



# Word and Sacrament: The Spirit's Gifts for a Divided World

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In 2005, Stephen Colbert coined the term “truthiness” to denote statements that were not independently verifiable but were called “truth” by their speakers and that could persuade many who heard them. In 2006, Merriam-Webster’s dictionary readers chose truthiness as the word of the year. We live in a world where truthiness is no longer flagged by Microsoft Word spellcheck.

“Truth” as a concept upon which reasonable people can agree belongs to our culture’s past, as does agreement on how reason may be identified. Americans have an increasingly difficult time agreeing on an analysis of our problems and prospects and so experience alienation from each other. Such alienation—that feeling that our conversation partner must be from a different planet!—is present in our

*Christian leadership is inexorably intertwined with the congregation of faith gathered around God’s proclamation of Word and Sacrament. This shapes the imagination of its hearers, and provides the entry into world where God’s promise of reconciliation and grace enliven and bless God’s people and all of creation.*

families, our congregations, and even within our political parties, not to mention across them.

The single observation about persistent division and distrust is not all one can say about the future, but it is sufficient to ground what follows. In this essay, I argue that a Christian community's sustained attention to speaking and hearing the Word and sharing the Sacraments is good news and worthy work among people whose interactions are otherwise often characterized by misunderstanding and fear. To present and future ministers of Word and Sacrament in American Christianity, I say, Take heart! The central things of your work offer a distinct and life-giving alternative to the daily bread of quarrels, delusions, and lies.

### WORD-SHAPED IMAGINATION

My generation studied with seminary professors who wanted us to know that words do things. Especially the promising word does things. A trustworthy promise changes attitudes and actions in the present, even as it creates an imagination for a particular future. Hope, fear, courageous action, a sense of peace amidst anxiety: all of these may be inspired by a promise that its hearers trust.<sup>1</sup> After I hear that my flight will be delayed by thirty minutes, I am free to walk one more lap around the concourse. Without that word, my world shrinks to the size of the gate area where I remain stuck as the original flight time approaches and then fades into the past. Will we ever get out of here? A promise can change things.

A story can change things too. My teachers were often not as keen on this second way of speaking about the power of the Word. They worried that any talk of "the biblical story" would reduce the complex nature of the Bible and its witness beyond recognition. How much bias could hide behind that definite article before "biblical story!" As if there were one biblical story! Moreover, the Word is not reducible to the Bible. Christ is the Word. The proclamation of Christ from a preacher to an assembly is the Word. A Word-shaped imagination is surely formed by more than the Bible. Finally, my teachers were concerned that speaking of "the biblical story" would put too much

<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Lischer, "Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise," *Word & World* 8, no. 1 (1988): 66–79.

emphasis on plot or theme, and not enough on character, especially the character of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament and the character of God throughout the Bible.

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I have adopted and passed along the concerns I learned from respected teachers and colleagues. Even so, a story *can* change things, most notably the imagination of those who hear it. Preaching situates hearers inside a biblical story that the sermon proclaims. In the sermon, the preacher announces to hearers, "The truth of your life is here, within the story of creation, redemption, and the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ."

Those whose imagination is shaped by proclamation of the Word will regard: (1) the natural world as good, and humanity as both a part of that good creation and entrusted with its care; (2) humanity as often seduced into unholy alliances and actions whose end is destruction and from which we cannot extricate ourselves; (3) Jesus of Nazareth as embodying God's redemption of humankind and accomplishing that redemption by means of his self-giving love, his crucifixion, and his resurrection from the dead; (4) the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a story whose end, though yet to come, is nonetheless visible before it arrives in its fullness. The Spirit uses the proclamation of the Word to shape such an imagination. With it, hearers of the Word know a *real world* different from the suspicion, division, and violence into which current cultural rhetoric urges us.

## CREATION AND ITS STEWARDSHIP

The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 give pride of place to human beings, and at the same time, draw us to scale, that is, as a smaller part of creation than we often think. We do not own the place. In Genesis, humans are part of a much bigger project on the Creator's part. The natural world is filled with an abundance of good things. Human beings are part of it, and they are assigned stewardship toward it, and still, they are dwarfed by its grandeur. Psalm 8 is a compact and poetic statement of our place in things. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:1).

A generation of biblical scholarship has taught us that the language of stewardship in Genesis does not mean what many Christians believed and taught for many years. Stewardship is not a synonym for the few to expand their influence over the many in the name of God, extracting anything of value from the earth, the sea, and all living creatures for their own use. Rather, stewards bear responsibility for the flourishing of that over which they are placed.

A Word-shaped imagination sees human meaning and purpose in terms of a calling to care for that which has been entrusted to us. With such an imagination, Christians regard the natural world, as well as other human beings, as valuable in themselves, apart from what use to which they may be put. We see the flourishing of others as God-ordained and our flourishing as tied to theirs. We get to this vision, not by educational sermons and prayers of intercession about "the environment," but rather by preaching that draws us to scale, just as the creation story itself does; that acknowledges our capacity for self-deception, especially about our own generosity and that offers a vision of abundant life together.

People of Word-shaped imagination may disagree on how best to bear the responsibility of stewardship. We will have to talk with each other on this point. Conversation around the specifics of embodying the shared value and calling of stewardship will always be part of enacting it. Still, the story within which we find ourselves keeps drawing us back to an awareness of our identity and calling as stewards of the earth and God's provision of what we and the rest of creation need to thrive. Starting with and circling back to this shared sense of call gives people who disagree a place from which to recognize each other as siblings and coworkers, rather than monsters, enemies, or fools.

## THE LURE OF UNHOLY ALLIANCES

We do not need biblical stories to notice that human beings have a capacity for great harm. Yet an imagination shaped by biblical preaching will have particular content for this insight. The story of Cain and Abel traces the path from envy to murder. The story of the Golden Calf shows readers how fear leads to idolatry. The stories of the kings of Israel and Judah often bring into focus another embodiment of fear, namely looking for security in all the wrong places. Amos offers vivid descriptions of greed, as when the rich sell the poor for a pair of sandals. The book of Proverbs catalogs self-involvement on a small scale and highlights its outsized dangers. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul laments how something bigger than himself (Sin) lives in him and can pull the strings of his marionette self.

With the help of the biblical text, the preacher says to hearers, "Us too." The Word's truth about us includes the ease and persistence with which humans turn from life. We choose, wander into, or are simply caught up in destruction. Collectively and individually, we make a mess of things.

Preachers, like anyone trying to change someone's behavior, sometimes mistakenly act as if knowledge of the mess is power over it. If knowledge were power, my preacher could tell me that late-stage American capitalism is not trustworthy. It does not have my best interests at heart, or my neighbor's, or the planet's. With this information, I would be able to recognize the folly of identifying safety and comfort with my purchasing power, and I could stop amassing funds for my own safe and comfortable long-term care, American style. If knowledge were power, I could preach a sermon in which I document the self-serving and manipulative actions of a particular public figure. My argument would be sound. On the basis of it, that figure's supporters would recognize his corruption and abandon their loyalties.

One of the most treacherous things about the human capacity for unholy alliances is that, in this game, knowledge is not power. This, too, is part of the story in which we find ourselves. Fearfully and wonderfully made, we are simultaneously tangled up in something that means to destroy us and from which we cannot escape. That thing is not socialism or capitalism, or the deep state, or unsecured national borders and the people who walk across them. It is more generalized and foundational than any of those things. Scripture calls it sin and

tells its story in many ways, the first of which is the serpent's lie: "You will not die... You will be like God."

Preachers of the Word know what pundits and other explainers do not. The tangle has hold of us, too. In 2017, one of my preachers said, "To pray for Donald Trump, I needed to find a way that he and I are alike, and it didn't take me long. Just like Trump, I think people who disagree with me are stupid." To the reality of societal division, preachers of the Word bring the news that the enemy is not only around us but also within.

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## JESUS OF NAZARETH, CRUCIFIED AND RISEN

Jesus was not an idea, and he should not be reduced to one. Jesus ought not to be reduced even the ideas his life exemplified, ideas like self-giving love, liberation, forgiveness, justice, union with the divine, and the resurrection of the dead. When Jesus of Nazareth is the subject of our preaching, we are referring to a particular human being from a particular place and time. He was a Jew, a traveling teacher and healer, a reader of the Hebrew scriptures, a performance artist in the Jewish temple, and someone executed by the foreign government occupying his homeland. As the Apostles' Creed puts it, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." At the center of the story shaping the Christian imagination is one of the world's "little people" who did and said amazing things, gathered a following, and then was fairly easily squashed by an occupying power. To steward the Word is to proclaim this one, Jesus of Nazareth, a crucified Jewish messiah.

The Word that Christians steward also includes the news that this crucified messiah has been raised from the dead. In New Testament accounts of the resurrection, the “before” and “after” pictures of Jesus have enough similarities to make him recognizable to his friends. He eats. He walks. He breathes and speaks. He catches fish, broils them and invites his friends to breakfast. He exists in a body that is scarred from the crucifixion. The risen Jesus is like the Jesus who was crucified, and he is different, perhaps most dramatically because he is alive after having been dead. Also, he is able to appear in locked rooms without coming through the door, and sometimes, as when Saul is traveling to Damascus in Acts 9, he can be heard but not seen. There is some mystery in this part of the story. We do well here to recall here that mystery “is not the absence of meaning, but the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend.”<sup>2</sup>

When New Testament writers draw out the implications of Jesus for a world created good yet snarled in sin, they point to God working in this crucified messiah to free individuals and the whole creation from the power of sin. As the apostle Paul described it, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

So much more can and must be said about Jesus by those who are given the task of proclaiming the Word! Here I have focused on his being (1) a particular human, (2) crucified as a Jewish messiah, (3) raised from the dead, and (4) reconciling the creation to God. I believe one must say at least this about Jesus to be telling the story within which Christians understand our lives to make sense and hold hope.

I have focused my comments about Jesus in this way also because the first step of negotiating conflict is for the parties to recognize common ground. Together adversaries ask, what are our shared interests? What do we agree on? In the conflicted church board, or congregation, can we agree that Jesus was a human being, born in a particular time and place? Can we agree that he was crucified? Can we agree that he was raised? Can we agree that God was at work in him, for good? Even if we find one or more of these propositions puzzling in its details, can we agree to start here?

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 204.

The search for agreement on the broadest brushstrokes of a story may sound beside the point to preachers who feel urgently called to bring the sins of society into the light. “Who has time to talk about Jesus as a human being when my people don’t even know what white privilege is?” You may regard it as irrelevant to your time and place to begin with shared elements of a story, which, when attended together, bring to light shared values and shared interests.

I am not saying that we stop at what we can all agree on. I am saying that we start there. From that place of agreement, we trace with each other the steps we took that have landed us in the disagreement that is splitting us apart. This conversation may reveal steps we want to reconsider, or new paths we could not see before. This practice will take some time, as relationships always do. It holds more promise, though, for a witness to wholeness in a broken world than does hungering down with like-minded people and asking, “What’s this world coming to?”

At this point, I have made no claims about what can be argued from these points of agreement. I have not said that the Jewishness of Jesus compels Christians to repent of anti-Jewish words and actions across the millennia and in our own time. I have not said that Jesus’ refusal to take up arms against his enemies pronounces judgment against our individual and communal eagerness to respond to perceived threats with crushing violence. I have not said that the visible scars of the risen Jesus reveal something about the vulnerability of God. Proclaimers of the Word will tell the story *and* draw out its implications. Of course we will! People who disagree on the implications can find a way through disagreement by beginning with points of agreement and tethering the next things each says to those points of agreement.

## THE PROMISED END

Our lives unfold within a story of promise. The story announces God’s promised future before it arrives. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). The writer of 1 John says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (3:1a). The reading continues, “what



we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (3:2b). Paul differentiates the present from the future by saying, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Bible and the church's creeds tell a story whose conclusion is trustworthy even as it is also as yet unfulfilled.

In a culture built on violent and dismissive disagreement, the future of our story is another place Christians can look for help bearing witness to God's reconciliation of all things to God's self. In "The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care," Richard Lischer maintains that the Sermon can be lived only by the community that understands its eschatological character.

Our only hope of living as the community of the Sermon is to acknowledge that we do not retaliate, hate, curse, lust, divorce, swear, brag, preen, worry, or backbite because it is not in the nature of our God or our destination that we should be such people. When we as individuals fail in these instances, we do not snatch up cheap forgiveness, but we do remember that the *ekklesia* is larger than the sum of our individual failures and that it is pointed in a direction that will carry us away from them.<sup>3</sup>

Questions for the fractured, anxious congregation include, "What *is* in the nature of our destination?" What has God promised in this week's text, or in other parts of the biblical witness, and how can this outpost of God's people bear witness to that destination ahead of time? Like the question, "On what do we agree?" questions that call forth expressions of our hope in Christ give ministers of Word and Sacrament a place besides headlines and op-eds to begin conversation. Given all that God has promised we will be, what now?

## THE SACRAMENTS

Just as God's Spirit shapes the imagination of God's people through the proclamation of the Word, so also, in the administration of the sacraments, the Spirit is at work creating and sustaining Christian identity and community, and calling that community beyond

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Lischer, "The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care," *Interpretation* 41, no. 2 (1987): 163.

itself toward the neighbor and the world God loves. As Christians seek to live together in a quarrelsome culture and bear witness to the creative and redeeming work of God in Christ, shared identity, community and vocation are also places to start.

## IDENTITY

*The Book of Common Prayer* includes this prayer over those who are about to receive baptism: “Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory.”<sup>4</sup> For the baptized, the death of Jesus Christ is our death. The power of his resurrection animates our life. The apostle Paul describes the identity of the baptized when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:19–20).

Our identity in Christ is also proclaimed, embodied, and renewed in the Sacrament of the Altar. Gordon Lathrop refers to “the deep anchor of the sacraments in the single sacrament of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> “Both cup and baptism are to be full of the cross,” he writes, “and they belong together.”<sup>6</sup>

Compare the identity of one baptized into Christ, and receiving the body and blood of Christ in their own body, with the understanding of identity that a church member declares: “Bishop, I’m a Christian, but I’m an American first.” When I heard this quote from my own bishop, I experienced the horror that the bishop meant to convey with it, and then immediately my conscience offered the following observation: “Given how much you like money and spending it, maybe you are a Christian, but a consumer first.”

Multiple sources of identity intersect around us and within. The American identity, the consumer identity, and all other elements of self-understanding are relativized by the news that we have died, and

<sup>4</sup> Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (Place of publication not identified: Seabury, 1979), 306.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Lathrop, “Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord,” in *Table and Font: Who is Welcome? Final Report and Resources 2013-2015* (Chicago: Division for Worship, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2015), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Lathrop, “Welcome to Life in Christ,” 61.

our life is hid with Christ in God. Even when we forget it, our life is hid with Christ in God. When we do forget it, ministers of Word and Sacrament remind us.

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## COMMUNITY

In their worship, sacramental traditions offer a regular visual of the communal nature of Christianity. It is our way of saying that identity with Christ happens in community. The congregation at worship participates in baptism, confessing the faith in which we baptize. And even when Communion is privately offered, our liturgy places the communicant in the space of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, not to mention the assembly that has sent the minister and the elements to the one who cannot join its worship in real time.

To those whose expression of Christianity is tied up with corporate worship, the company in which the sacraments are administered may not seem newsworthy. Yet other forms of American Christianity emphasize the personal relationship someone has with God or Christ to the exclusion of belonging in community. The “you” is always singular in such traditions. The sacraments bear witness to a different understanding of the work of God, and a different understanding of the work of Christians, in the world. As disappointing and difficult as life in community can be, the Spirit gives us to each other and calls us to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2, RSV).

## VOCATION

The sanctuary of Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis was designed so that light from its windows illuminates the path of communicants as they are walking toward the Eucharist, and when they are leaving the table, light draws their gaze out of the same windows and into the neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> We come to the table, and there we are strengthened for our vocation in the world. The calling of those united with Christ in Baptism and Holy Communion is Christ's calling: like Jesus, we go into a world loved by God. Again, Christians of good will must talk to one another about the precise contours of that call in any particular time and place, and we may disagree in ways that cannot be reconciled. One thinks of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15, parting company as the result of a sharp and irreconcilable disagreement. Still, we begin together, and we begin aware that our place is in the neighborhood, for good.

## WORD AND SACRAMENT AS THE CHURCH'S MISSION

In a collection of his writings published in 1981, Joseph Sittler included an essay titled, "The Maceration of the Minister."<sup>8</sup> He writes of the busy pastor, occupied with blueprints, "negotiations between the parish, the bank, and the Board of Missions; samples of asphalt tile; and a plumber's estimate."<sup>9</sup> Today's pastor, Sittler says, is being chopped into pieces by many concerns.

The examples of what occupies Sittler's macerated minister are so dated as to inspire nostalgia for that phenomenon of the past known as the congregational building program. Yet the concern for the chewed-up minister remains timely. Sittler goes on, "When one wonders what holds this pastor together, what allows equal enthusiasm for practical decisions and pastoral and proclamatory function, one learns that if he or she is held together at all, it is by the public role of responsibility for the external advancement of the congregation."<sup>10</sup> Replace

<sup>7</sup> Photos of the sanctuary taken from both directions are at <https://savingplaces.org/stories/photo-essay-inside-a-saarinen-designed-church-in-minneapolis>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, eds. Robert M. Herhold and Linda Marie Delloff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 57–68.

<sup>9</sup> Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, 58.

“responsibility for the external advancement of the congregation” with “responsibility for keeping the doors open” and we have arrived in 2024.

Leaders of the future church have far more meaningful and important work than “keeping the doors open.” As the church and its leaders proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments, an alternative to alienation, suspicion, and hate comes into view. That alternative is Christ. As Word and Sacrament remain central to the church’s reason for being, and central to the work of pastors, those who hear the Word and receive the Sacraments will recognize the story of God’s creative and redeeming work as the story of our lives and the call on our lives. In a sea of false impressions, isolation, and fear, we will receive—and offer to others—abundant life together. ☩

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