

Liturgy and Love as Political-Ecological Virtue

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We live in a world of beauty beyond comprehension, a glorious bit of earth and water resplendent with sight, sound, smell, and touch...a shimmering sphere created and destined to provide abundant life for all. ~~It is marvelous and awesome, this fecund and fragile planet.~~

And this world is tormented. Economically privileged people in the Global North today face a two-fold moral crisis--economic and ecological--of unprecedented scope. We are, in the words of John Cobb and Herman Daly, living toward "a *dead end*," destroying Earth's life systems, and building a soul-shattering gap between the rich and the impoverished.¹ We have organized economic life such that 225 people own wealth equal to 47 % of the human family.² For many "poverty means death."³ 300,00 children are killed daily by poverty. ~~Yet, humankind today has the food resources to feed all.~~

The second dimension of the moral crisis is new. The last third of the twentieth century witnessed a shift in Earth-human relations. Hear it slowly: The human species, living in the manner in which you and I live, became a threat to life on earth. Our numbers and our excessive consumption threaten Earth's capacity to regenerate life as we know and love it. God created a planet that spawns and supports life with a complexity and generosity beyond human ken. After creating the Earth, God said, "it

¹ John Cobb, Jr. and Herman Daly, *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, 1994), 21.

² United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report*, 1998 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 29-30.

³ Jesuit priest, Jon Sobrino, in conversation with him at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

is good.” In the Hebrew, “*tob*,” which means “life-furthering.” It is that very “*tob*,” life-generating capacity, that we are destroying. *We have become the “uncreators.”*

Ecocide and economic violence, however, are not the greatest manifestations of evil in our day. Greater still are their seductive guise as “good” to many in the Global North who “benefit” materially from them. People of economic privilege live and breathe as players in a great “masquerade of evil.” Most of us do so unintentionally and unwittingly. To illustrate: United States society, the society most “benefiting” from the over consumption, most responsible for the ecocide, and arguably most linked with the controlling economic powers, generally accepts the lifeways enabled by currently prevailing global economic arrangements as a “good life.” In general (but not exclusively) we demonstrate practical allegiance to this way of life and the political-economic alignments that enable it. As a society, we remain ensconced in ways of living (trading and investing, constructing and transporting, recreating and clothing ourselves) that endanger Earth’s life-systems, and the lives of global “neighbors” on the losing end of the neo-liberal global economy.⁴

Never before has this ground been trod. Something new is asked of humankind. An ancient Chinese proverb warns: “If we do not change direction, we will end up where we are headed.” Human society of the future--if there is to be one for this dangerous species--will live in a sustainable relationship with its planetary home. That is, we will have “reshaped” how we live on earth.

Surely the mission of the church composed of “uncreators” includes repentance and *metanoia*, a process of change from threatening life on Earth to Earth-healing. Surely

⁴Space precludes elaborating the term, “neo-liberalism,” and my use of it. For that discussion see Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), chaps. 1-3.

the mission of the church among those who use vast portions of the world's wealth while others starve for lack of it includes repentance and *metanoia*, actively seeking to dismantle social structures that maintain the gap between the enriched and the impoverished. In shorter terms, the mission of the church in the Global North today includes working toward sustainable Earth-human relations and economic ways that do not impoverish some in order to enrich others.

This paper proceeds in four "parts." We will pose a question, note four common but not adequate responses to it, offer a thesis in response, and then suggest what this all implies for liturgical practice and theology.

[Part I:] The Question Pursued: A Contradiction

As part of the church living in the heart of economic privilege, I have for some years, been haunted by the question of why we comply with ways of life that are on the macro level, so destructive.⁵ It is, I believe, one of the most important inquiries facing humankind at this pivotal point in history. Vaclav Havel said it well: "Today, the most important thing in my view is to study the reasons why humankind does nothing to avert the threats about which it knows so much, and why it allow itself to be carried onward by some kind of perpetual motion." We who see the world through

⁵ "We" and "us" are dangerous terms, made less so when its referents are clearly specified. In this essay, the first person plural most frequently refers to "Christians of the Global North who have more than enough material wealth and have income sufficient to enable concerns beyond survival." At times, "we" and "us" refer instead to either "the readers or author of this essay" or "humankind." Context in the essay clarifies the referent.

theological lenses must bring the resources of Christian traditions to bear on this crucial question. So doing is my intent in this address.

Contemporary theorists in multiple disciplines argue that human identity and hence subjectivity and action are shaped by the narratives that we are fed and the liturgies that reinforce them. Indeed, the church, at least since Irenaeus of Lyons, affirms that liturgy shapes the life of the church in the world, and does so in part by telling an epic story in which the worshiping community is a player.⁶ Liturgical theologians affirm and elaborate this sense of liturgy's morally formative impact. As articulated by Don Saliers nearly three decades ago, "[T]here is an internal, conceptual link between liturgy and ethics." "How we pray and worship is linked to how we live."⁷ *Lex orandi* inherently is linked to *lex agendi* (the law of ethical action) or in Kevin Irwin's terms, *lex vivendi* (law of living).⁸

That connection is held to be largely, but not exclusively, formative. The moral life of worshipers is formed ~~by prayer and~~ by liturgical enactment of an "alternative vision of the world" and a normative story of life in it.⁹ The Christian liturgy forms us for the life-work given by God to human creatures: to praise God and to "love." ~~Receiving the gracious love of God, we are to trust it and to live that mysterious and marvelous love into the world. Forever beloved, we are to be intentional bearers of that love.~~ The "public work of the people," the "*leitourgia*," is to receive God's gift of life-saving love, allow it to "abide in" us and work in us toward abundant life for all. We are created to be lovers--offering to God, self, others, and the entire creation the love that we are fed by the One who gives us life. The "school" and "rehearsal" for this form of

⁶Wayne Meeks in *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries*.

⁷"Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall 1979), 174.

⁸Kevin Irwin. *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 55-6.

⁹Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 227.

life is the liturgy.¹⁰

~~Yes, at its best, the liturgy “changes us” toward love.~~ Luther, speaking of the Eucharist, says it beautifully: “The sacrament...so changes a person that he is made one with the others.” “Thus by means of this sacrament, all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all.”¹¹

How then is it possible that Christian communities in the Global North celebrate the liturgy regularly and sincerely and yet continue to embody antitheses of God’s work? We continue to choose “patterns of life”—and in particular economic life—that “uncreate” and bring many “neighbors” not love, but death and destruction. This we do while receiving in the liturgy a “pattern of life” that participates in the very life of God!¹² I, for instance, am sent forth by the Spirit through the liturgy every Sabbath day to serve God’s mission. In stark contrast, I “go forth” from Sunday worship to emit, on that Sabbath day, 150 times as much greenhouse gas as do many of my global neighbors. Those who suffer first and most from the ensuing global warming are people who are impoverished, especially those who live in the world’s low-lying regions. I “go forth” to purchase products made of bauxite mined by global corporations that forced tribal people’s of India from their ancestral homelands and into urban poverty, in order to mine those lands.

To speak of the liturgy enabling humans to participate in God’s work to heal and liberate all from the powers of death and destruction appears as the height of theological hubris and mass self-deception, unless we simultaneously acknowledge

¹⁰Don Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 176, 102.

¹¹“The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhoods,” 251 and 260.

¹². Saliers, 176.

the overwhelming, overriding screaming reality of our participation in structural sin. Sri Lankan theologian, Tissa Balassuriya, poses the contradiction starkly: “Why is it that in spite of hundreds of thousands of Eucharistic celebrations, Christians ...who proclaim Eucharistic love and sharing deprive the poor people of the world of food, capital, employment, and even land...inequities grow,...[and] the rich live like Dives in the Gospel story?” How can this be? That tormenting question is the focus of this inquiry, that contradiction its motivating force.

[Part II:] The Contradiction Explained....Inadequately

Forbearers in the faith have grappled with this contradiction for millennia. Today it is expressed theologically and sociologically in multiple ways. Typically liturgical theology posits it as the gap or “radical conflict”¹³ between ~~how we worship and how we live~~, liturgy and mission, between “worship and social-ethical practice,”¹⁴ etc. ~~or between “a purely believed...faith” and a faith embodied in society.~~¹⁵

Useful explanations for the “radical conflict” follow five patterns. One highlights the pervasive presence of sin in human life. We as individuals, as societies, and even as a species, ~~are *se incurvatus in se* (“selves curved in on self”), in bondage to sin, both private and systemic.~~ We do not fully live out our call to trust and love God and to love neighbor, because on this side of the grave we always will be both sinner and saved. We cannot do fully the moral good that we long to do. ~~We thank God that, for this, we are forgiven by the grace of God alone. In this forgiveness I fully believe. It~~

¹³ Don Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” in *Liturgy and the Moral Self*, ed. E Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 16.

¹⁴ Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamneses*, 64

¹⁵ Johann Baptist Metz,

has been life to me.¹⁶ However, this moral anthropology, taken alone, bears a lie. As Martin Luther insists, having been filled with the living Christ and fed in the Eucharist, we, paradoxically, are no longer *solely* selves curved in on self; we also are people who, by the power of Christ's indwelling love, serve the widespread good even at great cost to self. While this dialectical moral anthropology—*simul justus et peccator*—refutes the possibility of moral perfection in earthly life, it also disavows any claim that sin's ubiquitous presence renders the faithful morally powerless.

Another reason for the gap between our lived lives and our worship may be the moral ambiguity and complexity that pervades contemporary life. We may pray and sing for justice and “feast at the table and bathe in the waters” that empower us to seek it, but what constitutes justice is not always clear.¹⁷ What brings justice for one group of suffering people may breed injustice for another.

Liturgical theology provides a third and a fourth worthy explanation. “Those who claim love for God but are not disposed to love and serve the neighbor are misunderstanding the words and actions of worship.”¹⁸ Or, the problem may lie in a failure to structure liturgy appropriately. These too are valid partial explanations. The church is working diligently to overcome them through liturgical renewal and theological education.

As Williman Cavanaugh has noted, Tertullian offered a fifth trenchant response. A major danger to the church, he insisted, lies in the human proclivity to elevate above all else, the dominant culture's story of success. That is, rather than living primarily

¹⁶This and the following three paragraphs are from a forthcoming chapter in and LWF publication on “confessing faith in the context of empire.”

¹⁷Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

¹⁸Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” 18.

within the story of God in Jesus Christ, people were being seduced into prioritizing success and status according to the political, economic, and cultural values of the empire. Tertullian, in this, was prescient. ~~A major strength of “empire” today is its power to seduce people into defining success and worth according to its dictates and morays. We become subjects of that story, rather than of Christianity’s counter story.~~ Two centuries later, Johann Baptist Metz voices the same concern. The modern subject in the church, he avers, is not shaped primarily by the Christian narrative despite its liturgical recounting. “Religion (by which he means “middle class religion”), Metz explains, “no longer belongs to the social constitution of the identity of the subject, but is rather added to it.”¹⁹ Christians in modern society are shaped by other stories.²⁰

~~To the extent that this is true, and it is true to varying degrees for different Christian communities and people, a task of the church is to discover how the narrative of life in Jesus Christ can gain prominence over the magnetic pull of the other “stories” shaping our decisions and actions in the world. The church, according to Tertullian, was to be a “divine community which could withstand the pull of society’s ‘success’ or ‘status’ ethic on Christians.”²¹ Liturgy, and in particular baptism, he taught, would play a central role.~~

~~However, even the seductive lure of “other stories” does not adequately explain the gap between lived life and liturgy; for, in the best of situations, Christians in worshiping communities *are indeed being formed into the identity and story of servant love*, despite the counter pull of contrary social “stories.” That is, the liturgy is~~

¹⁹Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 33.

²⁰Other theologians subsequently have asserted as much. See Don Saliers, “Afterword: Liturgy and Ethics Revisited,” in *Liturgy and the Moral Self*, Anderson and Morrill, 216-18; and Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), chap 3.

²¹Groh, “Tertullian,” 7.

~~a powerful force in moral formation toward lives of faith active in love. Many Christians do embody the love received and learned in worshiping community. They bring that love in service to the world, grounded in the conviction of heart and mind that as God loves us we are to love others.~~

All five of these explanations “hold water.”²² They partially illumine the soul-searing contradiction of worshipping Christians participating in ecocide and death-dealing economic violence. However, when I see the church and other people of good will *not* resisting the powers, policies, and practices that suck the life out of impoverished people the world over, and endanger Earth’s life systems, I know that to rest at peace in these explanations, while allowing the injustice to persist, is to betray the God of justice-making love revealed in Scripture. These five factors, while crucial, are not adequate. One must at least investigate the possibility of other factors at play. And so we do.

[Part III:] A Thesis:

~~Critical theory offers useful tools for demystifying paths of thought that enable “good” people to accept as normal, natural, or inevitable, ways of life that enable a few to consume exorbitantly at expense of earth’s health and the lives of many who are deprived by that consumption. Critical theory bids us examine assumptions about social arrangements and categories of thought that bind us to “the way things are.”~~

²²Other, explanations, less valid in my opinion, abound. The deconstructionist postmodern voice would claim that all human pictures of God are social constructions, including the vision of God’s love breathed by the Spirit into the believing community. The Christian meta-narrative of a creating, saving, and sustaining Holy One is just that, a story and no more. This resolution to the contradiction would work only for those willing to disavow faith in the very God revealed in Jesus Christ. Alternatively, some would argue that the work of God on Earth does not include challenging unjust power structures. We are mistaken to claim that by God’s baptismal covenants, we are “to seek justice and peace in all the Earth.” No, it is impossible to read the Prophets and not perceive that God calls and enables God’s people to seek justice in the face of oppressive power.

~~Following that methodological lead, this address begins to retheorize “the internal relation of liturgy and ethics.” That task, comprehensively done, would be interdisciplinary and enormous. Its theological portion alone is boundless. Here we explore just one small piece of the landscape, focusing on two things: epistemology and a concept central to Christian mission and ethics, neighbor love. I posit two related theses, flesh out five constitutive elements of them, and then point to a constructive proposal in response.~~

Recall that our quest here is for insight into what disables the inherent link between liturgy and actions in the world for Christians of the Global North today. We seek clues for allowing the liturgy more fully to form worshiping communities to be body of Christ’s love on Earth.

My thesis is this: In conceptualizing the relationship of liturgy to public life, the tendency to perceive Christian “neighbor-love” primarily as an individual or interpersonal virtue, rather than also as a political-economic and ecological virtue, truncates the capacity of Christians in the Global North to serve God’s mission of building sustainable Earth-human relations and justice among humans.²³ *That is, the Christian norm of “love neighbor as self,” as commonly understood, pertains primarily to how individuals treat one another. This widespread assumption limits the power of liturgical practice to form us toward lives of justice-making love and Earth-*

²³A note of clarification is in order: The word “political,” while bearing multiple connotations and denotations, has two broad sets of referents. One denotes participation in government, formal interest groups, and political parties. The second, the classical sense of “political,” refers more broadly to the processes whereby people shape the terms of their life in common. In the words of Aristotle, “the political,” in this second sense is “public deliberation of the question: How ought we order our life together?” It is in this broader sense that I use the word herein. The former is an instance of the latter, a subset if you will. Numerous other theologians and social theorists hold a similar notion of “the political.” Joseph Allen, a theological ethicist, in *Love and Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 255 defines politics as “the process of making decisions about the life of a community, and political institutions, and structures through which people carry on this process....” Kwok Pui-lan notes that for many feminist theologians of the Global South, the “political” refers to “the collective welfare of the whole people of the polis.” See Kwok Pui-lan, “Feminist Theology, Southern,” in Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, eds., *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 194. Social theorist, Iris Marion Young, sees the “political” as “the activity of raising issues and deciding how institutional and social relations should be organized.” See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 240.

care. Let us untangle a few strands in the fabric of privatized neighbor-love.

First is *The Elevation of Virtue Ethics*

Literature theorizing the relation of liturgy to life in the world leans strongly toward virtue ethics [otherwise known as character ethics] over other approaches to the moral life. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, argues that Christian life in the world “grows” from “individual Christian character” formed by “association with the [Christian] community that embodies the language, rituals, and moral practices” of that life.²⁴ [ENDQUOTE] “The Christian life,” asserts Don Saliers “can be characterized as a set of affections and virtues...~~There are limits and possible misunderstandings in such a characterization, but for purposes of drawing attention to the internal relations between liturgy and ethics [this characterization] is essential...Affections and virtues grounded in the saving mystery of Christ. -constitute a way of being moral.~~”²⁵ Subsequent liturgical theology has tended to share the bias toward virtue ethics.²⁶

Character/virtue formation is a necessary -- I repeat necessary -- ingredient of morality, but alone is fatally flawed; a focus on personal virtue ethics not account for the social structural factors that shape decisions and actions *despite* the virtues or lack thereof of the individuals involved. ~~Where those factors are unjust, we speak of social, structural, or systemic injustice (or, in theological language, social, structural, or systemic sin). Secondly virtue ethics directs intentional moral formation toward privatized morality.~~ Thus one easily is drawn into hiding from the reality of social structural injustice [or, in theological language, social structural sin] under the

²⁴Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), 210.

²⁵Saliers, 22-3.

²⁶Note that Saliers in recent work (“Afterword,” 210) briefly questions the adequacy of virtue ethics alone.

comforting cloak of virtue in private life. To illustrate: Have you ever wondered how it could be that Christians who were intentionally and truly virtuous in private life, served, in their public lives, as leaders in the holocaust. ~~People who were generous and kind in their private circles, went out to strip Jewish people, hang them up and spray them with icy water until frozen to death, or burn them in furnaces.~~ Closer to our project here, privatized morality allows one to give time and money to a shelter for homeless women, while failing to question the zoning and development policies that have enabled expensive condos to be built on the land that previously held their apartment buildings. In short, virtue ethics alone promotes the assumption that Christian morality-- the central feature of which is love -- is primarily a matter of interpersonal or individual life.

~~The problem is not resolved by shoring up virtue ethics with a deontological approach, for normative obligations also easily are molded to the subtle but life-shaping demands of structural injustice and privatized morality. Virtue ethics must be complemented also by value-based moral theory aimed at structural change to realize those values, and by honest ideological self-critique~~

A second dynamic truncating the moral power of liturgy pertains to Diakonia

How easily our liturgy equates “*diakonia*” with its English rendition, “service,” and the connotations thereof. “[T]he liturgical assembly...is by its very nature oriented toward...the very criteria of truth: service toward others (*diakonia*) and witness (*martyria*)” reads a recent newsletter of the *Societas Liturgica*. In conceptualizing what neighbor-love requires of us, we tend to think of loving service, the giving of time, money, personal attention. We are “called to be caring, daring, sharing servants”

affirms a banner in the sanctuary of my worshiping community. Theologians, I among them, readily insist that we [CITING ONE THEOLOGIAN] “need to worship in order to glimpse the mystery of love which reveals itself to us in a God who is a suffering *servant*”.²⁷

Yet, assumed without caveat, the equation of *diakonia* with service harbors a lie, or perhaps two. First, as feminist theology long has protested (~~at least since the ground-breaking works of Valerie Saving and Barbara Hilkert Andolson~~), servant love as the apex of Christian love is not a moral good where it reinscribes cultural norms of self-abnegation or servitude. Secondly, love embodied as “service” easily (although certainly not necessarily) inhibits or displaces critical consciousness of the call to love ~~lived~~ embodied as justice-making.

Lutheran diaconal ministers from around the world, gathered for a “Global Consultation on Diakonia,” point to this danger. They issued a compelling “Epistle,” declaring: “We acknowledge with gratitude the many kinds of diaconal work that the Church has carried out through the centuries and which necessarily continues in our own day. This work is now challenged to move toward more prophetic forms of *diakonia*. Inspired by Jesus and the prophets who confronted those in power and called for changes in unjust structures and practices, we pray that God may empower us to help transform all that leads to human greed, violence, injustice, and exclusion... While *diakonia* begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores reforms and transforms.”²⁸ Indeed *diakonia*, embodied neighbor-love, ought take the inter-dependent forms of service,

²⁷ Paul Oestreicher, “Incarnate Liturgy,” in *Studia Liturgica* 36 (2006): 89-90.

²⁸ . “An Epistle from the LWF Global Consultation on *Diakonia*,” 1.

public policy advocacy, community-based organizing toward the common good, public protest as evangelical defiance, and more.

Worshipping communities in positions of privilege easily form themselves into limited notions of *diakonia*. My congregation recently established a relationship with a Lutheran diocese in Tanzania. We have commissioned two youth delegations for “mission trips” (also called “service trips”) to that diocese. ~~We consider the evangelical exchange as mutual, and do service work only at the bidding and direction of our hosts.~~ While working on a Lutheran World Federation project this summer, I met a theologian from that diocese. She was most enthused about the partnership, and to my delight had met both of my sons during their respective “mission trips.” Yet, as I described the liturgy of commissioning and other preparatory work of the delegation, she cried out, “but do they know why we are poor!” Her stark and startling interruption could reshape the congregation’s liturgical and educational approach to mission. In the course of our extended conversation she and other African and Indian theologians pointed to the U.S policies, corporate practices, and neo-liberal economic norms that cause the very poverty that our youth long to alleviate. In no way, however, did our liturgy push the youth or congregation to see beyond *diakonia* as giving time and material resources and building interpersonal relationships. That is, liturgy reinforced limiting *diakonia* and neighbor-love to those terms alone, obscuring the equally crucial evangelical work of challenging structural injustice that damages the lives and land of that diocese.

A Third Dynamic:

Liturgical formation for Earth-care and justice-seeking is undermined also by the assumption that liturgy “is politically and socially innocent.”²⁹ Countless theologians of the Global South insist otherwise, noting that people associated with the centers of power and privilege [like we here gathered] tend not to see what may be crystal clear from the margins: the ways in which religious practices – including liturgical practices -- reinforce relationships of domination and subordination. They call us to ~~for a~~ ~~[IN THE WORDS OF MUSIMBI KANYORO]~~ “cultural hermeneutic”³⁰ ~~–that examines~~ examine the rhetorical and political functions of liturgical language, art, and other symbols. What attitudes, behaviors, moral norms, understandings of God and human vocation do they promote? Who benefits and who loses as a result?

As illustration, consider the people of one predominantly white congregation. They affirm racial justice as a Christian value. Never would they knowingly adopt liturgical practices that undergird white racism. Most members of this congregation assumed that liturgy is a-political. That perception was shattered when an African American member (note the perspective from the underside of racial privilege) opened others’ eyes to the tacit equation of “white” with “good” and “black” with evil in Christian language and symbol. A quick trip through the hymnal, at her suggestion, revealed a worshipping community subtly and unwittingly taught to associate “white” with pure, good, and innocent, and to link black with the opposite.

Christian liturgical traditions have promoted--usually unwittingly--the cultural norm of white supremacy.³¹ Generations of Christians, for example, have pictured Jesus and

²⁹ Morrill, *Anamneses*, 65

³⁰ Musimbi Kanyoro, T ME L see 202 pol theology

³¹ This has not always been unintentional. At times Christians knowingly have used liturgy to promote white supremacy. A stark example is the Christianity of white slave holding culture in the United States. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *The White Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 19??).

Mary as blue-eyed and light-haired. One would think that Nazareth was a village in Norway. This is but one illustration of the “accommodation” of Gospel to culture that gives liturgical symbols cultural power--and thus political power--that is hidden to those “privileged” by it.³²

~~Liturgy forms and mal-forms us morally.³³ It does so not only by our intentional use of language and symbol, but also by their even more powerful formative influence at the unconscious level. It has taken Christians located on the underside of color, gender, and class privilege to disclose “the political alignments of theological discourse,” including liturgical discourse.³⁴ Liturgical theology is called to join in that faithful task. It is key to “harness[ing] the power” of liturgical language and symbol to shape followers of Jesus capable of constructing non-exploitative ways of being human today.³⁵~~

Finally, a fourth dynamic limiting love to the interpersonal is the anthropocentrism of Christian liturgical tradition. In much Catholic and Protestant theology, while God’s revelation and even indwelling presence extend beyond the human, the scope of God’s salvific love is human and individual, not cosmic. ~~God’s saving love is for individuals and they are human individuals!~~ In like manner, human moral obligation grounded in Christ-like love is bounded by the human. The liturgical story of what we are called to be and do unfolds within the boundaries of ~~the socially constructed~~ an anthropocentric understanding of Christian love.

³² Kwok Pui-Lan, “Feminist Theology, Southern,” in Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 203.

³³ In previous work I argue that Christian ethics must attend not only to moral formation, but also to moral mal-formation. See “Moe-Lobeda,” *Christian Ethics for Earth-Honoring Christianities*, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*

³⁴ Katheryn Tanner,

³⁵ Elaine Graham, “Feminist Theology, Northern,” in *Political Theology*, ed. William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 223.

~~The lens of “species privilege” (like other lenses of “privilege”) limits the power of~~
This limits the power of liturgy to form us for mission in the world. Contrary to the biblical witness that other-than-human creatures and elements may be active servants of God, liturgical practice rarely compels us to heed seriously the witness of the mountains, or actually to be instructed by God’s *ruach* in the wind. Most of us “have no clue” of how to do so. Consequently, the wisdom and power that God offers through the elements of Earth, for the sake of living rightly on this planet, go unheeded!

The last two decades witnessed the entry of eco-theology into the mainline of theological inquiry. Eco-theology issues a clarion call to liturgical theology and practice: they must contribute to an “Eco-Reformation” of the church, the move toward Earth-honoring Christianities.

The questions entailed in that task will be both critical and constructive. How have liturgical practices helped to form our sense of dominion over the other-than-human parts of creation? What Earth-belittling cosmologies do we unwittingly promote in the art, structures, language, and locations of worship?³⁶ [Here I hold up Gordon Lathrop’s work on liturgical cosmology.] How have we ritualized an anthropocentric scope of salvation? How can liturgy expand our understanding of salvation, revelation, and incarnation beyond the human? What moves in liturgical theology and practice will teach us to hear the voice of God in the mountains or the winds? Where in the last two millennia have Christian liturgical traditions successfully portrayed “faithfulness

³⁶ For powerful discussion of liturgy’s role in forming and expressing cosmology, and cosmology’s role in shaping morality and mission, see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

to Earth” as a form of faithfulness to God?³⁷

Four Dynamics in Sum

These then are four key pieces in a puzzle: the puzzle of how it is that people formed and fed by liturgy into the “~~affections and virtues~~” consistent with life in Jesus Christ continue never-the-less on a daily basis to devastate Earth’s life-systems and to support a deadly gap between those who have too much and those who have too little for life with dignity. ~~While the reasons—comprehensibly considered—span multiple fields of human inquiry, o Our task here has been self-critical. We have looked within Christian liturgy and liturgical theology themselves for factors that truncate our capacity to build Earth-honoring and justice-making Christianities. My theses asserted that two tendencies in our construal of the liturgy-mission nexus~~

Presupposing love as primarily an individual virtue curtails the morally formative power of liturgy. We have unearthed four roots of that presupposition.

- elevating virtue ethics and bedimming the inadequacy of virtue ethics alone;
- reinforcing *diakonia* as primarily service, and obscuring the need to extend *diakonia* to include justice-making;
- ~~—domesticate our understanding of justice, and hide injustice;~~
- ignoring where liturgy reinscribes unacknowledged oppression; and
- limiting salvation and God’s messengers to the human.

These dynamics, in concert, truncate the power of Christian liturgy to shape worshiping communities in the Global North for God’s work of justice-making and Earth-healing. ~~Even while liturgy may be forming us into ways of life that express God’s love, in some senses, that very liturgy may fall short in another sense; it may~~

³⁷ Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethic* (

~~fail in leading us to embody God's love in actions that challenge two primary ways in which we counter the work of God: destroying Earth's capacity to regenerate life, and accepting economic arrangements that result in death by poverty for many.~~

[Part Four:] A Constructive Proposal

The purpose of this self-critical endeavor has been constructive. The more fully we understand causes of the gap between liturgical formation and lived public life, the more able we are to bridge that gap. This inquiry invites liturgical practice and theology to nurture the people of God for love as a political -- as well as individual—virtue in order that we may fulfill the public vocation of the church in this particular time and place ~~in the history of our young species.~~

I am convinced that Lutheran traditions hold a wealth of resources for undertaking that task. Note four [three] of them:

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- Luther's theology of neighbor-love ,
 - Luther's sense of the moral power given by Christ and Spirit, and
 - a Lutheran doctrine of sin and of human finitude, and
 - Luther's sense of Christ "abiding within" all of creation.

We begin with Luther's profound understanding of what it means to love neighbor as self.

In his eucharist writings, Luther identifies "two principles of Christian doctrine."ⁱ The first principle is that Christ gave himself that we may be saved, and we are saved by no effort of our own. The second "is love...as he gives himself for us...so we too are to give ourselves with might and main for our neighbor."ⁱⁱ Luther insists

on the inseparability of the two: they are “inscribed together as on a tablet which is always before our eyes and which we use daily.”ⁱⁱⁱ Further reading in Luther reveals that all aspects of life are to be normed by neighbor-love (*Nächstenliebe*) which includes the call to serve the well-being of those who are vulnerable and in need, especially the economically poor and the ill.^{iv}

What happens when Christian neighbor-love encounters suffering that is caused by the sin of unjust social structures? The response of Christian love in the context of slavery was not simply to bind up the wounds of the beaten slaves. It was to expose, resist, and dismantle the structural sine, the social system of slavery. Systemic injustice tends to permeate human societies, even while those of us not oppressed by it remain unaware of it. What happens if we are called to love neighbor in a society and a world broken by economic injustice such that some people are terribly impoverished while others have too much and the poverty of some is connected to the over-consumption of others?

Luther offers guidance. Neighbor-love, he teaches, as the norm for public life, has at least three dimensions:

- * the first is familiar to us: love manifest in service to neighbor, even if it may bring danger to self and family;^v

However, the second and third are daunting.

- * the second: love is to be manifest by disclosing and theologically denouncing oppression or exploitation of the vulnerable, ~~where those realities are perceived;~~^{vi} and
- * 3rd: Christians will demonstrate neighbor-love by living in ways that counter prevailing cultural norms *where those norms exploit the vulnerable or defy God in some other way.*

Loving in these forms, “we become,” Luther taught, “hands and feet of Christ, for the healing of the world.”^{vii}

The call to neighbor-love is accompanied in Lutheran theology by a conviction that we are not left on our own to find the moral power enabling justice-making neighbor love in a context that relentlessly seduces us toward serving self and “tribe” alone. Luther insists that the love by which we love neighbor is the actual love of Christ abiding within us. “In Hebrew the word ‘abide’ denotes ‘to remain’ or ‘to dwell’ in Now this is a precious dwelling place and something to glory in, that through faith in Christ and through our eating, we have Christ abiding in us with His might, power, strength, righteousness, and wisdom.”^{viii} So wrote Luther. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, following Luther theologically, develops this claim. For him, as for Luther, the finite bears the infinite, and “the finite” is all of creation. Yet, in a particular way, “the finite” is the community of the faithful.^{ix} Christ dwelling in the church “conforms” that community into “the form of Jesus Christ.” That form is God’s overflowing love incarnate now as beings-in-community who act responsibly in the world on behalf of life and against forces that thwart it.^x For Bonhoeffer, then, the love that serves the well-being of the vulnerable, even when so doing is terribly costly, is the actual love of God as Christ taking form in human community.^{xi} Through that gift, human beings are pulled *out of* life as “selves turned in on self” and *into* life “with and for” one another.^{xii} That, the gift of Christ loving in and through us enables our love—in interpersonal relations and

in political, economic, and ecological relations.

However, in the current political climate, we would be fools not to acknowledge the significant dangers inherent in religiously grounded political language and actions. All too often religious voices claim absolute truth, equate their programs or symbols with God's will, demonize the other and more. A Lutheran doctrine of sin and human finitude is invaluable in the practice of "faith active as love" in the public realm.

All human agency, avers Luther, is subject to the sin of elevating self interest over all else. Since human agency is expressed not only by individuals, but also through humanly constructed social systems, those systems also are inevitably tainted by the wily and deceptive sin of self-interest. That is, sin is not a condition only of individuals, but also of the social systems that we construct; sin takes social structural form. Herein lies essential wisdom for political religious discourse. First, no course of action, political movement, economic system, or trajectory of history may be equated with the reign of God. A distinction between it and all humanly constructed systems is mandatory. Derivatively, the conflation of Christian terms and symbols with the symbols of economic, political, or military might is invalid. Third, in confessing sin, repenting, praying for conversion from sinful ways, and being alert to the seductive power of sin, we must keep in the forefront of consciousness, not only our sin as individuals but also the sin of social structures into which our lives are intricately woven. Clearly the implications are challenging.

The paradoxical confession that humans placed by God into right relationships with God and others remain, *at the same time*, subject to sin mirrors the conviction that good and evil are intertwined in human life. In doings human, naught is purely good nor purely evil. This claim, a common emphasis in

Lutheran theology, falsifies all intimations, subtle or overt, that one “side” in social conflict represents purely good and another singularly evil. In simple terms, to demonize the enemy is unacceptable. Public discourse—religious and otherwise—that does so is invalid.^{xiii}

Lutheran traditions, share with much of classical Protestantism, the conviction that all things human are finite and fallible. Absolute truth does not reside in human beings, ideas, or institutions, including religious authorities.

Accordingly, Christian public life is a perpetual paradox; we must discern to the best of our abilities what actions best cohere with the love of God revealed in Jesus. On the other hand, we must, at the same time recognize that we cannot know with certainty and fullness the ways and will of God. Said differently, we must embody love in public life with conviction born of prayerful community-discernment, while recognizing that our knowledge and actions could be mistaken and definitely are incomplete. Thus are we compelled to refuse claims to absolute certainty about the way and will of God for public life. ~~Such elevation of human knowing is called idolatry. It defies the central Reformation insistence on human finitude and fallibility.~~ These cautions against absolute truth claims and against equating human political or military programs with God’s will are utterly invaluable for the exercise of religious conviction in public life in today’s world.

The call to equip believers for love as a political virtue presents splendid challenges to liturgical practice and theology. I have claimed however that Christian neighbor love has ecological dimensions as well as political. Here we turn to Luther’s insistence that God abides within the *entire* creation, not only within its human creatures. Hear Luther: “Nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.” “God . . . exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and

above all and outside all created things.” “[E]verything is full of Christ through and through” “[A]ll creatures are . . . permeable and present to [Christ].” “Christ . . . fills all things Christ is around us and in us in all places [H]e is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there” [ENDQUOTES] While, for Luther, the scope of redemption and of the theo-ethical universe is the human—and these are fault lines with grave consequences—the scope of God’s blessed creaturehood *in whom God dwells* is cosmic.

Now, hold this claim together with another. The work of Christ—*wherever* Christ is—is to create, save, and sustain. Held in one breath, these two faith affirmations pose extraordinary questions. If the saving presence of Christ abides within all created things, then, are we not to heed Christ’s presence there, as we discern what it means to live Christ’s love into the world? Might our proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed reach human hearts yet closed to it, if we learn to heed to voice of God in the the winds (Ps. 104:4) and waters (Ps. 148), as the Psalmist implores?

In our practice of faith active in love, and in our liturgy that feeds and bathes is for that work, how will this church venture into the uncharted terrain of hearing the Word of God spoken through other-kind? Thank God, we are blessed already with clues. For in the liturgy, by our own claim, we “join in the hymn of all creation.” TO ME: SINGER....!

In Closing

The crisis of Christian faith today is not a crisis of belief; it is the failure to get up and walk. Today, humanity faces a two-fold moral crisis never before known: We are threatening Earth’s life systems, while building a morally

insufferable gap between the rich and the impoverished. The pathos of our situation stuns. Though we long to heed God’s call to love, we--the few who consume most of Earth’s goods--are complicit in ecocide and economic brutality, not by intent or will, but by virtue of the social structures that shape our lives. Under our weight, all of “creation groans.....” We are at a turning point. “If trends continue we will not.”³⁸ In this context, the public vocation of the church in the 21st century includes offering the gifts of Christian traditions to the pan-human and interfaith task of building ecologically sustainable and socially just ways of living on planet Earth.

The church’s claim that Christian liturgy forms and empowers believing communities to participate in God’s work suggests that liturgical practice would shape and nurture us for that work. ~~justice-making, Earth-honoring~~ In contrast however, the church of the Global North, tends to comply with ways of life that accumulate and consume at the expense of Earth’s life-systems and of many who are impoverished. We began by asking: “How can this be?” We uncovered ways in which liturgical theology and practice contribute to this gap by construing love as primarily an interpersonal virtue.

Neighbor-love—the primary moral norm for Christian life—encompasses work to shape the terms of our life on Earth along the lines of justice, compassion, and Earth’s health. This is the primary political-ecological obligation inherent in being created, called, and sent by God in Christ and Spirit to be the body of God’s love on Earth. ~~Neighbor-love becomes a political-ecological virtue, as well as a private virtue.~~ As we have just glimpsed, Lutheran liturgical theology and practice, drawing on Luther’s wisdom, are fertile soil for nurturing neighbor-love as a political-ecological virtue.

³⁸Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 19??), 10.

ⁱ “The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against Fanatics.”

ⁱⁱ Luther also refers to these as Paul’s two teachings. See Luther in Lenker 8: 278.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther, “The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against Fanatics,” in *Luther’s Works* 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961).

^{iv} See for example “Trade and Usury” and “On Whether a Christian May Flee the Deadly Plague,” which illustrates implications of neighbor love for economic life and for response to the ill. Resources discussing the former include the introductory essay to “Trade and Usury” in Luther’s works; Carter Lindberg in *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*; Ulrich Duchrow in *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*; and Moe-Lobeda in *Healing a Broken World*.

^v See, for example, Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” *LW* 43:115–38.

^{vi} Luther’s perceptions of injustice were limited by a number of contextual factors including: 1) his anti-Semitic, Constantinian, and patriarchal worldview; 2) his conflating the orders of society with the orders of creation; and 3) the nonexistence, in the pre-modern conceptual world, of the concept of organized social structural change. These factors—among others—led Luther to assume a divinely ordained social hierarchy and to align himself with the political powers that enforced it and embraced the new theology. Thus, in some arenas, Luther was aligned with injustice which he failed to challenge, as seen most clearly in his demonizing of Jewish people, and his denunciation of the peasant uprising and of the “radical” reformers.

^{vii} “An Epistle from the LWF Global Consultation on *Diakonia*,” 1. For further discussion of Luther’s sense of the power for neighbor-love given by God in the “second kind of righteousness” and in the eucharist, see Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), ch. 4 and 5.

^{viii} Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of John,” *LW* 23:146.

^{ix} “The Church is nothing but a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form.” The church is “the place where Jesus Christ’s taking form is proclaimed and accomplished.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 85, 89. “...the church is Christ existing as community.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, in Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 57.

^x For elaboration of “the form of Christ taking form in us” or “conformation with the form of Christ” in Bonhoeffer, see his *Ethics*, 81-86. Throughout Bonhoeffer’s work, the process of “conformation with the form of Christ” entails obedience to the will of God and responsibility in the world. In the last year of his life (perhaps even from the time just before his imprisonment when “Ten Years After” — located in *Letters and Papers*—and the last “approach” in *Ethics* were written), the nature of “conformation with the form of Christ” develops from active proclamation to a form of faithfulness in a season of “silence.” The language of “Christ dwelling in” is present also in Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship* (303), although that work is not our primary source here.

^{xi} “The relation between the divine love and human love is wrongly understood if we say that the divine love [is]...solely for the purpose of setting human love in motion....On the contrary...the love with which [humans] love God and neighbor is the love of God and no other...there is no love which is free or independent from the love of God” (*Ethics*, 55-56).

^{xii} Here Bonhoeffer is deeply grounded in Luther, especially in his eucharistic theology.

^{xiii} The public rhetoric of demonization scapegoats an enemy in order to justify the consolidation of community; it is a form of self-justification. See: Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) Chapter 6.

^{xiv} Martin Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This is My Body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics,” *LW* 37:58.

^{xiv} Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” in Lull, 397.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 387.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 386.

^{xiv}. Luther, “The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics,” 321.

^{xiv}. As Mary Solberg points out in her *Compelling Knowledge*, “[F]or Luther . . . the proper subject of theology is the divine-human relationship . . .” (98).

^{xiv}. See Larry Rasmussen with Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “The Reform Dynamic,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen Bloomquist and John Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).