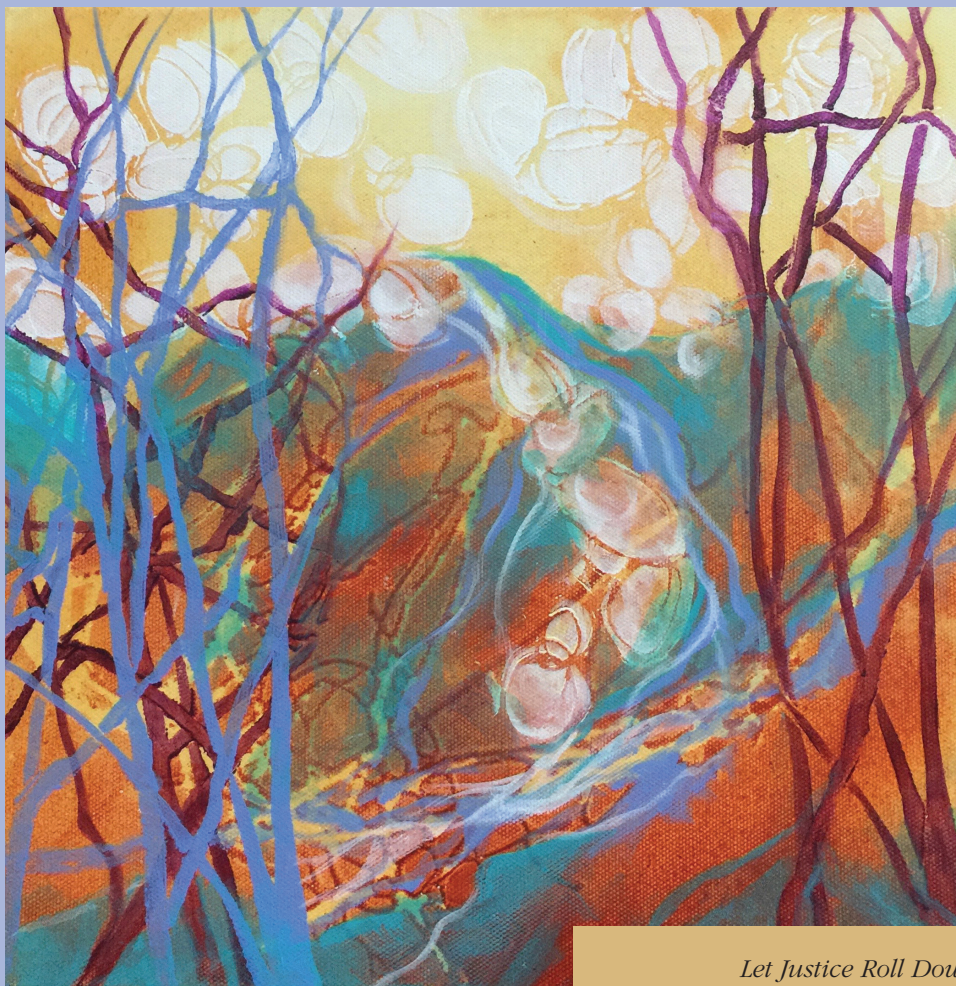
The need for art is not secondary, to be filled only after people are adequately fed and housed, but rather is a primary part of what it means to be human. Art is not simply about making one's surroundings more attractive, or adding ornaments to an already satisfactory life. Art can be a tool to travel through difficult times, an important pathway towards knowing oneself, of communicating that knowledge to others, and becoming an integral part of the human community. Art fills a hunger that nothing else can fill; it opens doors that cannot be opened in any other way; it creates a channel for the truth that Jesus told us will make us free.

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Executing Prayer behind Bars

Mitzi J. Budde



Let Justice Roll Down Like Water

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Many of us have gotten a brief taste of house arrest during the pandemic closures of 2020. Although the psychic and spiritual toll of COVID isolation is real, for most of us it has been a gilded-cage experience compared to the prisons and jails that hold so many people captive in our society today. For coronavirus, the shelter-at-home order is for a few months. For those who are incarcerated, imprisonment is their life—for some, literally for life; for others, *only* the best years of their life. A life that is isolated, separated from family and friends. Waiting, enduring, marking time, a life bound by external forces over which they have no control or say.

In July 2020, the federal government resumed executions of federal prisoners on death row for the first time in seventeen years; twenty-eight states and the federal government currently allow capital punishment. In the face of these death-row executions, the church is called to a wholly different type of execution: to execute prayer—to put prayer into action, to be church community with and among all those who are incarcerated and their families, linked by God's Spirit of mercy.

After a brief description of the state of prison life today, this article will discuss a new prison prayer book, offer suggestions for congregational involvement in prisons and jails in their communities, and challenge Christians to faithfully execute prayer for and with those who are incarcerated.

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Prison Life Today

Prison conditions in American today are shocking and brutal. Cramped, confined, and generally overcrowded cells where your every move is watched and monitored. Your belongings and your body searched roughly and frequently. Visits or privileges can be revoked without apparent cause. Nearly every initiative is thwarted by rules that can change without warning; keep your head down. Work—if allowed at all—is remunerated with literally pennies per hour, while food and supplies for purchase are exorbitantly expensive. You must always be attentive to formal and informal hierarchies of power, from corrections officials to gangs, accompanied by drugs and deals and frequent outbreaks of violence. Medical care is often poor or unavailable. Transfer to another facility can happen at a moment's notice. Family events—weddings, births, birthdays, graduations, funerals—are missed year after year; family relations often become strained or estranged. Prison is a harsh and hostile environment, focused on retribution and punishment over redemption and restoration. And recidivism is high, so the cycle has a tendency to repeat again and again.

The numbers are staggering. Nearly every community in America has a jail, detention center, or prison. The Prison Policy Initiative reports that in 2020, “the American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories.” Further, due to “jail churn” and pre-trial detention, people are jailed 10.6 million times each year in the United States.¹

Nearly half of Americans either currently have, or have had, a

family member incarcerated.² But the stigma is such that we generally do not share that information in church, or even with friends. So, we may think we do not know anyone who has served time or who may have an imprisoned family member, when, in fact, we almost certainly do. We are just oblivious.

A Resource for Prayer in Prison

“How do you find God?” the incarcerated woman asked the Bible study group at the local detention center insistently. “How do you pray, and how would I know if God answers?” she asked, hungry for answers that would feed her spiritually even as her physical frame became gaunter through the months of imprisonment. When she first came to the Bible study, she had admitted, somewhat defiantly, that she had no religious background and was coming mainly as an escape from lock-down and to engage with other women detainees. But she gradually became interested in the Bible stories and faith conversations, finding meaning for her own situation in the other



Holy Spirit, Release Me

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women's sharing. Her questions frame the life-long spiritual journey of all Christians, and they can be particularly pointed for those who are incarcerated. The life cataclysm that is arrest and imprisonment often becomes a catalyst for the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives.

*Hear My Voice: A Prison Prayer Book*³ is a prayer and worship book for those who are incarcerated. Though the prison prayer book project was commissioned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it was envisioned to be an ecumenical endeavor from the start: offering images of God's in-breaking justice and mercy to convey Christ's presence to persons living in a context of brutality and to break prison isolation with the companionship of the church. Often, religious books on the market for those in prison focus on convicting them of their sinfulness. The intent of this prayer book, by contrast, is to offer the imprisoned the assurance that none of us is ever beyond God's redeeming love and redemptive grace, no matter what we have done in the past.

The primary audience for the prison prayer book is those who are currently in jails, prisons, detention centers, and half-way houses, those facing arrest and sentencing, and those serving time. The book is for Christians who are in prison, for seekers, and for whoever wants a resource to help them deepen their spiritual journey. The prayer book is also intended to offer spiritual support and sustenance for families and loved ones, people in relationship with incarcerated persons. Prison chaplains, prison congregations, and prison libraries are the secondary audience.

As liturgical theologian Gail Ramshaw noted in an article on the Psalms, "There are prisons galore, and we all are in one prison or another, some of our own construction."⁴ An additional audience for the prison prayer book is anyone who feels imprisoned by life's circumstances. Soon after the publication of *Hear My Voice*, a woman reported that she read a selection from it aloud every evening to her elderly mother, who was unhappy and depressed because failing health had forced her to enter a nursing home. The daughter said that the prayer book had been comforting to her mother, who frequently referred to her nursing home as a jail. The book is meant to help each of us draw from the deep well of Scripture, song, meditations, prayers, and witness of the church in our times of trial in life.

How the Prayer Book Came About

When the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted the social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*⁵ in 2013, the implementing resolutions included a call to develop a prayer resource for people who are incarcerated. Not content just to make a public theological/ethical statement on criminal justice, the church wanted to provide ministry resources directly to those who are imprisoned and all who are impacted by the criminal justice system. This became the mandate for the prayer book partnership coordinated by Kevin Strickland, then executive for the ELCA's Division for Worship, and Jennifer Baker-Trinity from Augsburg Fortress. (Full disclosure: I served as the project manager and a co-editor.) We had one year to put together the writing team, design the contents, and craft the text for what became *Hear My Voice: A Prison Prayer Book*.

The writing team consisted of nine people from across the church, including a currently incarcerated person, a formerly incarcerated person, people with experience in various prison and re-entry ministries, and people with gifts in liturgical writing. The writing group represented racial/ethnic diversity, geographic diversity, gender diversity, and diversity in experience with incarceration. We had several two-day intensive team meetings in person and otherwise worked collaboratively online. *Hear My Voice: A Prison Prayer Book* was officially launched at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 2019 by ELCA presiding bishop, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton. The prayer book has been endorsed by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Curry.

Structure and Themes

The prayer book's title, *Hear My Voice*, is a quote from Psalm 130. Deliberately ambiguous, it represents both the human cry to God: "God, please hear my prayer!" and God's assurance: "I will answer you; I am always listening and responding to you." The structure of the prayer book is intended to invite readers more deeply into this encounter with God by praying through the church year, praying throughout the day, and praying in every aspect of prison life. It offers liturgies, prayers, prayer practices, Scripture passages, and artwork to encourage the reader to explore and expand his or her own engagement in prayer.



Light Dawns

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Imprisoned in drab cinderblock walls with no windows and clothed in dark prison garb, incarcerated persons are generally sensory deprived and hungry for color and beauty. So the publisher, Augsburg Fortress, commissioned fourteen pieces of full-color original artwork from artist Robyn Sand Anderson⁶ to interpret the written text of the prayer book. They illuminate the prayers and liturgies, offering a similar illustrative effect that stained-glass windows provide to a church service. The book's section on "Praying with Eyes Open: Visio Divina" invites readers to engage with the artwork of the book meditatively and then to draw, paint, or doodle their own prayer responses to the messages of the art.

This excerpt from the reflection for Lent 3, with the theme of "Something Made New," reflects the tone and intent of the prayer book:

Often it feels like once something is broken, it will forever be that way for us. But if you dare to let God join the conversation, listen and hear this: In every hard thing, in suffering and even in death, you have reason to hope for new life. Hope happens in places we can't imagine, among people who will surprise us, in times

we don't expect, and in ways we could never plan. This is the power of Jesus and the work of the Spirit to make all things new.⁷

This is the heart of the book's message, an ecumenical message for Christians and seekers: that Christ proffers forgiveness, grace, redemption, and liberation.

The seasons of the liturgical year invite the reader to connect the events of Jesus' life to the particular situations and challenges of those in prison. The entries for Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost follow a pattern: a seasonal theme, a mantra prayer, a Scripture text, a reflection on that text relating it to life in prison, a quote to ponder, a question to wonder, a closing prayer, and a song. The mantra prayer for Epiphany 1 reflects the theme "Journey toward Justice." Amanda Weber, the leader of the Voices of Hope women's prison choir, authored the easily-memorized mantra:

Light out of darkness
Comfort from despair
Peace fueled by justice
Lord, hear my prayer.⁸

The prayers and liturgies acknowledge that justice is many-faceted. An incarcerated person is simultaneously convicted of perpetrating injustice upon someone else and also experiencing firsthand the systemic injustices of the criminal justice system. "Prison theology seeks and speaks justice, God's justice, the justice that Christians are called to affirm and practice, the justice that picks a person up and helps her or him to stand," Sadie Pounder writes. "While holding those who break the law to accountability, it liberates, restores, gives new life and hope."⁹

The racial inequity that permeates the U.S. prison system is another theme of the prayer book. Lutheran pastor and author Lenny Duncan composed this prayer for the transformation of racism out of his own experience as a formerly incarcerated person of color:

Loving and liberating God, your Son, Jesus Christ, was taken by law enforcement in the night he was betrayed, railroaded in court,

and was killed in a state-sanctioned murder by execution. We know that there is still injustice in this world and that there is something that is in direct opposition to your kingdom at the very heart of the present prison-industrial complex. Help us to confront it, name it, and cast it out of our society. We name systemic racism as a sin that is abhorrent to God. We name that the prison system and the legal system are often the tools of this same systemic racism. Remind us that just because something is legal does not mean that it is of you. We call on you and your power to transform hearts and dismantle all systems of oppression, inequity, injustice, and racism in our penal system. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.¹⁰

The accompanying artwork entitled *Come, Loving/Liberating God*, reproduced here, depicts God's Spirit shattering whatever physical, emotional, or spiritual walls confine us as individuals or as a society.

The conditions of prison life are addressed in a section of individual prayers for praying through the realities of life in incarceration. There is a prayer, for example, about being assaulted in prison, as well as prayers when experiencing health issues in prison, for mental health difficulties, for thoughts of suicide. Individual prayers address the emotions that roil in prison—disappointment, anger, guilt, depression, humiliation, fear, the longing for family. Here is the prayer expressing loneliness:

O God, somewhere: It is so lonely here—this is the worst of it for me. I am so lonely, cut off, far away. I wait for mail, I linger at the phone, I dream of a visit, I miss being touched. There is so much noise, so many people all around, but I am all alone. Wherever you are, help me believe that you hear me and that I am not forgotten. Be with me, God. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.¹¹

Former ELCA bishop Bruce Burnside, who is currently serving a ten-year sentence in Wisconsin for a car accident resulting in the death of a pedestrian, contributed much of the ring of authenticity and honesty of these prayers.

The reflection for Pentecost 2, "Risky Truth," acknowledges how difficult—even seemingly impossible—it can be to "love your neighbor" in a prison context. "Love is risky in a place where

love is considered a weakness. . . . The truth is risky in a place where lies are the everyday currency."¹² The prayer book challenges readers to pray for the people encountered daily in prison: for cellmates and friends, for enemies and gangs, for corrections officials and prison staff, lawyers and judges, chaplains and volunteers. Prayers prayed simultaneously by those inside prison with their loved ones on the outside are intended to deepen family bonds of connection even when geographically far apart.

A Liturgy for Healing and Hope, contributed by Episcopal priest Beth Bingham, is provided for those seeking healing from addiction, from abuse or violence, from discrimination, from illness, grief, or depression, for a blue Christmas, or for any situation where God's healing and restoration is desired. Here is the closing prayer from that liturgy:

Gracious and loving God, we come before you today, broken yet being healed through your love. Be present with us always, even



Come, Loving/Liberating God
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when we only feel your absence. Give us the courage to stand in the shadow of the cross of your beloved Son and see your love laid open for us in that sacrifice. Give us the strength to mourn what has been lost and to bear the traumas of our past, knowing that you are with us in the present. Meet us in our brokenness and remind us that we are whole, and we are yours. Fill us with the light and hope to see ourselves—our bodies, minds, and spirits—as you see us: beloved children of the living God. Amen.¹³

The artwork *When You Pass Through the Waters, I Will Be with You* was created for the Liturgy of Healing and Hope. Its rich imagery evokes God's protection and care promised in Isaiah 43 and the river of the water of life in Christ from Revelation 22. Some may also see this as an image of justice and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream from Amos 5, and others may be reminded of being claimed as God's own in the sacrament of baptism.

A responsive Litany for Reconciliation and Welcome allows both an individual returning to a community after incarceration and representatives of that community to acknowledge with a ritual the challenges and difficulties of re-entry.

Let us acknowledge that life is messy, that reunions may be painful, and that life within community may never be easy.

For we cannot clean up the messes or ease the pains that we do not admit we have caused.¹⁴

The hope is that this liturgy will build a foundation for the formerly incarcerated person's successful transition back home. This litany also addresses racism in the criminal justice system and society.

Since many in prison have limited access to a chaplain or clergy person, every liturgy in the book is designed for lay leadership: Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Compline, Affirmation of Baptism, and Commendation of the Dying. These liturgies were adapted from the worship book of the ELCA,



When You Pass Through the Waters, I Will Be with You
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Evangelical Lutheran Worship, for use in a prison environment. The editorial team debated whether a liturgy for the celebration of the Holy Communion should be included but ultimately decided not to do so.

The chapter on praying throughout the day offers a suggested morning prayer structure, the practice of the presence of God throughout the day, and then the Ignatian *Examen* for the end of the day. Methods for Bible study, lectio divina, visio divina, audio divina, spiritual journaling, body prayers, and arrow prayers are offered for individuals alone in their cell or for groups of prisoners to share together. Here is a sample body prayer:

Breathe in God's love;
 breathe out your gratitude.
Breathe in God's forgiveness;
 breathe out your guilt.
Breathe in God's mercy;
 breathe out your hope.
Breathe in God's grace;
 breathe out your joy.
Breathe in God's peace;
 breathe out your praise.¹⁵

Gail Ramshaw contributed a section on praying with incarcerated saints through the ages, from Joan of Arc to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. This part seeks to give those in prison a sense of connection to Christians throughout history who also experienced imprisonment.

A Call to Congregational Engagement

The church does not bring God into prisons; God is already there. After all, Christians follow a Savior who was himself betrayed to the authorities by one of his followers and who was tried, convicted, and sentenced to the death penalty. The church is called to accompany those in prison and their families, just as we do those who are sick or hungry, and in so doing, Jesus promises that we will encounter Jesus himself.¹⁶ Many Old Testament prophets, New Testament apostles, and Christians through the centuries suffered trial and imprisonment. The themes of God's faithfulness to us in our time of trial and God's setting the prisoner free are constant refrains throughout Scripture. Once we start paying attention, it is astonishing how much caring for those who are imprisoned is woven into the fabric of the Christian faith. Or how much it *ought to be* woven into the fabric of the Christian faith—yet often isn't.

The prison prayer book serves as a call for Christians and churches to accompany those who are incarcerated on their journey of faith. I would like to suggest some ways for congregations to break through the stigma of incarceration and become more involved in this type of ministry. First, *Hear My Voice* can be a tool to offer support and pastoral care to those who have family or friends who are imprisoned, or who have themselves been incarcerated.

Second, those who are incarcerated cannot order the book from the publisher or from Amazon, and so congregations are key for getting the prayer book into their hands. The publisher, Augsburg Fortress, followed federal prison restrictions in crafting the prayer book (e.g., soft cover, no ribbons, no staples) and offers some general guidelines for the distribution of the book to prison facilities.¹⁷ But federal and state facilities have wide variations in their rules about how books can get into the facility. Congregations might connect with the chaplains and volunteer coordinators at the jails, prisons, detention centers, and half-way houses in their communities to find out the local regulations for donating the

prayer book to prisoners and prison libraries and then purchase copies accordingly.

When *Hear My Voice* was published, for example, the Witness and Outreach Committee of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Great Falls, Virginia, contacted the Virginia Correctional Center for Women. The chaplain and warden agreed to accept a donation of ten copies of the prayer book. A year later, the church's Outreach Committee was able to provide one hundred more copies of the prayer book to the correctional center, as the COVID pandemic limited worship to small groups and prohibited the sharing of books. The chaplain wrote to the church that this donation allowed each worship group to have their own set of the prayer books, which could then be set aside for the required number of quarantine days before being used again. In her thank-you letter, the chaplain described the gift as "a tangible way of letting folks on the inside know that they matter."

Such connections between a congregation and the local prison or jail allow them to discern whether God is calling the congregation into an ongoing relationship with the incarcerated. The church might offer a Bible study, art program, book discussion group, worship service, or even field a softball or basketball team to play an incarcerated team. Congregations may want to partner with re-entry agencies to offer assistance to those who are transitioning from incarceration back into the community, such as public transportation vouchers, rental assistance, job interviewing workshops, or employment opportunities.

The prison prayer book's Litany for Reconciliation and Welcome challenges communities of faith to "learn about, imagine, and advocate for alternatives to incarceration, that the criminal justice system might better serve God's desire for human flourishing."¹⁸ Denominational resources like the ELCA's social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*, for example, can help educate and equip congregations. It calls the church to four practices: hearing the cries, hospitality, accompaniment, and advocacy; offers three paths: pursue alternatives to incarceration, reform sentencing, and scrutinize national drug policy; and names four imperatives: address racism in the criminal justice system, recognize the special needs of juvenile offenders, stop the privatization of prisons, and foster the integration of ex-offenders into the community.¹⁹ Denominations are speaking out together through

the National Council of Churches for a criminal justice system that is more just, more equitable, and more humane.²⁰

Conclusion: From Isolation to Community

This prayer book project arose from a shared theology that every one of us stands in need of justice tempered with mercy and forgiveness grounded in hope, and that God's call is persistent, despite all the sins of our past. Jesus reaches out in compassion to offer grace to all sinners and outcasts—in other words, to us all. Our past, no matter how heinous, can be transformed by Jesus' past and the Spirit's future. Though we live with the ongoing consequences of our actions, we can be free in Christ.

The fuel for the Christian journey of accompaniment and advocacy is prayer: prayer for those who are in jail and those awaiting trial; those who are incarcerated and those who are on death row; those in detention centers and awaiting deportation; those about to be released and those on probation, and all of their families and loved ones. Let us pray, as well, for their victims and lawyers, for law enforcement officials and judges, and for the communities and churches that they left behind and to which they will return. And we need to pray and to take action for the transformation of the troubled system of mass incarceration in this country.

Let us execute persistent prayer for and with our incarcerated brothers and sisters, in the name of our executed savior.

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19. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*, 2013, <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Criminal-Justice>. See also the congregational study guide for the social statement: "Called to Hear": https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_Criminal_Justice.pdf?_ga=2.220659676.539898249.1595183706-479532103.1586562482.
20. See *Thinking Theologically about Mass Incarceration: Biblical Foundations and Justice Imperatives*, eds. Antonios Kireopoulos, Mitzi J. Budde & Matthew D. Lundberg, National Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission Theological Series (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017); and the National Council of Churches' "Starter Kit for Teaching and Learning about Mass Incarceration," ed. Joseph V. Crockett, <https://www.uuplan.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/MassIncarKit.pdf>.

Poverty and Scripture: Reading the Bible with the Poor

Crystal Hall

As a biblical scholar I may be something of an interloper into an ongoing conversation among pastors, church musicians, and liturgists. While I may not always speak in the same registers, I will endeavor to share about work that makes my heart sing. I am hopeful that writing in that key might create room for common recognition in our mutual being about the work of church. With this hopeful overture, I turn to the current moment.

The use of “unprecedented” to describe these times is perhaps no longer useful in the face of the intersecting crises that continue to unfold—the health care crisis of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the social crisis of the Black Lives Matter movement originating in the enslavement of Africans at the founding of the United States, and the economic crisis that has left millions unemployed, hungry, and facing eviction on a scale some economists are comparing to the Great Depression. If not dire in and of themselves, these crises are unfolding against the backdrop of a climate catastrophe in which the effects of burning fossil fuels are already producing tips in Earth’s ecosystems expressed in hotter temperatures, extreme weather events, and sea level rise. The word “crisis” also no longer seems to quite get at the current moment. One might be tempted to ask, where is God in this? Can the Bible point to a word in such a time as this?

While expressing themselves in acute ways, these crises are nothing new under the sun. Before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic, there were already fissures, if not gaping holes, in the structures of US American society. The pandemic has laid them bare. The “American dream” has never been accessible to significant swaths of people living in the United

States on account of their race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and/or immigration status. While this article will focus on economic aspects of the current moment, and how Scripture may be a resource in engaging it, I do so with an awareness of its racialized and gendered aspects.

The outgoing UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, recently noted, “The coronavirus has merely lifted the lid off the pre-existing pandemic of poverty. Covid-19 arrived in a world where poverty, extreme inequality and disregard for human life are thriving, and in which legal and economic policies are designed to create and sustain wealth for the powerful, but not end poverty. This is the political choice that has been made.”¹ Alston points to the systemic nature of poverty, asserting that poverty is not a pathology, an accident, or the will of God, but the effect of political choices that result in a status quo of growing poverty and inequality.

This article will examine broad connections between Scripture and poverty, both ancient and contemporary. A note about what I will and will not set out to accomplish: There are a number of excellent articles already available that collect and thematically organize Bible verses about poverty and books that interpret biblical passages frequently cited in contemporary debates about poverty. While I was initially tempted to create my own list, or even to summarize the specific Hebrew and Greek words used to describe the poor and poverty in the Bible, I will instead work to locate the biblical text in its socio-historical context as a way of deepening interpreters’ understandings of the poverty in both ancient and socio-historical contexts.

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The focus of this article will be reading the Bible with the poor. These four key words and phrases—“reading,” “the Bible,” “with,” and “the poor”—will be treated individually, each pulled apart in order to be put back together. While these ideas create the most meaning in the order in which they appear here, I will treat each of them separately and out of order for analytical clarity (although it is impossible to pull them apart entirely) before bringing them back together at the conclusion.

The Bible

It is an understatement to say that encounters with the Bible in the contemporary are fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, the Old and New Testaments are a source and norm of the Christian faith. The words on the page point to the Word, Jesus Christ, and the Bible’s tremendous liberating potential. On the other hand, in contexts historical and contemporary in which Christianity has been, and is synonymous with, colonial and postcolonial projects, the Bible likewise has tremendous death-dealing potential. It has been used to justify the chattel slavery of Africans, the oppression of women and children, and the continued impoverishment of millions. The Bible can sanctify the abandonment of the poor to the status quo of growing inequality and climate catastrophe by proof-texting “the poor will be with you always” (Matt. 26:11) and “those who will not work will not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Ironically, the words which point to the Word made flesh, a poor brown man, have and continue to be weaponized among the very types of people whom Jesus lifted up as disciples.

To layer on complexity, the Bible is a product of history, composed, edited, compiled, and eventually canonized by human beings over a process of almost two thousand years. (It was not until three hundred to four hundred years after the earthly ministry of Jesus that the church canonized the New Testament.) That the Bible is a product of history by no means excludes the movement of the Holy Spirit; in the same way, to borrow from theology, Jesus’ humanity by no means excludes his divinity. That God can continue to speak through the papyri, codices, translations, and canonizations that were the ancestors of today’s English language annotated study Bibles—and all the human errors, frailties, and machinations of each of these historical moments—makes God present, perhaps even especially present, in this historical production.

With these preliminary understandings that the Bible is both ambiguous and a product of history, my concern is not to cherry-pick specific passages but to examine the arc narrative of the Bible as a story primarily of a people who were poor. As with any issue, the Bible does not speak with one voice but a polyphony of voices often in dissonant paradox with one another. It is more than possible to find isolated verses that support nearly any position on poverty. I will locate this arc narrative around two often unconscious assumptions that mostly white, middle-class US American interpreters (among which I include myself) bring to the text, although people with these intersecting identities are by no means the only ones who bring them to the text. The first assumption, which I will address more briefly, is that today’s capitalist economy can be easily translated back into the agricultural economy of the biblical text. The second, which I will address more expansively, is that the biblical story operated at the center of its own socio-historical context. These implicitly capitalist and individualist assumptions need to first be noticed (awareness precedes change) and then deconstructed before new interpretive lenses can be integrated that authentically address the intersections among poverty and Scripture.

A Different Relationship to the Land

In the long arc of history, it is important to understand just how unique and unusual is the current moment, whether it be the past five hundred years, or even the past fifty. According to the US Census Bureau, about 80 percent of the US population lives in urban areas. Only 2 percent makes its living as farmers. These realities of dense urbanization and mechanized agriculture are enabled by an Industrial Revolution powered by fossil fuels. While still fundamentally dependent on it, the majority of the people in the United States are, to a large extent, disconnected from the land. The assumptions of an industrial society powered by fossil fuels need to be decentered to understand the economic conditions before 1800. In the millennia during which the Bible was composed, compiled, and redacted, and for that matter for the vast majority of human history—the economy was agriculturally based. People had a closer, more localized relationship to the land.

In the agriculturally-based economy of antiquity, most people farmed the land to eke out a meager existence. People overwhelmingly lived at a

subsistence level. One significant difference between the ancient economy in comparison to today's late-stage capitalism was that agriculture placed inherent limits on population growth and relative prosperity. It was not until the Industrial Revolution, powered by the same fossil fuels now testing the limits of the planet through climate disruption, that the levels of wealth certain segments of society in the United States and globally have achieved became possible.

Biblical scholars have endlessly debated the breadth and extent of poverty in antiquity, and where sections of the Jesus movement in particular may have been located socioeconomically. For the purposes of this article, a key point is that in antiquity there was inequality, although not on the scale that exists today. A relatively small, wealthy elite controlled significant portions of land. The source of wealth was a relationship to the land, and the ability to compel people to work that land, either through leasing to peasants or the forced labor systems of *corvée* and slavery. The scholarly consensus is that poverty did in fact exist, and the vast majority of people in antiquity lived and died near or below a subsistence level, able to farm or access just enough calories to keep body and soul together.

A Different Relationship to Center

In addition to a different relationship to the land, the peoples who shaped the Bible also had a different relationship to the center, the dominant powers that shaped ancient societies. According to the Pew Research Center, in the United States Christianity continues to be the dominant religion—although declining in prominence with the rise of the “nones” (those with no religious affiliation), people who identify as “spiritual but not religious,” and increasing diversity among the religious traditions that are practiced. In the United States today it can be difficult for Christians to locate the sociopolitical position of the Israelites and the Jesus movement within their own historical contexts without superimposing contemporary assumptions. Often Christians read figures in both the Old and New Testaments as if they are at the center of the story, but one of the gifts of reading the biblical text in its historical contexts is the ability to appreciate just how marginal the Israelite people were within their own context.

The Israelites were small fish in the big pond of ancient Near Eastern empires and power politics. Recognizing the social stratification between the

wealthy and poor within Israelite society itself, the Israelites were a marginalized people in the region. Beginning with the falls of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17), and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 24–25), the Israelites were occupied by a series of empires (Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman) into the New Testament period of the Jesus movement and beyond. During the ministries of Jesus and Paul in the first century CE, the Jews were subject to impoverishment and exploitation from within and without. In the Gospel accounts, day laborers were dispossessed from their lands and taxed by their own religious leadership (keep in mind that both Jesus and Paul were Torah-observant Jews), as well as the political elite, the Herodian dynasty which ruled on behalf of Rome.

These historical details point to the story of God's people in the Bible as the story of a people who were overwhelmingly poor, living hand to mouth from season to season. It is the story of a people who, for the majority of their history, lived under foreign occupation, with the violence, taxation, and exploitation those empires imposed. With the exception of the united monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon (the historicity of which biblical scholars and archeologists debate), the history of the Israelites, and the Jesus moment, was the history of a people who were, at different times, variously immigrants, refugees, and/or subjects of colonial occupation. It was not until the fourth century CE—over three hundred years after the earthly ministry of Jesus—when emperor Constantine became a Christian that Christianity became anything close to mainstream or aligned with the dominant power structure.

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The sort of people with whom God chooses to make a covenant at the origins of what would become known centuries later as Christianity says something about who God is. The story of the Israelites is a story of a marginalized and oppressed

people, one that has far more in common with the marginality of undocumented immigrants arriving at the US/Mexico border and the Black Lives Matter movement striking for the rights of essential workers in the midst of a global pandemic than with the respectability of white, middle-class US American cultural norms.

To “spiritualize” and “dematerialize” the text, to preach and teach that “church isn’t a place where we talk about politics,” is to deny the materiality of the incarnation. If we take seriously the doctrine, developed centuries after the New Testament texts were written, that Jesus was indeed fully human and fully divine, then to deny not only the particularities of Jesus’ embodiment as poor, brown, and occupied to is to deny the interpretive implications of those identities. It is also to deny the particularities of the earliest church as a movement of poor folks, as gatherings of people who broke bread around tables in the name of a crucified one sharing the little they had.

The Poor

While the last section focused primarily on the histories that inform the development of the biblical text, especially as they relate to the poor, this next section will focus on understanding who the poor are and why they are poor in today’s world. Doing this work is prerequisite both to understanding the assumption about poverty interpreters unconsciously bring to the biblical text, as well as exploring how to “read with” the poor.

Today in the United States poverty is racialized, gendered, and pathologized.

Today in the United States poverty is racialized, gendered, and pathologized. One of the stereotypes of who is poor is the African American man with obvious mental health and/or addiction issues wandering the streets of an “inner city” neighborhood. This stereotype points to how poverty is associated with Black (as well as brown, yellow and red) skin and pathologized through association with drug use—although in the wake of the opioid epidemic’s prevalence among the white working class in rural areas, this stereotype has shifted somewhat.

Another stereotype of poverty in the United States is the single mother with several children who commits welfare fraud. This same single

mother may be in the United States without documentation working in restaurants, cleaning homes and businesses, or providing childcare. These images point to how poverty is gendered and pathologized through perceived criminality. Each of these stereotypes are culturally conditioned, produced in the culture through mass media, and points to how people who are poor are “other-ed” not only because of their class, but also because of their race and gender.

Each of these stereotypes is associated with explanations of why people are poor. Poverty as pathology suggests people are poor because of behaviors like addiction or criminality. Poverty as accident suggests that people are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time, that any one of these experiences can be solved by a streak of better luck, or in the current moment, perhaps the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine. Poverty as fate, which the church has been largely responsible for perpetuating, suggests that poverty is ordained by God and may even be a “blessing.” While there is an element of truth in each of these explanations, they do not point to root causes of why people are poor.

Poverty is the result of the structural organization of the economy. There is consensus in some corners that poverty is structural, and intimately tied to white supremacy, patriarchy, and the anthropocentrism which privilege people over and against the planet. This understanding is not prevalent within US American culture broadly, however. Most US Americans, mostly unconsciously, hold a number of often contradictory assumptions about who the poor are and why they are poor. The culture is largely shaped by a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps,” rags-to-riches mentality of rugged individualism that assumes that poverty is a moral failing on the part of particular people and communities, with an unwillingness to “work hard” and “get ahead.” These complex assumptions and biases need to be unpacked and explored by interpreters in working with the biblical text both in its ancient and contemporary contexts because of how deeply they often shape the worldview of US Americans, and by extension, their engagement with the Bible.

Reading with

In the phrase “reading with,” the preposition “with” makes all the difference. “Reading with” is fundamentally different than “reading to” or “reading at” or “reading for”—all of which create different

relationships and orientations among communities of the organized poor ranging from top-down paternalism to accountability-informed mutuality and solidarity.

There are, broadly speaking, three intersecting and overlapping groups of people involved in the process of “reading with” in contemporary contexts—the organized poor, church folk, and biblical scholars. The organized poor are working toward the transformation of the structures which keep them poor. However, the same cannot be assumed of church folk and biblical scholars, who work within institutions which have, while not monoliths, been largely complicit in the colonial and postcolonial projects.

It is the church and academia that desperately need to hear what the organized poor have to say, to learn the ways in which they have presided over and accompanied the colonial and postcolonial projects that have caused the suffering of the poor.

The ways in which both the church and academia have served as handmaidens of racialized capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy suggest that the organized poor do not need to be “helped,” “accompanied,” or “missionized.” When interpreting the Bible, they do not need to be read at, read to, or read for. The organized poor do not need to be brought a word. The opposite is true. It is the church and academia that desperately need to hear what the organized poor have to say, to learn the ways in which they have presided over and accompanied the colonial and postcolonial projects that have caused the suffering of the poor. While in some corners the church and academia have indeed accomplished tremendous good, soaring cathedrals and ivory towers have by and large helped build corporate skyscrapers, not tear them down. Indeed, it is the church and academia who have lost their way and need to be converted to the perspectives and knowledges of the organized poor. It is the organized poor who bring the church and academia a word.

Assuming the reader is willing to be continually “converted” to this perspective and to continually

betray the powers and privileges that come with ascribing to capitalist, white supremacist, and patriarchal values through ongoing relationships of accountability, one might ask, how does one go about this work of “reading with”? It begins with building relationships with individuals and organizations through deep listening. It begins by individually and communally interrogating motivations for doing the work. While there is no such thing as doing the work “perfectly,” to do this work with a white savior complex is perhaps worse than doing nothing at all.

A process of reading with the poor, alongside understanding of who the poor are and why they are poor, is rooted in the histories of particular reading traditions—those of the base communities in Latin America, the apartheid struggle in South Africa, and poor people’s organizing in the United States. While influenced by all three traditions, in my scholarship I draw primarily on Contextual Bible Study for its methodology, which developed out of the history and experiences of what is now the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Contextual Bible Study (CBS) unfolds through intentional encounters between “ordinary readers” and “socially engaged biblical scholars” reading the text as a resource in the struggle for liberation. The use of the terms “ordinary reader” and “socially engaged biblical scholar” in the CBS methodology have grown and evolved in recent decades, especially because the Ujamaa Centre has come to recognize that knowledge of, or experience with, organized struggle cannot be assumed. For the sake of clarity, I distinguish between the “organized poor” and the “socially engaged biblical interpreter.” However, it is important to understand that these are not necessarily distinct, separate groups. Academics are certainly among the organized poor, and many among the organized poor function as organic intellectuals.

As a starting point, the CBS process of reading the Bible with the organized poor is about where one’s feet are located. It is about having one’s feet oriented toward and walking with communities of the organized poor. It is about being embedded within movement work already happening, and in this historical moment of economic recession and global pandemic there is no shortage of movements and organizations of poor folks organizing poor

folks. CBS inherently raises to church leaders the question, “How are our ministries not tangentially supportive of, but inherently aligning themselves with, the organized poor?” On the basis of this starting point of embeddedness within and accountability to the organized poor, “reading with” is inherently a second step. For information on the specifics of the See, Judge, Act process that grounds the CBS methodology, I commend to you the Ujamaa Centre’s CBS Manual, which is available for free on its website. This work of “reading with” is built over time, and at the invitation of organized communities.

Returning to the Roots

The purpose of this article has been to explore how Scripture is informed by and speaks about poverty in its sociohistorical context and in contemporary readings of the Bible with the organized poor. I anticipate some readers may perceive the reading process outlined above as somewhat unsettling, or even radical. However, this contextualizing of the biblical story in its sociohistorical context and its implications for contemporary interpretation is “radical” only in the sense of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* definition—“of or growing from the root of a plant” or “growing from the base of a stem, from a rootlike stem, or from a stem that does not rise above the ground.”²

Extending this metaphor to a tree, the roots are mostly below ground, largely unseen, and yet absolutely vital for the thriving not just of the tree, but of entire ecosystems of microorganisms, fungi, plants, and animals. This image can expand in at least two directions, the first being the roots of systemic oppression. The roots of the intersecting ideologies of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy run deep. While their roots sometimes break through the surface in explicitly classist,

misogynist, or racist words and deeds, these systems of oppression remain largely implicit and assumed, as embedded within our individual and collective consciousness as root systems extending far below ground. While the roots of oppression run deep, all the way back to antiquity, the economic system that produces poverty today is relatively new in the much longer arc of history. Despite the collective historical amnesia to the contrary, it has not always existed and will not always exist.

A second direction in which this image of rootedness might extend is to read the biblical text in its sociohistorical context as a kind of re-grounding, a sinking down through the sedimentary layers of time and space to tap deep into subterranean root systems. It is a way of tapping into the stories of our faith ancestors and the material conditions which informed them. Our faith ancestors who wrote down these stories did not exist in the abstract. They were human beings who lived and breathed, worked and wrote within the particularities of specific historical contexts. Just as we tap into the roots of their experience, they in turn were connected to stories passed on from generation to generation. Trusting in the presence of the root is a bit like trusting in faith. A faith that life is stronger than death, that poverty can and must be ended, is a trust in what cannot be seen, even with the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Notes

1. Philip Alston, “Covid-19 has revealed a pre-existing pandemic of poverty that benefits the rich,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/11/covid-19-has-revealed-a-pre-existing-pandemic-of-poverty-that-benefits-the-rich>.
2. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “radical,” accessed September 4, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/radical>.



Amy E. Gray

Is the Eucharist a Feast of Abundance for All?

Lolly Dominski

In the church's liturgy and particularly in our celebration of the Eucharist, we give thanks and praise to God for providing abundantly for all of our needs. Yet at the same time, we live in a world riddled with poverty and chronic hunger. How does the Eucharist call us to address this tragic distortion of God's vision for the world?

Two books that address this question are *Still Hungry at the Feast: Eucharistic Justice in the Midst of Affliction* by Samuel Torvend, and *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis* by Mary E. McGann. Torvend is a professor at Pacific Lutheran University and has taught courses on Christian rituals and the church's response to local and global hunger, in addition to courses on the history of Christianity. McGann is an adjunct associate professor of liturgical studies at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University and of the Graduate Theological Union, a consortium that includes eight graduate schools of theology in the San Francisco Bay area. Her current research interests concentrate on the intersection of Christian sacramental practice with the global challenges surrounding food and water.

Torvend's book is centered on the Eucharist and branches out to explore the sacrament's ethical dimensions. McGann's work focuses on the practices and effects of corporate agriculture, and asks how our eucharistic practice can inspire us to address this system and the societal and ecological ills that have resulted from it. Both books have critically important things to teach us.

Still Hungry at the Feast: Eucharistic Justice in the Midst of Affliction

Samuel Torvend (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019)

In his introduction to *Still Hungry at the Feast*, Torvend poses a question that is at the core of this work: "Who is hungry at the feast?" (p. xii). This question, and this book, brings into sharp relief the reality that there are many who are hungry in the midst of the church's regular celebration of the eucharistic feast. The question of who is hungry at the feast invites the reader to join Torvend in reflecting on meanings and dimensions of the Eucharist that have been less fully explored in the church's heritage than aspects such as sacrifice, forgiveness, memorial, or Christ's presence in the sacrament. In *Still Hungry at the Feast*, Torvend explores the ethical dimensions of the Eucharist. He asks why the hungry in our communities typically are not at Table with us. He asks why many of those involved in the farming and production processes of our eucharistic bread live in poverty. He asks if those farming processes are harmful to the earth which has been entrusted by God to our care. Torvend argues that the Eucharist calls us to ask and address questions such as these. One answer the author gives to his own question of who is hungry at the feast is that *he* is still hungry. He is hungry for liturgy that will inspire Christians to rectify the economic, societal, and ecological oppression that pervade our world today. His work invites the awakening and deepening of this hunger within us as well.

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Gathering around Word and Table Leads to Gathering with the Poor

Torvend begins his reflection on the ethical dimensions of the Eucharist by arguing that Christian liturgy and the Eucharist are not stationary events, but effect movement of the worshipping assembly. The liturgy leads Christ followers from gathering together around the Word proclaimed and enacted at the Table out into the world to minister to its needs. The Eucharist has a worldly trajectory, Torvend maintains. As an example of each action in liturgy leading purposefully to the next, and eventually to those in need in the world, Torvend discusses the description of Sunday worship given by Justin of Rome in his *First Apology* written in 150 CE. Justin describes a pattern of Christians gathering on the Lord's Day, hearing an exhortation based on readings drawn from the words of the apostles and the prophets, and then receiving the bread and cup after a prayer of thanksgiving had been offered. Following this, the deacons would take a portion of the bread and wine to those who were absent. Justin also wrote that the wealthy of the group gave contributions for distribution to orphans, widows, the ill, the imprisoned, visiting strangers, and any in need. This liturgy in second-century Rome displays a trajectory that moves the assembly outward in concentric circles, extending its ministry through time and the community. Torvend points out that "the liturgy simply does not end: it continues into the larger world among those who are most vulnerable" (p. 10). The pattern Justin describes, of course, is strikingly similar to the liturgy and ministry of mainline Christian congregations today. Torvend stresses that the profound experience of receiving the bread and cup is not an end in itself; rather, "nourishment in 'flesh and blood' is not only the reception of Christ's self-giving to others but also one's commitment to serve the flesh and blood of those in want and need" (p. 10).

"The liturgy simply does not end:
it continues into the larger world among
those who are most vulnerable."

The Inexhaustible Richness of the Eucharist

After establishing that Christian liturgy and the Eucharist have a worldly trajectory, Torvend turns his focus to what meanings Christians attribute to the Eucharist. He demonstrates that numerous meanings of this sacrament have been advanced over the history of the church, providing examples from early church leaders Ignatius, Hildegard, and Augustine, medieval theologians Thomas Aquinas and Alcuin of York, and contemporary voices Leonardo Boff, Oscar Romero, and Pope Francis. For example, over the church's history the sacrament has been characterized as the medicine of immortality and the salve for wounds, and as emphasizing that communicants share in Christ's life and are made neighbor to one another. The sacrament has also been understood as providing a foretaste of the heavenly feast, and as calling Christians to serve the poor and hungry and to care for the earth and all creation. Torvend notes that mainline Christian denominations tend to emphasize one meaning of the Eucharist; for example, the Roman Catholic tradition has stressed sacrifice, while forgiveness of sins is a primary understanding for Lutherans. Having gazed upon the words "Do This in Remembrance of Me" etched into the communion table in many places and at many times over my life as a Presbyterian, I would suggest that remembrance, or memorial, has been foremost among eucharistic meanings for Presbyterian worshipers historically. Torvend's point is that when one or even two meanings of the Eucharist are the prevalent focus, other dimensions of meaning such as ethical ones are overshadowed and perhaps are even lost from the consciousness of Christians. He writes, "Indeed, it would seem that one interpretation is not sufficient to capture or pin down 'the inexhaustible richness of this sacrament'" (p. 23).¹

Hungry at the Feast

Following this discussion of the polyvalent nature of the Eucharist, Torvend begins to unpack the sacrament's ethical dimensions. He draws extensively on biblical passages, explaining that Jesus' inclusive table fellowship, and Scripture reflecting on customary behaviors surrounding meals, can broaden our understanding of the sacrament. Torvend suggests that in Luke 14, when Jesus has been invited to a dinner party at the home of a prominent Pharisee and instructs him to invite

the poor and outcast to future dinners rather than those who can reciprocate, Luke is encouraging all Christians to question why the poor and those marginalized by society typically are not regular participants in their assembly's worship, fellowship, and eucharistic celebrations. Torvend invites us to consider whether we "are living into this good news through the countercultural act of honoring the poor and those with physical hardships who in every other setting would be excluded from the banquet table and the breaking of bread among friends" (p. 38).

Torvend invites us to consider whether we "are living into this good news through the countercultural act of honoring the poor and those with physical hardships who in every other setting would be excluded from the banquet table and the breaking of bread among friends."

Torvend highlights Jesus' fervent concern for those who are regularly excluded from meals and are hungry. The words of Mary's Magnificat "[The Lord] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53) are echoed by Jesus in the blessings and woes passage in Luke: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. . . . Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry" (Luke 6:21, 25). At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Luke he proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring . . . good news to the poor . . . to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19). Jesus draws attention to the indifference of the affluent to the life-threatening hunger of the poor in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Torvend suggests that those of us who have never experienced chronic hunger may avoid or spiritualize challenging biblical texts such as these, or the parable of the sheep and the goats with its question of "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry . . . and did not take care of you?" (Matt. 25:44), because such texts call us to question our priorities and a socioeconomic system where so many suffer food insecurity. Sharing Jesus' concern for the poor, Pope Francis criticizes the easy

acceptance of food being discarded in wealthier countries by declaring, "Whenever food is thrown out, it is stolen from the table of the poor" (p. 61).

Torvend challenges us to consider whether the hungry poor are welcomed into our worship and eucharistic celebrations or are merely objects of charity, still distant from our genuine inclusion and from an equitable sharing of food. He discusses God's abundant provision of food illustrated by the feeding of the five thousand and encourages the reader to ask, "Why in a land marked by astonishing wealth . . . do children and adults continue to struggle with hunger, continue to form the largest percentage of hungry people among all—*all*—developed nations?" (p. 49, italics in the original). In 2017 the World Health Organization, he notes, reported that one of every five children in the United States lives in poverty (p. 60).

Gifts of the Earth and Work of Human Hands

Torvend then turns his focus to the origins of the eucharistic elements. Recalling the common description of the bread and cup as gifts of the earth and work of human hands, Torvend connects our celebration of the sacrament with the farming and production practices that have made the elements available, and with our care of the earth and its abundant resources generally. The production of bread is dependent on seeds, and yet the availability of seeds increasingly has become controlled by corporate entities whose first priority is maximizing profits. Torvend invites us to consider whether it is hypocritical to receive the cup without contemplating the poverty of the many laborers in American vineyards who work for less than a living wage. Control of seeds by corporate agriculture, the poor working conditions and pay of farm workers, and related topics parallel concerns developed at length by McGann in *The Meal That Reconnects*.

Torvend reminds us that the liturgy of the church historically has welcomed the gifts of creation in its rites. The water that fills our baptismal fonts, the candles that remind us of the light of Christ, the oil used in anointing, the fabrics featured in our banners and paraments, and the wood, metals, and stone from which various furnishings and adornments of our sanctuaries are made, all are gifts of the earth and work of human hands. Creation enriches our worship. The Eucharist moves us not only to give thanks to God for providing the

diverse and abundant gifts of creation, but to live up to our calling to be good stewards of the earth and its resources as well.

The prevailing orientation of our culture towards creation, however, is not stewardship but an anthropocentric perspective, Torvend claims. The earth and all its resources are under human dominion; they exist for the benefit of humanity. Moreover, the powerful in society use the earth's resources to maintain and strengthen their wealth without sufficient concern about the potential harmful effects or the sustainability of their practices. Torvend brings our attention to global warming and climate change resulting from fossil fuel emissions, the continuing extinction of species and decrease in our planet's biodiversity, the extensive use of pesticides, the widespread practice of deforestation, the unsustainable harvesting of timber, and the pollution of water and land through factory effluence, sewage runoff, and the dumping of millions of tons of nonbiodegradable waste. For Torvend, the words of Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* provide an accurate summary: "The earth herself is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor" (p. 55).

God's Economy of Abundance and the World's Economy of Scarcity

Torvend broadens his discussion of how the orientation of our culture differs from that of Christianity, as he compares God's economy of grace and abundance with the economy of overconsumption and scarcity that characterizes our world. Identifying the Greek word *oikos*, often translated as "house," as the root of the word *economy*, he explains that the most basic definition of economy is how a household is cared for and managed. An economy can serve the well-being and flourishing of all, rooted in an equitable and gracious sharing of resources. Or, as has been common in our world's history, an economy can be structured to benefit those in power, resulting in an insatiable accumulation of assets, a focus on self rather than the common good, and a persistent gap between the haves and have-nots. Torvend draws a stirring and graphic conclusion from the Gospel of Mark about economies designed to benefit those in power. In Mark, King Herod agrees at a banquet to have John the Baptist executed immediately and to have his head brought on a platter to the daughter of Herodias to fulfill a vain promise he made to her (Mark 6:14–29). Mark places this narrative

immediately before the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Torvend observes, "One meal scene is set in juxtaposition to another: with predatory and exploitive rulers, there is only death; with Jesus, there is more than enough food and life" (pp. 42–43).

In God's economy of grace and abundance there is more than enough food for all. In Genesis 1, God gives every green plant as food to everything that has the breath of life. The psalmist praises God for the faithful provision of food: "All look to you to give them their food in due season; . . . when you open your hand, they are filled with good things" (Ps. 104:27, 28). The feeding of the Hebrews in the wilderness with manna is discussed by Torvend as an example of God's economy. God tells Moses to instruct the Hebrews to gather as much manna each day as they *need* and twice as much on the sixth day in preparation for the Sabbath day of rest, but not to gather as much as they *desire*. God faithfully provides manna as promised, and those who gather much have none leftover while those who gather little have no shortage. God's economy is one where hoarding is not necessary or beneficial. Torvend recounts the story of Elisha in a time of famine using an offering of twenty barley loaves to more than satisfy the hunger of a group of one hundred people. Noting that some scholars claim that in the Bible famine is understood as resulting from economic systems characterized by greed rather than being due to unfavorable conditions in nature, he argues that Elisha's action was a prophetic critique against economic systems which do not address fundamental human needs such as hunger. Similarly, while Jesus' action of feeding the five thousand not only demonstrates God's economy of grace, where an abundance of food is freely given to all, Torvend maintains that it also serves as a critique against economic systems structured to benefit the powerful, like that of the Roman Empire.

Torvend invites the reader to consider why, when God provides abundantly, scarcity exists and is accepted. He suggests that the reasons underlying this "tolerated inequity" (p. 61) include greed, indifference, inaction, and an unwillingness to restrain and limit our consumption to what is needed rather than what is desired. Recalling Amos's prophetic critique of Israel in the eighth century BCE with its practice of selling the poor into debt slavery when they could not pay the excessive levies on their homes or land, Torvend cites the systemic sin of normalizing inequity within institutions as

an important additional cause of scarcity existing alongside overconsumption in our culture.

Not only did Jesus enact God's economy of grace and abundance in his earthly ministry; he is the prophet of God's economy. He calls his followers to be in right relationship with God and neighbor, in relationships grounded in love. When Jesus spoke of loving God and neighbor, the Greek term used in the New Testament is *agape*. Torvend defines *agape* as a "passionate commitment to the well-being of others . . . love as action that benefits the welfare, the *salvus* [being whole or safe, being rescued from a situation], the health of others" (p. 77).² Social justice, he writes, is the "public form of Christian love for others, for one's neighbor, especially those who suffer injustice" (p. 100). In calling us to love others with a love that takes action to ensure the well-being, health, and wholeness of all in the community, Jesus is calling us to adopt God's economy of abundance with its equitable and gracious sharing of resources.

"You Give Them Something to Eat"

Torvend suggests how the church might expand its eucharistic practice to model God's economy of grace and abundance. He explains that until the early second century, the Eucharist was part of an actual supper shared by groups of Christians who gathered together on the Lord's Day. Since many Christians living in the Roman Empire were poor, sharing in this meal was especially significant. Each brought what food they could to the common meal, and all present were fed, regardless of how much food they were able to contribute, or their social status, gender, ethnicity, or physical ability. There was sufficient food for all, as long as each recognized the need for all others to be served as well and exercised appropriate restraint. Torvend calls the early Christian communal meal God's "economic system *in micro* . . . grounded in the practice of Jesus of Nazareth: 'You give them something to eat'" (p. 88), which Jesus said to his disciples as he called them to participate in his feeding of the five thousand. Since dining with others across social boundaries was decidedly countercultural, the early Christian communal meal was a sharp contrast to and criticism of the accepted social stratification of that society.

Torvend invites us to consider whether connecting our celebration of the Eucharist to an actual meal symbolic of Jesus' meal practice

would help us recognize that Jesus' self-giving in the sacrament calls us to give of ourselves and our resources to our hungry neighbors. He suggests that food could be brought to the Table for later distribution to those suffering food insecurity, or to stock a farmer's market to be held around the Table for those in need during the week, or to prepare, serve, and share a meal with the homeless following worship. Eucharistic practice shaped by Jesus' meal practice and the early Christian communal meal presents an ethical vision for our lives in the world. Torvend reminds us that Jesus is present, *incognito*, in those who suffer chronic hunger, the poor, the outcast, and in the many who long to live in an economy of abundance rather than scarcity, all whose prayer is "Give us this day our daily bread."

The larger question exists of why food insecurity persists in a nation as wealthy as the United States. He suggests the answer may be found in our complicity in maintaining the economy of overconsumption and scarcity, by being willing to give only from our surplus, rather than limiting and changing our pattern of consumption so that it reflects our needs more than our desires.

Fasting So That All May Feast

Torvend points out that while the church historically has engaged in various ministries to address hunger, the larger question exists of why food insecurity persists in a nation as wealthy as the United States. He suggests the answer may be found in our complicity in maintaining the economy of overconsumption and scarcity, by being willing to give only from our surplus, rather than limiting and changing our pattern of consumption so that it reflects our needs more than our desires. He challenges us to replicate in our lives God's economy *in micro*, the restraint each individual exercised in the early Christian communal meal so that all could be fed. He challenges us to fast so that all may feast.

He challenges us to fast
so that all may feast.

Torvend notes that fasting is practiced as a spiritual exercise much less now than at earlier points in the church's history. Many Christians have a limited or even misguided understanding of this practice. Torvend discusses several of the motivations or occasions for fasting seen in the Bible. Fasting was used to communicate affliction to one's community, to make one's anguish visible, to protest a condition. At times, fasting was practiced as an acknowledgement of economic or political disaster, often coupled with the recognition that changes needed to be undertaken. In modern times, fasting has been used as a form of nonviolent protest against economic, political, or social affliction by groups and individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi and United Farm Workers cofounder Cesar Chavez.

And Jesus fasted. Torvend points out the juxtaposition of Jesus being the one who fasts for forty days in the wilderness, but also the one who feeds all who seek him, whether in the feeding of the five thousand or at his Table today. Fasting is set beside feasting. Jesus' practice of fasting is a call for us to set fasting beside our eucharistic feasting. Torvend suggests that "in this society marked so deeply by an addiction to consuming—one ethical dimension of eucharistic feasting might well be eucharistic fasting—that is, placing limits on the propensity to want more and more by channeling one's treasure, great or small, to the many in need" (p. 112).

Are We Hungry at the Feast?

In *Still Hungry at the Feast*, Torvend urges Christians to expand their apprehension of the Eucharist to include its ethical dimensions and trajectory. As we partake of the bread and cup, we are called to feed those who suffer chronic hunger. As we thank God for these gifts of the earth and work of human hands, we are called to address the poor working conditions of those who have labored to farm and produce these elements, and to advocate for better stewardship of the earth. As we enjoy communion with Christ and one another at Table, we are called to include those marginalized by our culture. As we receive Jesus' self-giving at the feast of abundance, we are called to give of ourselves and to work for the richness of our world to be shared in an equitable and grace-filled manner.

Are we hungry for the realization of these ethical dimensions when we celebrate the eucharistic feast? Torvend's book is an accessible and provocative read. Pastors, committee chairs, high school and college students, and all Christians who are interested in hunger, ecology, sacramental theology, liturgy, mission, or the spiritual practice of fasting will find it engaging. It would be an excellent choice for a book study. Those who read it, I believe, will find that like Torvend they, too, are still hungry at the feast.

The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis

Mary E. McGann (Collegeville, MN:
Liturgical Press Academic, 2020)

In *The Meal That Reconnects* McGann builds a persuasive argument that although the majority of the world's food is not grown by the corporate food system, that system has displaced small farmers, exploited farmworkers, contributed to an increase in world hunger and poverty, reduced biodiversity, and introduced farming methods that have significantly damaged the earth's ecosystems. Industrial farming has been promoted as the way to increase food production and feed the world's population efficiently, but it has not lived up to this claim. In fact, several United Nations initiatives have concluded that industrial agriculture is not sustainable and have called for its replacement by locally based farming, utilizing organic, sustainable, and regenerative methods.

Because of the power of industrial agriculture corporations, McGann believes a groundswell will be necessary to bring about such a shift. She contends that faith traditions, with their rituals of sharing food and blessing God, can be instrumental in this, and examines how the Eucharist can "create an alternative paradigm and effect a prophetic healing of relationships with the Earth and all who share it" (p. xi).

Relationships Are Inherent to Food

Before examining the industrial food system, McGann begins by exploring the significance of food from several vantage points. First, she discusses how eating implicitly enters humans into a number of relationships having ecological, ethical, and

theological significance. McGann points out that those who have grown the food we eat must work in relationship with the natural resources of soil, sunlight, rain, and seed. Eating brings humans into relationship with a vast number of creatures, since in the “paschal economy of creation” (p. 5) the lives of some creatures are given to sustain the lives of others. We are drawn into deeper relationship with each other when we eat food together. Meals help to build a communal identity, and like the Eucharist can be an integral part of a group’s traditions. With whom we eat and who is excluded from our tables, how we treat those who work to produce the food we eat, and how we care for the earth from which our food originates reveal our values.

McGann argues that the food we eat should be perceived as gift, but that the current food industrial system promotes the view of food as commodity. Understanding food as gift recognizes and respects the relationships inherent to our reception of food. Food has been given freely by God, whose provision is abundant. Enough food can be produced to fill the world’s needs, and no one should be excluded from receiving this life-sustaining gift. Concern for the treatment of those who labor to bring the gift of food to our tables is required, as is respect for and cooperation with the regenerative cycles and rhythms of nature. When food is viewed as a commodity, competition to own and control the resources and processes of food production results. Relationships are devalued. Maximizing profit is the key motivation and goal, overriding concern for the working conditions of laborers in the food industry or an equitable sharing of food with all. Scarcity, not abundance, is assumed and realized. The orientation toward the earth’s resources is one of dominion rather than stewardship.

McGann encourages Christians to reconnect with, and work for justice and wholeness for, the earth and its people who have been harmed by the industrial food system, through our understanding and practice of the eucharistic meal.

The industrial processes employed in providing a wide array of food choices on grocery shelves today distance us from the relationships inherent to

food and from the underlying ecological, ethical, and theological issues. McGann encourages Christians to reconnect with, and work for justice and wholeness for, the earth and its people who have been harmed by the industrial food system, through our understanding and practice of the eucharistic meal. To deepen our understanding of the Eucharist and explore the significance of food in this context, McGann concludes this first section of her book by discussing the meal practice of Jesus and the early church. She reviews many of the same concepts, biblical passages, and early church documents as Torvend in *Still Hungry at the Feast*.

The Industrial Food System

McGann then turns to an examination of the industrial food system, its origins and practices; negative impact on seeds, soil, world hunger, and farmworkers; and regenerative agricultural practices that could be adopted to bring healing. This section is the core of her research; it comprises half of *The Meal That Reconnects*.

Noting that scholars estimate that agriculture began ten thousand years ago, she describes traditional farming as including saving seeds from one year’s crops for the next planting; interspersing multiple crops in a field, known as intercropping, to facilitate natural weed and pest control; and allowing fields to lay fallow periodically to renew their fertility. Food is distributed to locations nearby, ensuring that it is fresh when eaten.

In the 1940s following World War II, a group of prominent American economists and businessmen designed a food system that would concentrate agriculture in industrialized, corporately-owned farms. It would operate under deregulated free-market strategies, including minimal barriers to import and export of food produce, in order to increase economic efficiency. In the decades that followed, farms were consolidated, the use of large farm machinery became common, hybrid seeds were developed that required extensive watering but produced crops more conducive to mechanical processing, synthetic fertilizer was routinely applied to increase nitrogen in the soil, chemical pesticides and insecticides were employed to control weeds and insects, and intercropping was replaced by growing single crops in order to increase the efficiency of tending large fields.

Initially, these changes yielded significant increases in food production. By the 1960s, crop

yields had doubled or tripled in the United States, and wheat production in Mexico had almost tripled. A few years later record crops of wheat were reported in Pakistan and India, and of rice in the Philippines. Hundreds of millions of dollars of aid was given by Western governments to bring industrial agricultural methods to Africa and Asia (pp. 64, 65–66).

But this trend of record harvests could not be sustained. The increase in food production was reversed in Africa by the 1990s and in Asia some time later (p. 67). Global wheat harvests have been declining since their peak in 1986 (p. 78). The movement to industrial farming had devastating consequences for small farmers as well. In India, a study by the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology showed that Indian peasants were losing \$26 billion annually due to lower farm prices. This coupled with the higher cost of chemical-intensive farming undoubtedly contributed to the tragedy of thirty thousand small farmers committing suicide in India (p. 68). In the last decade, the United Nations concluded that globalized industrial farming is unsustainable and has made its replacement by regionally-based, organic agriculture a goal (pp. 81–82).

Seeds and Soil: Critical Examples of Industrial Farming’s Ecological Cost

The practices of the industrial food system are estimated to be responsible for destroying 75 percent of the world’s soil, water, and biodiversity, and to be the cause of 40 percent of the earth’s climate distress (p. 77). Seeds and soil are rich carriers of the resources God has given to sustain life, and both have been treated by the industrial food system as raw materials to be owned and used for profit rather than as gifts.

Seeds are now controlled by a handful of agrochemical corporations, as seed companies were consolidated under their ownership (p. 84). The seeds made available by these corporations represent a greatly reduced number of varieties of each crop, limiting the earth’s biodiversity significantly. Many of the seeds available are hybrid seeds that cannot be saved by farmers and used for the next planting, so farmers must purchase new seeds each year, raising their costs. Some 80 percent of processed foods sold in our country contain GMOs (genetically modified organisms), and yet regulations were changed in 1993 so that crops grown from genetically modified

seeds are exempt from toxicological and biochemical testing (pp. 83–89). McGann affirms, “Whatever happens to seeds affects the whole web of life” (p. 83). She calls us “to become seed-savers and seed-lovers once again” (p. 92).

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The earth’s topsoil, developed over lengthy geological eras, is being diminished by erosion, degradation, contamination, and desertification, all due in part to the industrial food system. Healthy soil contains millions of organisms that are necessary to maintain its fertility, to preserve its health during times of drought, to prevent erosion, and to protect the plant roots within it. Microbes in the soil partner with plant roots to transform nitrogen from the air into a form accessible to plants, creating a natural fertilizer. Synthetic fertilizer used by the industrial agriculture system kills many of the microbes and other organisms that live in healthy soil. Agribusiness’s widespread use of herbicides, pesticides, and heavy farm equipment has further damaged the earth’s soil. While 99 percent of the earth’s food is grown in soil, erosion has reduced the land in our world suitable for farming by one-third. Some estimate that the soil necessary to cover thirty soccer fields is lost every minute, and that at this rate the earth’s topsoil will be fully depleted in sixty years (pp. 93–99). McGann reports that “civilizations that ignored the health and well-being of their soil, that exploited rather than renewed its fertility, have disappeared along with the soil” (p. 97). She adds, “The fate of our civilization, as in the past, is bound up with how we treat the soil” (p. 101).

World Hunger and Injustice to Farmworkers: Examples of Corporate Agriculture’s Human Cost

McGann points out that our world is polarized in terms of the availability of food. In wealthier countries like the United States, the corporate food system has resulted in a wide range of food items being readily accessible in abundance. Many of these foods are highly processed and filled with fat, sugar,

salt, and chemical additives. Overconsumption and obesity are common, accompanied by diet-related health issues such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. But in other areas of the world, hunger and food scarcity are common. Over 900 million people across the globe, or one person out of every seven, suffer from chronic hunger and malnourishment. It is estimated that 6.5 million people die from starvation each year (pp. 103–105).

One cause of food scarcity is the diversion of crops from feeding the world's population to producing biofuels or feeding livestock to meet rising meat consumption patterns. These uses claim 98 percent of the corn and 90 percent of the soy grown in the United States. From 2005 to 2011, the grain devoted to fuel production tripled, resulting in significant inflation in food prices. In many regions of the world, poorer households spend 50 to 70 percent of their income on food (pp. 110–111).

Corporate farming has displaced many small farmers who owned fertile land. These farmers largely have increased the numbers of the urban poor. The remaining small farmers work plots of land that are difficult to farm, and typically struggle to make ends meet as well.

About 90 percent of the three million farmworkers in America are foreign-born, an example of the reality that cheap foreign labor builds the success of industrial countries' corporations and economies on the backs of these workers.

Farmworkers, too, number significantly among the poor, especially in the wealthy United States. McGann reports that about 90 percent of the three million farmworkers in America are foreign-born, an example of the reality that cheap foreign labor builds the success of industrial countries' corporations and economies on the backs of these workers. Most of the foreign-born farmworkers in the United States are undocumented, seasonal workers from rural Mexico. These workers often labor in extreme heat, for long hours, with inadequate sanitation, and at a rapid pace to meet the demands of their employers and to maximize their per-piece pay. For example, a farmworker may pick four thousand

pounds of produce in a single day. Weekly pay for a farmworker rarely reaches \$400, and annual income from this seasonal work does not exceed \$13,000. Given this paltry income, farmworkers often sleep in fields or live in tents, crowded trailers, abandoned buildings, or even chicken coops. Fear of deportation, language barriers, and lack of education are factors that impede farmworkers from challenging their oppressive working conditions and unjust pay (pp. 114–118).

The cost structure of the products utilizing farmworker labor reveals a staggering disregard for these neighbors created in God's image. The cost of farmworker labor in the production of a bottle of Napa Valley wine that may sell for \$40, or as much as \$200, is about twenty-five cents. If one cent more per pound would be paid by the Publix food chain for the fresh tomatoes it purchases from Florida growers, and this penny per pound was added to the farm laborers' wages, their pay would double. And, if the extra penny per pound cost was passed on to the consumer in higher prices, the average family of four would pay only forty-four cents more for tomatoes each year (pp. 118–119).

McGann's research demonstrates the industrial food system has exploited both small farmers and those who are hired to work on farms, resulting in increased landlessness, poverty, and hunger. Sadly, distanced from these oppressive practices, most of us are unaware of them as we purchase products from our grocery stores, which are filled with ample amounts of produce and other food items year-round for us to enjoy.

The Hope Regenerative Agriculture Offers

After presenting substantial research on the industrial food system, its lack of sustainability, and its ecological and human costs, McGann joins her voice with those of many others, including several United Nations initiatives, in calling for a move from industrial farming to an agricultural system using sustainable, biodiverse, ecologically resilient, and regenerative methods. McGann proposes that such a system should have five foundational characteristics: small in scale, locally based, organically sustained, regenerative of the earth's resources, and rooted in justice (pp. 124–125). While industrial farming has been promoted as being able to produce larger crop yields, farming on a smaller scale actually produces more food per acre. Through intercropping, small

farmers increase food production and biodiversity, in addition to facilitating natural pest control and improving the health of the soil. Locally-based food production would dramatically reduce the current transportation spoilage rate of 25 percent for fresh fruits and vegetables. Regenerative agricultural practices, particularly by improving soil, can repair our damaged ecosystems and even mitigate global warming while producing sufficient food for the world's growing population (pp. 126–140).

The Prophetic Voice Liturgy and the Eucharist Offers

McGann concludes *The Meal That Reconnects* by discussing how the church's liturgy and celebration of the Eucharist can bring greater awareness to world hunger and poverty, the unjust treatment of farmworkers, and the abuse of the earth's ecosystems. She recommends all elements of the liturgy, including prayers, hymns, preaching, liturgical art, and our celebration of the Eucharist, communicate four overarching orientations. First, our liturgy should stress that "the Earth is the Lord's . . . a living sanctuary . . . filled with God's presence and glory" (pp. 178–179). Our culture's abuse of the earth is an offense to God. It is our responsibility to protect and foster the health of the earth for generations to come. Second, Christians are called to "a more radical *koinonia*," where we publicly embrace our relatedness and responsibility to all who suffer injustice, poverty, and chronic hunger across the world, and seek to be in relationship with them (pp. 184–189). The third orientation reconnects the fruit of the Earth with the work of human hands. Humanity is meant to respect and cooperate with the earth's patterns in the production of food and other goods. The bread and cup call us to consider the ethical dimensions of the Eucharist, and whether the earth or human workers are being maltreated in agricultural and other production processes (pp. 189–191). Finally, the liturgy should encourage us to realize a eucharistic economy, or in Torvend's words, God's economy of grace and abundance rather than the world's economy of overconsumption and scarcity (pp. 197–202).

Is the Eucharist for Us "the Meal That Reconnects"?

McGann's book is densely packed with voluminous research on hunger, poverty, injustice, and ecological damage caused in large part by the industrial food system. *The Meal That Reconnects* will be of interest to any who are concerned about these topics or who wish to broaden their understanding of eucharistic theology and practice. But it is critical that *all* Christians become much more knowledgeable about the highly sobering data presented in this book. As McGann points out, many of us have been distanced from these disturbing realities. Her work can open our eyes and hearts, and hopefully strengthen our eucharistic practice so that it truly is the meal that reconnects us to an unflagging commitment to bring healing to the earth and its most vulnerable people.

The Feast of Abundance in the Midst of Scarcity

In these two books, Torvend and McGann lead us to recognize more fully that our earth has been severely damaged and many of its people are suffering terribly from chronic hunger, poverty, and oppression. We have to confess it must be difficult, if not impossible, for those who suffer food insecurity and injustice to conceive of the Eucharist as a feast of abundance. By examining the ethical dimensions of the sacrament, Torvend and McGann urge us to see how Christians are both called and equipped by the Eucharist to work to correct these systemic sins.

Notes

1. In a footnote Torvend indicates that "the inexhaustible richness of this sacrament" is taken from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997/2000).
2. The definition for *salvus* given in parentheses was provided in a footnote by Torvend.

Christians are called to "a more radical *koinonia*," where we publicly embrace our relatedness and responsibility to all who suffer injustice, poverty, and chronic hunger across the world, and seek to be in relationship with them.

On Liturgy: Responding to Poverty according to the Liturgical Narrative

Kendra Buckwalter Smith

I was coming home one day when my neighbor popped her head out of the window to say hello, as she often does. When she asked my plans for the rest of the day, I told her I'd be working on a column about poverty and liturgy. "Oh, I have some thoughts about *that*," she responded. My neighbor identifies as an atheist and she has a certain level of intrigue about who I am and what I do as a pastor. I deeply appreciate conversation with her. I'm not actually sure what she perceives when I say the word "liturgy," but she has given me many glimpses into her own experience growing up in rural poverty. And as I learned that day, her experience with poverty does, unfortunately, have a rather sordid association with the church. She remembers receiving aid from different churches in her area pretty regularly—when the electricity was turned off, casting into darkness the stack of overdue bills; when a thunderstorm transformed the once small leak in the roof into a gaping hole; when the family yet again couldn't afford groceries. Her mother would from time to time make her way to a nearby church, explain their plight, and receive just enough financial support to fend off immediate crisis. My neighbor recalled,

Of course, I always appreciated help from the church. But what I hated the most was the next Sunday. We'd all have to get dressed up in our very best clothing and make our way to worship at whatever church was playing our latest savior. At some point during the service, the pastor would make us stand up, and would parade us in front of the congregation, telling all the people exactly what our struggle was and exactly what the church had done to fix it.

She felt like a prop to make "these church people" feel good about themselves. She noted that the church always gave enough to help with a physical need in the moment, but that the price was a sense of dehumanizing shame, which only intensified the fear that too often undergirded her young life. I wonder if each church's celebration of the good they had done actually outlived the brief assuagement of her family's struggle.

I personally have not experienced quite that level of self-aggrandizement showcased in worship. But I do think that a kind of othering can easily creep into our liturgical engagement—an us-versus-them mentality that perpetuates unjust power structures rather than embracing the wholeness and reconciliation offered in Christ. Othering is a process of differentiation and demarcation, an establishment of a power dynamic through which those experiencing poverty are treated as inferior to the rest of society.

Jesus is quite clear that this is something we should guard against. In the parable of two men who went up to the temple to pray, the Pharisee—a poster child for othering in the context of worship—stood tall before God, offering thanksgiving that "I am not like other people," while the tax collector bowed down, crying out for mercy upon his sins. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted," Jesus proclaimed (Luke 18:9–14). And when Jesus and his disciples encountered a man blind from birth, the disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:1–7). Jesus beckons us to recognize the dangers of propping ourselves up on the backs

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of others. For in doing so, we participate in systems that impoverish and exploit, rather than in Christ's ministry that is for all people.

Often, we identify ourselves by comparison to those around us. The way in which we view the world determines the way we act within it. The church viewed my neighbor merely based on what she lacked and identified themselves by what they were in a position to do for her. In fact, they needed my neighbor's family and people like them to remain in poverty in order to maintain their self-identification as powerful and generous. And that kind of response to the world will only ever exacerbate the poverty of our own soul and the souls of those we would claim to help.

In the Reformed tradition, our very order of worship forms us into a different relationship with the world. The liturgy is not about establishing ourselves as the powerful who have the ability to fix another's problems. Rather, it is about pointing to the One who is already at work righting all that is wrong in the world. It's about discovering our own opportunities to participate in that work and finding those experiencing poverty to be our partners in that participation. It's about extending our view beyond an us-versus-them dichotomy to a recognition of all people as those who are simultaneously caught in the systemic realities of a broken world yet invited to participate in Christ's work of dismantling those realities.

Each time we gather for worship on the Lord's Day, we do not begin with the naming of needs, but with adoration of the creating, sustaining, redeeming God who calls us to worship. Like the prophet Isaiah, we become profoundly aware of the incongruity between God's goodness and the world's brokenness, which leads us to repentance (Isa. 6:5). Yet we don't even pray our confession before first being explicitly reminded that God

has already forgiven us and that we are already claimed by Christ. The Call to Confession assures us of who God is and who we are, thus providing the freedom and grace to more fully participate in God's will for this world. We learn to view ourselves in light of who God created and calls us to be. We approach our own needs in light of what God has already done and continues to do. And we become better equipped to view our fellow humans and approach the needs of the world in that same light. As prayers of confession come only after adoration of God and a naming of who we are in Christ, prayers of intercession come only after the reading and proclaiming of God's Word. It is when we have remembered and named God's promises for this world, recognizing the disparity between those promises and the reality of the world's present experience, that we make our petitions for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. So too does our offering only follow and grow out of this recognition, our own gracious giving out of gratitude for God's gifts.

I'm so grateful for my neighbor—for her strength, wisdom, and love. And I have no doubt that God has always been at work placing people in her life to recognize her gifts and encourage her, opening up opportunities for her to discover her own dignity and drawing her into a life of compassion for and support of those around her. I delight in the assurance that neither her identity, nor anyone else's, is found in the differentiating power dynamics of a broken world, but rather is found in the God who proclaimed, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). Thanks be to God that when the church fumbles in its call, God continues to be at work. May we discover ourselves and all whom we encounter as blessed participants in that work.

On Music: Privilege, Poverty, and Musical Practice

Phillip Morgan

I was recently asked after the televised services for George Floyd, “Why do Black churches always use a Hammond organ?” The answer I gave was a simple one. “Black churches have historically turned to the electronic Hammond organ because they’re cheaper.”

For weeks after, I pondered that question and began to think of all the ways many predominantly white congregations don’t seem to understand the worship and music practices of Black congregations because they refuse to see their privilege and deny historic Black poverty. For many churches, not having the resources would never be the primary factor in determining how they worship for generations. African Americans, on the other hand, have always worshiped with that reality. The music born of the Black church, traditional Negro spirituals and gospel, are the creative works of people who have historically had little or no material possessions and have seldom been afforded the benefit of what is often considered musical “training.” But even without these tools they have crafted what has become a significant part of the church’s song.

Traditional Negro spirituals and the blues were born and passed through the oral tradition, sung by one person to another person. The enslaved people who first sang them owned nothing and were considered themselves to be property. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, laws were passed in the South making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write. In spite of this, a rich musical tradition was born. Even after it became lawful for African Americans to become literate, the method of learning and sharing music—that is through an oral tradition—remained the standard practice.

During the Great Migration of the early twentieth century the descendants of former slaves moved to the North, taking almost nothing with them except this music that had been passed on to them. Bernice Johnson Reagan once said, “To study gospel one had to study the Great Migration.” In their new cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, they expanded on these musical styles and created what we know as jazz and gospel music, still creating music with their ear, not Western notation, as the major compositional tool and sharing it with others by rote.

As congregations not steeped in this tradition begin to include more of these songs and musical styles in worship, I am often asked how to appropriately approach these songs. “How do you play and sing gospel music with integrity and authenticity?” is the most frequently asked question. My answer is that to really understand and live into the style of gospel music one must approach it intellectually as it was composed. Gospel, like the spirituals and blues that combined to form it, is an oral tradition.

Someone recently recounted hearing a world-famous choir for the first time and knowing that was the sound they wanted to spend their life recreating with ensembles. They said something like “I believe that if it’s in your ears you can recreate it.” That conversation came back as I was crafting this article. I remembered the first time I heard Chanticleer singing spirituals and gospel music. I was blown away. “Where the Sun Will Never Go Down” proved to me that it was possible to recreate the sounds passed down to me with groups of singers who normally sang European classical music and who had not been born into my religious tradition.

Phillip Morgan is director of music at Central Presbyterian Church and Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Artistic Director Joseph Jennings said this in the liner notes of the album:

With the spirituals it was necessary that I lay some basic groundwork for Chanticleer. One of the first things was to do away with the printed page. What happened was sort of experience-compression and transfer. Traditions are passed along generation to generation, but in this case within one generation but across cultures. Rote learning is a very foreign concept to ‘trained’ musicians and some of us found it very difficult at first, but as time went on the ears developed and certain idioms and voicings became recognizable.

The first step in their path to success was to get rid of their privilege as “trained” musicians and approach the music through the lens of those extremely talented individuals who composed without the benefit of their training.

I hope you notice that both Jennings and I have repeatedly put the word “training” in quotations. It is because we both know, having grown up in the gospel tradition, that understanding this music takes a lot of practice and training. I believe this is the primary obstacle that many musicians face in trying to embrace African American music. Seeing it as unrefined and untrained only reinforces the systems of racism and generational poverty that we seek to tear down by including a rich diversity of music in worship. Insisting that the music be fit into classical systems of musical knowledge is exactly what we are trying to eradicate.

As a child I learned classical music of the Western tradition playing Mozart and Chopin with my piano teacher. I also sat at the piano for hours with my grandmother’s Roberta Martin and James Cleveland records and cassettes, listening and trying to recreate the sounds I was hearing until, like Jennings says, my “ears developed and certain idioms became recognizable.” It is an incredibly difficult process but it is no more difficult than the struggles I first had playing Bach inventions and no less musical training!

I’m also totally aware that this process isn’t always the most practical. I’m not trying to turn my Chancel Choir at Central Presbyterian Church exclusively into a gospel choir, so there are times when we don’t learn this music by rote and we begin the process of tackling a new piece by reading it off the printed page. However, there are more times when singing this style of music I have used a hybrid method filling in the cracks of the printed page. After a great deal of experience with the style, those idioms are heard naturally by my choirs who sing mostly anthems from the European classical tradition. Here are some suggestions to try with your own choirs.

1. Pick a piece from the African American gospel tradition for use in worship, either a piece to be sung by a choir or as congregational song. A brief list of classics from the gospel tradition includes the following:

- Lead Me, Guide Me, *Glory to God* 740
- Soon and Very Soon, *Glory to God* 384
- If It Had Not Been for the Lord, *Sing the Faith* 2053
- Give Me a Clean Heart, *Sing the Faith* 2153
- There Are Some Things I May Not Know, *Sing the Faith* 2147
- Oh, Give Thanks to the Lord, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* 72
- God Be with You, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* 212
- Lord, Help Me to Hold Out, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* 165

2. If you begin with the printed page, do not be bound to it. Use it only as a blueprint and know that it is truly gospel when you’ve added something from your ears and heart.
3. Listen to a great recording of the piece repeatedly and try to recreate what you hear. At first, you’ll need to do this in very small pieces.
4. Listen to other music by the composer/performer. Find the differences and similarities. This is how the gospel idioms become familiar.
5. Experiment with methods of teaching yourself and others to recreate what you’re hearing.

On Preaching: Blessed Are the Poor . . . in Spirit?

Buz Wilcoxon

Blessed are the poor . . . in spirit.” The difference between the first beatitude in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is impossible to miss. Matthew’s addition of the phrase “in spirit” has often felt to me like a splinter protruding from the text. I know there are myriad ways of reading and preaching this passage that open us to the spiritual dimensions of poverty and to the dehumanizing effects of suffering on the soul as well as the body. Yet, sometimes this move to spiritualize poverty feels like a cheap, easy deflection from addressing real suffering by generalizing it to include everyone. Is the addition of “in spirit” almost like an ancient version of “All Lives Matter”? Instead, Luke’s prophetic Messiah proclaims, “Blessed are the poor.” Period. In doing so, he invites those of us who are not poor (such as myself and the vast majority of the congregation I serve) to see God’s blessedness in real human bodies other than our own. It pulls us out of ourselves, out of our modern, middle-class idolatries, out of the half-truths of an overly spiritualized gospel that ignores the social, economic, and political realities of the real world into which Christ has come.

Presbyterians have an embarrassing history with regard to this tendency to spiritualize the gospel message and the ministry of the church. The doctrine of “the Spirituality of the Church” was a foundational principle upon which the PCUS (the old Southern Church) was founded in 1861 in order to justify ecclesiastic secession over the issue of slavery. The architect behind the formation of a separate Southern Presbyterian denomination was the brilliant professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, James Henley Thornwell. Thornwell helped to shape and express a Reformed Southern viewpoint that was rooted in the religiously

paternalistic patterns of a society built on slavery. “The Spirituality of the Church” proclaimed that slavery was an issue for the government to decide, and therefore, the church and its members should be silent on this matter and on any other matters beyond the realm of ministering to souls.¹

At the first General Assembly of the new Southern Church, Thornwell was assigned the task of writing a letter to all other Christian churches around the world explaining and defending its stance on slavery and its reasons for breaking away from the national Presbyterian church. This letter contains the clearest explanation of that Southern theory of the “Spirituality of the Church.” It states that the church and the state are two completely separate, opposite, and unrelated bodies that ought to have nothing to do with one another:

The State is a natural institute.

The Church is a supernatural institute.

The State is designed to realize the idea of justice.

The Church is designed to realize the idea of grace.

The constitution of the State is determined by human reason.

The constitution of the Church is divine revelation.

The State aims at *social order*.

The Church aims at *spiritual holiness*.

They are as planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences [will be] disastrous.²

The letter continues to explain that since the Bible does not explicitly prohibit slavery, the church has no grounds on which to debate it. Since slavery is

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only a civil issue, it should be left only to the civil government to address, and the church should keep its mouth shut. Only evangelism aimed at saving souls was permissible for the church to consider—nothing having to do with the justice and well-being of those souls in this life. Blessed are the poor . . . in spirit.

We certainly have much to confess from this part of our history, and in this season of national reckoning around race and the hurtful heritage of slavery, we need to wrestle with the long-term implications of this tendency to spiritualize suffering. Thankfully, however, that is far from the end of the story. A century after Thornwell, another great Southern Presbyterian theologian emerged, who held the same chair of theology at Columbia: Shirley Guthrie. In good Barthian fashion, Guthrie's decades of teaching and writing reminded the church of its calling to engage the full witness of the Scriptures and the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In doing so, Guthrie would speak about true Christian spirituality, the "Spirituality of the Church," in ways that sought to move beyond the sinful shortsightedness of the past:

Truly spiritual people . . . are recognized not just by how much they pray but by how much they pray for the world. They are recognized not just by how much they "praise the Lord" for what "the Lord has done for me" but by how sensitive their praise makes them to the needs and hurts of other people and the protection of the natural environment in which they live. They are recognized not just by how much they read their Bible, but by how their Bible reading influences their business practices, political commitments, and social relationships. They are not recognized just by their testimonies to how God befriended and came to their

aid when they were lost in sin, but by the way they befriend and come to the aid of other lost sinners.

A spirituality that retreats from the world into a self-serving safety of private religious life (either alone or in the company of other religious people) is a false spirituality that *flees* the Spirit of God. True Christian spirituality cheerfully and confidently plunges into the life of this world, for there is where we meet the Spirit of the God of the Bible who is as at work not to save us from but in and for the sake of the world."³

Deep down, I know that Matthew is right. In many ways we are spiritually impoverished and in desperate need of hearing the good news of blessedness. But Luke is also right. All of us, rich and poor, need the scandalously particular reminder of God's blessing to those whom the world has turned its back on. The true spirituality of the church is founded not on some otherworldly generalized religiosity but on a righteousness that focused on this world—a real-life spirituality that is formed by the real life, the real death, and the real resurrection of Jesus Christ, who came "to bring good news to the poor." Period.

Notes

1. For a full discussion and critique of this "distinctive Southern doctrine" see E. T. Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961).
2. "Address to the Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the Earth," in *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States 1861–1965* (Atlanta: Office of the General Assembly, 1966), 26–37. Emphasis mine.
3. Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 300.

On the Arts: Poverty and Liturgy

Lauren Wright Pittman

One evening, my partner and I were walking in Anderson as a man approached us. He began the interaction as I've experienced before, as though he had no right to speak to us, as if his presence was an inconvenience. He apologized for bothering us and then began to explain his approach. As is often the case in these moments, I felt uncomfortable, and my privilege led me to questions and assumptions about this man's intentions and needs as though I had this man figured out, as though I had a right to determine what might be best for him. I scrolled through these thoughts in a matter of seconds, and then he said, "I am an artist. I was wondering if you had any money to spare. I don't have enough for another canvas." A rush of warmth went through my body. This man and I were instantly connected. He held out his most recent painting, which reminded me of the bayous of Southern Louisiana, a place that defined me. It was clear to me that this man needed more than art supplies. Yet, I knew we both understood the act of creating to be essential to life—to who we are as created beings. I thought about the stacks of canvases in my studio waiting for paint, and the fact that this man, like me, needed tools for creative expression as much as he needed food, water, or shelter.

Most of my life I've placed judgment on the calling I felt to be an artist—a calling as strong as my call to ministry. It felt like a selfish desire that I'd need to let go in order to more faithfully serve others. Through seminary and my ordination process, I passionately fought to be true to myself as an artist, while I internally devalued my passion as a distraction from more "noble" ministerial paths. As I began to write this article, this devaluing emerged as I wrestled with the relationship between art and poverty.

Instead of continuing to spin unproductively, I decided to talk with my aunt, LeeAnn Love, whose passion lies at the intersection of art and poverty. LeeAnn Love is cofounder and art therapy program director of MyCanvas, a mobile youth community arts program based in Nashville, Tennessee, whose mission is to offer basic art skills to at-risk youth. This program seeks to support identity development, healthy coping skills, and community resiliency through artistic creation and expression.

MyCanvas offers a series of music and art workshops to underserved youth in their own neighborhood. The workshops are deeply relevant, offering opportunities for finding voice and processing difficult emotions. In early 2020, Nashville experienced devastating storms that were followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and demonstrations against police brutality and systemic racism.

MyCanvas takes these topics head on with the kids. For an upcoming workshop entitled "Transforming Pain into Beauty," LeeAnn and her colleagues will help the youth process the griefs, traumas, and losses of this year while creating a large sculpture of a phoenix rising from the chaos by utilizing debris collected from the storms. Kids will discuss, draw, paint, smash, stomp, build, and transform their pain into beauty.

One of the many beautiful parts of MyCanvas is that the workshops culminate in a community art show, hosted in the heart of the kids' community. The art shows bring people from all walks of life—wealthy art donors and collectors, the families and friends of the neighborhood, politicians, members of the police force, reporters—all to experience the kids' artwork and to hear their voices. Kids will often grab the hands of strangers to show them the work they did. As LeeAnn reflected on the shows, she

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beamed, thinking about the kids' sense of pride and their growing self-esteem. She called the art shows "a little microcosm of beauty." One might call it a foretaste of the Kin-dom of God.

As I reflect on our conversation, I'm struck by the basic human need of being seen, heard, and understood. With increasing disconnection and isolation in our society, we often don't see one another as whole people. This is especially true when we come into contact with someone experiencing poverty. We are tempted to see them as a mouth to feed, a body to shelter, or most devastatingly, a problem—not as someone with a voice, personality, imagination, and creativity who has needs for self-expression, someone to be heard and understood.

Creative expression is a basic human need. "Art, or at least the kind of meaning that art mediates, is a primary human need, without which we lose our sense of self-worth, our dignity, our relationships with one another."¹ Throughout my journey in finding my footing in ministry, I've seen how the church devalues the arts. We must do better in seeing, listening to, and elevating the voices of our neighbors who have deep, desperate, foundational needs. The church must provide opportunities for creative expression, because that can help us connect more deeply with ourselves and one another.

As a pastor, the most discouraging part of our conversation was learning about the difficulty MyCanvas has navigating the relationship between the arts community and the church. The church has attempted to place faith-based programming expectations onto MyCanvas, which proves

challenging given the therapeutic and multifaith environment in which they work. In response, secular organizations often refuse arts grants to faith-based organizations. This rift between the church and the arts community is creating unnecessary obstacles for this important work to flourish.

I wonder what it would look like for the church to repair its relationship with the arts community. How would the church need to change in order to fully value creative and emotional expression as essential and prioritize these opportunities for their communities to more holistically explore their faith and life together?

If we as the church are to truly love our neighbor as ourselves and freely share the love of Christ, we must see, affirm, and support the wholeness of our neighbors, especially those in need. Our neighbors are not simply mouths to feed or bodies to shelter. We need not make assumptions about their needs, as though we have the right to determine what is best for them. Instead, if we can repair the broken relationship to the arts community and remove external pressures and church-focused expectations, the church might be able to create space and opportunity for engagement with our neighbors as multifaceted people with needs beyond physical sustenance, growing us into the vibrant, life-giving, other-affirming community God has called us to be.

Note

1. Deborah Sokolove, *Sanctifying Art: Inviting Conversation between Artists, Theologians, and the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 99.



Amy E. Gray

Ideas

Build a Longer Table

Meter: 11 11 10 11

Build a longer table, not a higher wall,
feeding those who hunger, making room for all.
Feasting together, stranger turns to friend,
Christ breaks walls to pieces; false divisions end.

Build a broader doorway, not a longer fence.
Love protects all people, sparing no expense.
When we embrace compassion more than fear,
Christ tears down our fences: all are welcome here.

Build a safer refuge, not a larger jail;
where the weak find shelter, mercy will not fail.
For any place where justice is denied,
Christ will breach the jail wall, freeing all inside.

When we lived as exiles, refugees abroad,
Christ became our doorway to the reign of God.
So must our tables welcome those who roam.
None can be excluded; all must find a home.

Text: David Bjorlin, b.1984; © 2018, GIA Publications Inc.

In 2017, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada called for hymns on the topic of immigration and welcome for their new collection *Singing Welcome: Hymns and Songs of Hospitality to Refugees and Immigrants*. In addition to being on the working committee for the collection, I decided to try and write a text to submit for consideration (by everyone but me, of course!). Around that time, there was a popular meme going around social media that said something like, “When you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher fence.” One day as I was running, I found myself singing the line, “build a longer table” to the tune NOEL NOUVELET.

Scripture: Matthew 25:31–46, Ephesians 2:11–22

Themes: Immigration, Inclusion, Justice, Protest, Refugees, Welcome

The musical score is written in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has four verses of lyrics. The piano accompaniment includes a right-hand part with chords and a left-hand part with a simple bass line. The lyrics are: 1. Build a long - er ta - ble, not a high - er wall, 2. Build a saf - er ref - uge, not a larg - er jail; 3. Build a broad - er door - way, not a long - er fence. 4. When we lived as ex - iles, ref - u - gees a - broad,

feed - ing those who hun - ger, mak - ing room for all.
 where the weak find shel - ter, mer - cy will not fail.
 Love pro - tects all peo - ple, spar - ing no ex - pense.
 Christ be - came our door - way to the reign of God.

F#m Em Am D Em

Feast - ing to - geth - er, stran - ger turns to friend,
 For an - y place where jus - tice is de - nied,
 When we em - brace com - pas - sion more than fear,
 So must our ta - bles wel - come those who roam.

Am D Bm Em Am Bm B/D#

Christ breaks walls to piec - es; false di - vi - sions end.
 Christ will breach the jail wall, free - ing all in - side.
 Christ tears down our fenc - es; all are wel - come here.
 None can be ex - clud - ed; all must find a home.

Em A Bm Em F#m Bm Em

Text: David Bjorlin, b.1984; © 2018, GIA Publications Inc.
 Music: NOËL NOUVELET; French carol; harm. Thomas Foster, b.1938; harm. © 1986, GIA Publications, Inc.

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JESUS, BE WITH US

A hymn for Matthew 25 churches in the PC(USA)

DAVID GAMBRELL

Swing! $\text{♩} = \text{♩}^3$

Vocal

Piano

Je - sus, be with us. Help us each day to

fol - low the gos - pel and live as we pray.

Send us your Spir - it and show us your way.

Text and Tune: David Gambrell, © 2020
Music arr. Phillip Morgan, © 2020

13 Fm Bb Eb(sus4) Eb **Fine**

Je - sus, be with us _____ to - day. _____

17 Cm Gm Fm Eb

1. Where there is hun - ger _____ and thirst in the land, _____
 2. Where there is ha - tred _____ be - cause of our skin, _____
 3. Where there are val - leys _____ of bones, dry as dust, _____

21 Cm Fm G(sus4) G7

scat - ter _____ the sys - tems of greed. _____
 break down _____ the walls of our fear. _____
 build up _____ the bod - y of Christ. _____

25 Cm Gm Bb Eb

Je - sus, be with us; make use of our hands.
 Je - sus, be with us to save us from sin.
 Je - sus, be with us, and help us to trust.

29 F7 Bb(sus4) Bb7

Lift up your peo - ple in need.
 In your great love, draw us near.
 Teach us a new way of life.

Jesus, Be with Us

A hymn for Matthew 25 churches in the PC(USA)

Swing $\text{♩} = \text{♩}^{\text{3}}$
Eb Cm Fm Bb Eb Eb

Refrain Je - sus, be with us. Help us each day to fol - low the
Cm F7 Bb Ab G7
gos-pel and live as we pray. Send us your Spir - it and
Cm F7 Fm Bb Ebsus Eb *fine*
show us your way. Je - sus, be with us to - day.

Cm Gm Fm Eb
Leader 1 Where there is hun - ger and thirst in the land,
or all 2 Where there is ha - tred and be - cause of our skin,
3 Where there are val - leys of bones, dry as dust,

Cm Fm Gsus G7
shat - ter the sys - tems of greed.
break down the walls of our fear.
build up the bod - y of Christ.

Cm Gm Bb Eb
Je - sus, be with us; make use of our hands.
Je - sus, be with us; to save us from sin.
Je - sus, be with us; and help us to trust.

F7 F7 Bbsus Bb7
Lift up your peo - ple in need.
In your great love, draw us near.
Teach us a new way of life.

This hymn celebrates God's work through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Matthew 25 invitation (pcusa.org/matthew25)—eradicating systemic poverty, dismantling structural racism, and building congregational vitality. The refrain is based on Matthew 1:23, "and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us,'" and Jesus' closing words in Matthew 28:20, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Text and Tune: David Gambrell, © 2020
Music arr. Phillip Morgan, © 2020

MATTHEW 25
Irregular

Swing! $\text{♩} = \text{♩}^3$

Jesus, Be with Us

*A hymn for Matthew 25
churches in the PC(USA)*

E♭ Cm Fm B♭ E♭ E♭

Refrain Je - sus, be with us. Help us each day to fol - low the

Cm F7 B♭ A♭ G7

gos - pel and live as we pray. Send us your Spir - it and

Cm F7 Fm B♭ E♭sus E♭

show us your way. Je - sus, be with us to - day.

Cm Gm Fm E♭

Leader 1 Where there is hun - ger and thirst in the land,
or all 2 Where there is ha - tred be - cause of our skin,
 3 Where there are val - leys of bones, dry as dust,

Cm Fm G sus G7

shat - ter the sys - tems of greed.
break down the walls of our fear.
build up the bod - y of Christ.

Cm Gm B♭ E♭

Je - sus, be with us; make use of our hands.
Je - sus, be with us to save us from sin.
Je - sus, be with us, and help us to trust.

F7 F7 B♭sus B♭7

Lift up your peo - ple in need.
In your great love, draw us near.
Teach us a new way of life.

Text and Tune: David Gambrell, © 2020
Music arr. Phillip Morgan, © 2020

MATTHEW 25
Irregular

Book Reviews

Recovering Communion in a Violent World

Christopher Grundy (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019)

Reviewed by Lauren Patrus-Betzel

Christopher Grundy's *Recovering Communion in a Violent World* is a necessary book for anyone compelled to reflect on Holy Communion, especially in light of racism and violence in this country. Grundy systematically and engagingly invites us to consider how traditional communion liturgy and practices have violent entailments, as the typical focus of the sacrament is on the violence done to Christ in crucifixion.

Grundy's reflections on this violence is pastoral, thoughtful, and compelling. Throughout his work Grundy appeals to theology and church history as well as the work of trauma therapists and sociologists, providing a holistic lens through which to consider the important questions he is asking. While boldly staring at how problematic the inherent violence in Holy Communion is, Grundy's respect and affection for the sacrament remains consistent. It is evident throughout that this is truly a project of recovering, and never reducing or hiding—neither attempting to hide parts of the sacrament nor attempting to hide from parts of it as partakers.

The author does not merely leave us with the heavy questions, though, but guides readers through considering new ways forward in order to recover Holy Communion even in the midst of violence. After carefully setting the stage for why recovery work is necessary, Grundy makes an excellent case for considering the possibility that there is “plurality at the origins” of the sacrament. In other words, there were many meal practices throughout

the ministry of Christ which provide us as modern followers with a “wealth of resources” to consider as we reimagine and recover the sacramental meal. Readers are guided through a treatment of the traditional meal stories in the New Testament and invited to see these stories with the lens of possibility now that we are convinced not only that the violence in our sacrament is problematic, but that it is acceptable to admit as much. This book is an excellent guide for pastors and seminarians to begin—or continue—questioning sacred practices. Grundy makes a clear case for why these questions are necessary, and leads with hope that the reason we are compelled by the sacrament can and does compel us to reconsider the entailments of our typical practices.

I consider this book to be timeless, and one I will recommend again and again. This is exactly the kind of thinking and writing the church needs as the presence of violence, particularly state violence, permeates our headlines and newsfeeds, and as we rethink, reimagine, and recover liturgical practices while worshipping during a pandemic. Although it is a heavy topic, I found reading this book a great encouragement because it delves deeply and honestly into the problem of violence. Ultimately this book is about recovery, about setting right something that has been lost along the way, and offering guidance in how to do that recovery. I am grateful for Grundy's book and highly recommend it to others.

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Word of God, Word of Life: Understanding the Three-Year Lectionaries

Gail Ramshaw (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2019)

Reviewed by Maggie Gillespie

I have been a lectionary preacher for all my preaching years. Having grown up in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, I have been familiar with the lectionary and it makes sense to me. I appreciate its rhythms, the structure it provides, and the way it sometimes stretches me. However, after reading Gail Ramshaw's *Word of God, Word of Life: Understanding the Three-Year Lectionaries*, I am now aware of how limited my understanding and appreciation has been. I have been "playing checkers with a chess set."

Ramshaw has undertaken to reveal the underlying construct of the two most familiar three-year lectionaries: the Lectionary for Mass (LM) of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), used by many Protestant denominations. Ramshaw does a masterful job of organization. She lays out the order that is implicit in the three-year lectionaries by introducing ten foundational principles on which they were constructed. Each principle is given its own chapter in which it is fully explicated. Each chapter is organized into three sections: the first part presents a theological and liturgical exposition of the principle, the second part looks at the principle in a wider context, and the third part provides some examples from the lectionaries to illustrate the principle.

The examples in the third part of each chapter were impressively insightful. I found myself wishing I could make requests (say, how about Year A, Proper 8?). I feel confident Ramshaw could expertly demonstrate how the texts work together for any given Sunday, and deftly highlight how one, or more, of the foundational principles is at work.

The second part in each chapter, looking at the principle in a wider context, provided some

startlingly pertinent insights. Ramshaw used these sections to venture outside the biblical and liturgical realm and into the realm where every preacher needs to find her way. In her introduction, the author explains the importance of this section. As the word of life, the biblical texts not only strengthen our faith but also connect with "the daily ordinary worldview of many twenty-first-century people."

As one example, for the eighth principle—that the lectionaries bring both the biblical and liturgical past into the present during Holy Week and Easter—Ramshaw observes that the activity of honoring the past is necessarily "part whitewash," while further asking whether it is possible to celebrate the past while distancing oneself from past values.

In discussing the tenth principle—that the lectionaries intensify each body's participation in the worldwide unity of the body of Christ—Ramshaw discusses the American tendency to glorify individuality. She asks the pointed question, "When is the focus on the individual a dangerous mythic distortion of how human life actually functions in a crowded world?"

The concluding chapter takes a few pages to address some of the criticisms of lectionaries in general and the LM and RCL in particular. I appreciated this effort, since the criticisms were lurking in the background of my consciousness throughout the reading. However, I was disappointed in the scant attention they were given. She did not address one commonly heard criticism, that the lectionary pericopes frequently excise difficult verses at the risk of distorting the meaning. Ramshaw did give slightly more attention to the criticism that some lectionary texts may be perceived as anti-Semitic. Yet, this seemed too brief, barely skimming

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the surface and offering little help for the preacher. Perhaps these issues are better addressed more fully in another book.

On the whole, Ramshaw has inspired me to alter my approach to the lectionary texts each week. I have lately been giving more attention to the multiple facets she highlights in these chapters, beginning with the Gospel year (A, B, or C) and what its unique message is, then reading the secondary texts for how they illuminate the Gospel text. Additionally, I have taken the liberty of approaching the psalm lection in a more prayerful

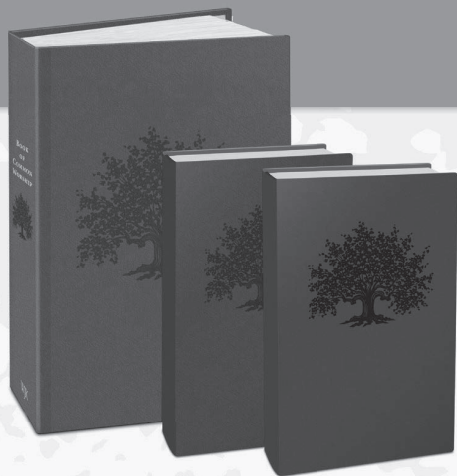
mode while reminding myself that I am participating in the prayer of a wide community.

Ramshaw's depth of knowledge and love for the subject is written on every page, something that in itself inspires the reader to fully embrace all the lectionary has to offer. But without hesitation I say that perhaps her greatest strength is order. Coming in at 170 tightly organized pages, bookended with references to Genesis 1 and Revelation 22, Ramshaw has delivered a clear and comprehensive guide to the three-year lectionaries, eliciting awe at how the Spirit has worked through this construct of the church.



Amy E. Gray

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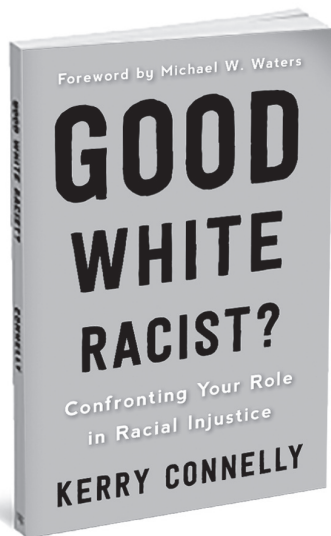


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- Psalm 47:1

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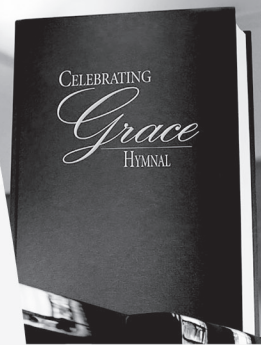
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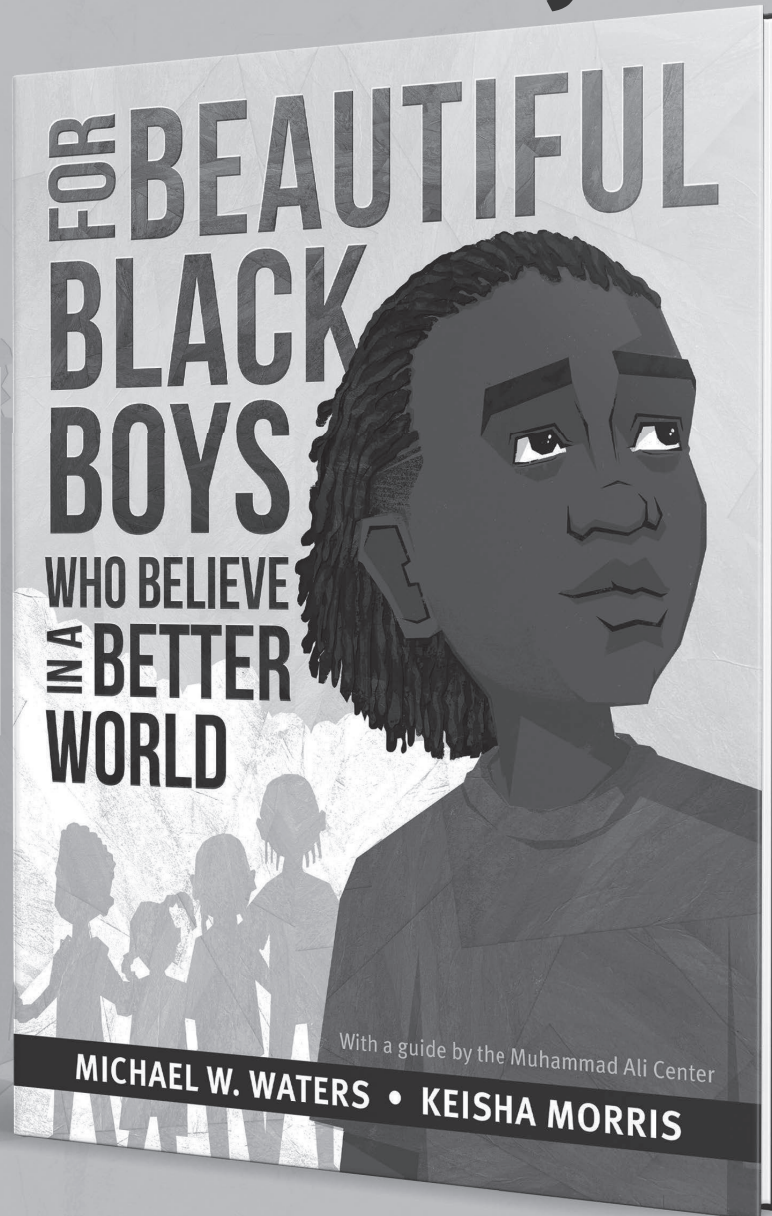
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