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Power and Weakness

Liturgy, Justice, and the World

Susan A. Ross

In June of 1982, I had just finished my dissertation and was presenting my first conference paper at the College Theology Society's annual convention. Based on my dissertation, it was on the relationship between sacramental theologies of revelation and theological aesthetics. When I came into the classroom where the session was, Bernard Cooke was sitting in the front row. With fear and trembling, I presented my paper in front of the most significant sacramental theologian in the US, someone whose work had been so important in my own theological development. During the Q and A, Bernard pressed me on my use of von Balthasar, making sure I knew that Balthasar was someone to be very careful with. I assured him that I was well aware of that, and I told him that Balthasar was in my dissertation because my adviser, David Tracy, insisted that if I were dealing with theological aesthetics, I could not ignore his work. Bernard became a mentor and supporter of my own scholarship and a wonderful colleague; I later came to know him much better through a common project we were both involved in during the mid-90s. We are all in his debt, especially for the theme of this convention.

As I prepared this essay, I felt something of the same trepidation I felt 34 years ago, since I was asked to speak on a topic that is related to but also distinct from the field where I feel more comfortable—that is to say that liturgical theology is a somewhat different field than sacramental theology. I came to sacramental theology through systematic theology, and I studied theology and ethics

at a school dominated by Protestant theologians (although there were also a few Catholics). My hope, though, is that my 60-plus years of experiences of liturgy, my theological and personal reflections, and the contributions of a number of wise philosophers and theologians can help inform this lecture. In other words, I begin from something of a position of weakness, a theme that I will play variations on in our reflections on power and liturgy today.

My formal remarks today will tell another story, and I will use this story to tease out some of the complex issues that surround discussions of liturgy and power. Putting these two terms side by side raises a number of intriguing and difficult questions. I will by no means be able to answer all of these, but I hope to formulate issues in such a way that we can move beyond some of the obstacles that have closed off further discussion.

So, the story: over twenty years ago, for a time my husband and I regularly worshiped at a Lutheran congregation in the South Loop of Chicago, where we had celebrated our marriage. The reasons for our being there are a whole other story, having to do with my discontent with the Catholic Church, my husband's canonical status, and the relationships that I had developed with the pastor and the community. This Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) parish was a "Reconciled in Christ" congregation, meaning that it openly welcomed LGBTQ people at a time when such ecclesial acceptance was far less prevalent than today.¹ Two members of the church, a gay couple who were both ordained Lutheran pastors, were active members, with one being the music director and the other often preaching and presiding at Eucharist. They helped me to greatly appreciate the Lutheran approach to liturgy. They were also good friends of ours. A few weeks before the incident I will relate, David had received the expected news that because of his open committed relationship with Jonathan, he was to be dropped from the ELCA clergy roster. The clergy roster includes a variety of pastoral roles; being dropped from the roster means that one no longer can serve the church in an official capacity.

On this particular Sunday, David presided and preached, and at the end of the liturgy, he announced that, because of the ELCA's action, he would respond by literally divesting himself of his clerical robes and status. He then proceeded to take off, piece by piece, his stole, his alb, his cross, and his clerical collar and shirt.

As he took off these symbols of his pastoral status, he spoke of what they meant to him and his deep grief over this situation. He would no longer be able to do what he felt in his heart that he had been called by God to do. He then stood in front of us in his white undershirt and pants, stripped of his clerical robes as the church had stripped him of his status. He was literally defrocked. His was an act of submission, of weakness in the face of institutional power. And yet it was also a powerful gesture, one that expressed his confidence and indeed his pride in his identity and his commitment to and love for Jonathan, a pride that, one could say, was supported in some ways by the world and not the institutional church. In a sense, one might say that worldly and churchly power conflicted in his literal and symbolic defrocking.

Over the last year or so, as I have thought about this lecture and what I might say, this scene came back to me again and again. It would not let me go. It seemed to express to me so many related issues: the power of an institution, the power of a dramatic act, the power of an oppressed minority in speaking truth, the power of liturgy. While David was making his powerlessness as a gay Lutheran pastor the center of his action, at the same time there was an immense power to this action which expressed the power of weakness, but also the power of his identity as a gay man, an identity he refused to hide.

What I would like to do in this essay is, first, to explore the relationship of power and weakness by drawing on the thought of some recent philosophers and theologians who have embraced the idea of weakness, particularly divine weakness. What are we to make of a “weak” God? How does this affect the way we worship and how we as Christians make our way in the world? How do the different roles of power and weakness in the church and in the world interact?

Second, I want to consider the ambiguity and ambivalence of weakness in relation to liturgy. How can divine weakness provide a model for how the church might think about how it exerts power, especially liturgical and sacramental power, in relation to the world? How does weakness also serve negatively to disempower people, both lay people in relation to clerics and those on the margins of society, and to work against the church having an impact on the world? I want to argue that liturgy can and should serve as a counter-narrative to other narratives of naked power

and force in the world and to the pain and suffering that challenge our lives in the world. Yet the church is, of course, not without its own narratives of power and the world is not without its own powerful narratives of weakness.

Third, I will consider how we might use power and weakness in liturgy so as to work toward justice in the world. In all of this, I offer not so much a complete and coherent answer to questions of the liturgy's relationship to the (powers of) the world, but rather a series of observations and interruptions. In other words, I offer no powerful metanarrative, but rather fragments of a possibly weak response, but also a response informed by the strength of weakness in relation to structures of power.

Power and Weakness

It is a truism to say that traditional Christian belief has emphasized God's power. We believe in God, "the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth." Liturgical language in particular is filled with the language of God's power, one might say particularly God's patriarchal power, since the language of Almighty Father is so well established in liturgy and prayer and so strongly defended. One need only to read the names of God in the order of the Mass to see how often our prayers are addressed to God almighty, Lord God of all, Lord God of hosts. This language of God's almighty power is not accidental and its effects on the imagination are not insignificant. I am sure that many of us here can vouch for shocked and dismayed student reactions when we propose alternative language for God not just in theology but also, perhaps especially, in liturgical prayer. So much seems to depend on God's almighty power, a point to which I will return later.

Yet as a number of theologians and philosophers have argued, especially in these later postmodern times, the God of Jesus Christ hardly fills the role of a powerful potentate. John Caputo, for example, discusses this extensively in his book *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*.² God, Caputo argues, is a "weak force," who "provides a provocation to the world that is otherwise than power."³ We should speak of God, Caputo argues, not as a name, but as an event—not "an essence unfolding, but a promise to be kept, a call or a solicitation to be responded to, a prayer to be answered, a hope to be fulfilled."⁴ Caputo's book is filled

with challenges to the various images of God's power as well as challenges to theological power, which he frequently and pejoratively describes as "rouged and powdered."⁵ I would note that the gendered implications of this phrase are worth a paper on its own, obviously a play on theology as the "queen of the sciences."

Throughout *The Weakness of God*, Caputo uses the language of weakness to provoke and disrupt but also to invite and cajole, to attract and move the hearer. His challenge to traditional conceptions of creation *ex nihilo*, drawing on the work of Catherine Keller, argues that what God does in creation is to bring goodness to what is already there, coaxing it out of matter, rather than powerfully willing it to be. He juxtaposes St. Paul and Jacques Derrida (whom he calls "Saints Paul and Jacques"⁶) to underscore his point that the ontotheological focus on God's powerful being utterly misses the point of the Christian Gospel, misrepresenting who God is in the New Testament and in the world today. God's real power lies precisely in God's "weakness," a "power" that works not by force but by attraction and persuasion. Throughout the book, he also relies on narratives of Jesus's "weak power" as expressed in the parables and on Paul's language of scandal to make his case that omnipotence has little place in the biblical understanding of God. There are also connections here with theological aesthetics, a point I will return to later in this paper.

Caputo is not the only contemporary thinker to challenge the language of divine power: Richard Kearney, Gianni Vattimo, and Sarah Coakley, among others, also eschew the traditional language of divine omnipotence, might, and strength and argue that the God of the Christian tradition is a reality best spoken of and related to as humble, a "still, small voice," the stranger who knocks at our door. Kearney, for example, ". . . notes that the concept of God as absolute Monarch of the universe stems from a literalist reading of the Bible along with unfortunate misapplications of a metaphysics of causal omnipotence and self-sufficiency."⁷ Coakley writes that, in contemplation, one "'practices' the 'presence of God'—the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone 'obliterates.'"⁸ In writing of Jesus's kenosis, for example, Coakley argues against some feminist interpretations that see Jesus as "giving up" a divine power that is assumed that he had and could just as easily have used—and thus he serves as a kind of role model especially for men who need to learn to give

up their power. She suggests that there is in fact no plethora of "divine power" that is already there, that Jesus is willingly and deliberately giving up. This is not the God of Jesus Christ—this kind of power isn't even there to begin with and then given up; rather, who God is, is not the almighty and omniscient Lord of All, smiting his enemies and able to effect anything he wills.

When it comes to considering power in the world today, we are in a very interesting time, at least politically, if not in other areas. When policies of diplomacy, strategy, and negotiation are pilloried as those of "weak losers," when brute annihilating force is named as the one and only realistic response to terrorism, when one must demonstrate one's willingness, indeed, one's commitment and desire to use force in order to demonstrate one's patriotism, it is more than clear that any understanding of "weak power" is going to be highly countercultural, to say the least. And I am not so sure that our world today is really so very different from the world of the past, or even the world of a thousand or two thousand years ago. Yes, we have made enormous strides in recognizing the humanity of many people heretofore considered subhuman; yes, there is less poverty, greater access to education; yes, fewer of us starve to death or die of treatable infections. Ideas of equality foreign to biblical and churchly circles have challenged the prevailing narratives of power, perhaps especially the powers of sex, race, and gender. In terms of how military and political power are used, however, we may be more sophisticated, but I am not sure at all whether we human beings are actually less prone to violence and abuses of power than we were in the past. To what extent the human condition and the will-to-power have changed or evolved over the centuries is yet another question I will leave open; I simply acknowledge here its reality and its challenges, especially to a conception of sacramental and liturgical life that relies, to some extent, on weakness.

If we are to take seriously the weak God of these thinkers, how does this speak to liturgy and how can this understanding of a weak God address these issues of power, both in the church and in the world around us? One of the main tasks of liturgy, as I understand it, is to provide us with an alternate narrative, another way of being in the world, than the excesses of worldly and ecclesiastical power and that the least powerful among us are the ones who can best tell this story. The Christian story is not one of good overcoming evil by force, but rather of the one dying in

humiliation and defeat, and in that defeat finding new life; indeed, it is a narrative of reversals where the last are first, the prodigal son is rewarded with a feast, and the most cowardly disciple is given the highest authority. I also find it helpful to remember, as any number of liberation theologians have observed, that Jesus himself lacked clerical power; he was a layman in a movement that challenged the powers of the institutions of his day. His own "weak power" proved threatening enough to cause his death.

The question of the purpose of liturgy has a number of possible answers. We can call it "the joining of heaven and earth," as the Orthodox tradition holds; the reception of the Word and our expression of praise and thanks to God; the place where we receive grace through the Sacrament. One simple definition might be: food for the journey, sacred food for the sacred journey, a journey that proposes a different way of navigating in the world. Liturgy is the work of the people, the means by which we enact and signify God's work for the world.⁹ We need to be nourished in mind and body, head and heart, with and for each other, and to do this work we cannot do this alone nor can we do this without material reality. So liturgy's role is to call us to life with God in this world so that we can transform it; how liturgy uses material reality will say a great deal about its understanding of power. Since we are not angels, we are incarnate human beings, we come to learn and know through our senses, our imaginations, our feelings, and our ideas. I have always been fond of Thomas Aquinas's discussion of the need for sacraments, and thus, for liturgy. I quote him here, making his own language inclusive:

It follows, therefore, that through the institution of the sacraments [human beings], consistently with [our] nature, [are] instructed through sensible things; [we are] humbled, through confessing that [we are] subject to corporeal things, seeing that [we] receive assistance through them: and [we are] even preserved from bodily hurt, by the healthy exercise of the sacraments.¹⁰

While Thomas is assuming a hierarchical universe in which the body's weakness is in some ways an obstacle to be overcome, he is also arguing that this precise weakness is a means—in fact, our only means—of expressing our relationships with ourselves, others,

the world, and God. There is a wonderful passage in the *Summa* where he reflects on the relationship between soul and body and, somewhat wistfully (I think), observes that after death, the soul, separated from the body before the final resurrection, “would wish the body to attain to its share.”¹¹ And we should especially remember that God’s own self-expression to us comes in bodily form.

Richard Kearney’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas is also helpful here: Merleau-Ponty, Kearney notes, “offers an intriguing phenomenological interpretation of Eucharistic embodiment as recovery of the divine within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world’s body, becoming a God beneath us rather than a God beyond us.”¹²

The weakness that is our dependence on corporeal things is in fact also our strength and power but not in any traditional sense of “power over.” The kind of “attractive power” described by Caputo, Kearney, and Coakley is a power that works by persuasion rather than coercion, and that is also, I would argue, an important avenue to justice. How we use these powers is the key question. Justice is not something that can simply be imposed on someone or a group; the idea of a genuine justice has to come from within. This is, I would argue, where beauty and justice intersect. Like weak power, beauty works by attraction and persuasion, by offering a vision, an alternate reality to which the person is drawn.¹³

To return to the act of submission of my friend David: his action was to submit to the powers of his institutional church which, in effect, had used this power to force him out of office. But at the same time, he demonstrated, through a dramatic and symbolic act of submission, the very power of making even more visible the institution’s priorities. Can we see the face of Christ in a gay man? To borrow an idea from Edward Schillebeeckx, this “negative contrast experience” provided a way to make even more visible the injustices of church polity which, as we now know, were eventually changed.¹⁴ It was the “weak power” of this action, and many others like it, that eventually changed the way the ELCA understood the place of sexuality in ministry.

The Ambiguity and Ambivalence of Liturgy as Weak Power

Let me turn now to some of the problems of such a conception of weak power. For all the positive talk of “weak power,” there

are undoubtedly serious issues with placing weakness at the center of our considerations of liturgical power. Weakness also connotes ineffectiveness, an inability to influence or change others, a ceding of authority to the one with greater power. Especially as a feminist, I am very nervous about celebrating the kind of weakness that suggests an unwillingness to confront injustice, a passive endurance, and one that encourages a simple and humble acceptance of one's lack of power as a kind of pseudo-virtue. Even worse, it can lead to an embrace of something like the "power behind the throne" that supposedly wives or parish housekeepers really exert. While there may be some truth to this, in the sense that it is the oppressed who are the ones who truly understand the dynamics of power, I think one would seriously need also to turn to Hegel and/or Foucault to try to sort out the dynamics of those relationships.¹⁵

In terms of the role of power and weakness in liturgy and their potential role in speaking to the world, I would identify at least the following. One example is the shift in liturgical emphasis since Vatican II that has had some unintended consequences. With the major liturgical focus on the Eucharist and the consequent loss of emphasis on lay-led devotional practices of the pre-Vatican II church, the presider has in many cases taken on a power that does not always serve him or the liturgy well. I am sure that we have all had experiences of what I sometimes call the "opera singer" presider: "Me, me, me, me, me, me, me." In an effort to make the liturgy more "relevant," presiders of this ilk end up taking "center stage," making themselves the stars of the show, turning the Eucharistic liturgy into a personal performance. This kind of presider will sometimes change the words of the prayers so that, at least in his mind, the congregation can see how much better, how much more powerful, his rendition is than simply speaking the words that are given. One effect of this tendency is that it relegates the congregation to the status of spectators, further weakening their role in participation. When the priest is the most important actor in the liturgy, the congregation is weakened, and not in a positive way. In many ways, I think, our entertainment-based popular culture only seems to support this kind of dynamic.

Unfortunately, a number of the liturgical guidelines from Rome have only made this problem worse. Consider how the rubrics discourage the presider from leaving the altar at the exchange of peace.¹⁶ At my own church, until about ten years ago, the presider

sat in the front row of the congregation during the Liturgy of the Word, after which he then took his place at the altar, symbolically signaling his identity first as a member of the congregation, hearing the word of God. The archbishop had made his displeasure about this known, but the location remained unchanged. When our pastor was reassigned and the new pastor came in, he relented to the pressure of the archbishop to move the presider's chair to the platform where the altar was. There was a subtle, but genuine, shift in the dynamics of the liturgy, since the spatial location did in fact make a difference. Another change was the new/old practice of kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer and the prayer before Communion, where the congregation had formerly stood. One of the members of the parish wrote a letter requesting that we return to the old practice, but this did not receive the support of the pastor. And we only need to consider how the Eucharist itself has been used as a gesture of both political and ecclesiastical power, both in terms of how one's public stance on political issues or one's canonical status can determine one's worthiness to receive the Eucharist. These practices are, I suggest, deliberate practices of power as force, which serve to further weaken and disempower the faithful, and thus the people's real power, not only in church but in the world as well. The way that power is exercised in these examples is not an attractive power of invitation but rather a negative power of coercion. I have discussed elsewhere the ways that the power exercised by pastoral staff, especially religious educators, can come to be seen as a threat to the priestly power over the sacraments.¹⁷

Liturgical language, as I have already suggested, also serves to emphasize where the power is. I am not trying to suggest that we jettison entirely any language of God as "Almighty Father"—for one thing, this language is too firmly embedded in the liturgy—but that we consider how our language exerts a subtle power over our imaginations and consider alternate ways of naming God and ourselves.

Such material uses of power can lead to a kind of passivity on the part of the congregation that works against the very understanding of divine power that Caputo and others encourage and that the work of the people, the *leitourgia*, is meant to foster. But there is still a paradox here that we cannot ignore and, indeed, that I think we have to embrace. That is to say, we need to hold, on the

one hand, to God's power as attractive, inviting, noncoercive and "weak," as challenging conceptions of power that we deal with in our daily lives, both secular and religious, on a regular basis, and on the other hand, to recognize that there *is* a need for a power that works against the "overpowering" narratives of so much of the political and even ecclesiastical discourse in the world. Dealing with harassment and abuse, for example, requires a response that is much more than weakness and that also deals with imbalances of power. There need to be strategies of resistance that expose and challenge injustice and that reveal the misuse of power. A more thorough consideration of this topic would touch on the role of law in relationship to injustice and power.

About ten or so years ago, there was a confluence of events at my university that seemed to raise issues of liturgy and power on a number of levels. A group of women students became increasingly angry and frustrated with the situation of women in the church. A number of them felt a call to ordained ministry and decided to express their anger by standing, silently, in the back of the chapel throughout the entire liturgy. They wore stoles that they had made themselves and prepared flyers and passed them out to puzzled visitors that described their silent standing as a visible protest against their being silenced in the church. If they were not to be heard, they would be seen.

At the same time, there were changes in liturgical space and practice at the university. The university's chapel, built in the 1930s, had been renovated in the 1970s so that the interior space formed a large oval. Instead of long rows of pews facing the high altar, the ambo and altar were placed at the two ends of the oval, and chairs were arranged around them. It was, I thought, a successful blending of the pre-Vatican II space with a post-Vatican II sensibility: an intimate and inclusive space within a larger formal space. Masses were usually filled; I recall one Easter Vigil in the late 1980s or early 1990s when I arrived about thirty minutes early and could not find a seat. Then a new president came to the university and raised the funds to restore the chapel to its 1930s glory; there were also a number of changes in liturgical leadership. During the two-year process of chapel renovation, services were held in a nearby auditorium where, incidentally, the silent protests continued, and there were other changes that included giving the Jesuit seminarians more prominent liturgical roles, us-

ing more traditional hymns and, in many ways, making a decided shift in liturgical style.

When the renovated chapel reopened, the space was completely transformed. The altar was returned to its elevated place in the front of the chapel, the long rows of pews (with kneelers, of course) were back, and the walls were painted in brilliant whites and golds. The chapel was now "restored" to what it had been intended to be in the 1930s. While I find the renovated space to be aesthetically stunning, I did not then (nor do I now) find it to be liturgically welcoming. The chapel has become a place of ecclesiastical power. And by the time of the rededication of the chapel, most of the women students had graduated, found other places to worship, or simply stopped going to Mass. The silent standing protest as an example of weak power and the renovation of the chapel into a space that highlighted clerical power are two examples of how our material reality embodies a way of being church, how power is expressed and, I think, conveys some powerful messages to the congregation as to its role.

In these examples, action, language, and space all function. And if we were to ask how the liturgy strengthens us and leads us out into the world to be agents of justice, my point would be that one message it conveys through its use of these particular material realities is that the power to do anything significant is left to God and to the clergy. Yet as Pope Francis frequently reminds us, we are called to offer a different story than that of the world, one that does not force its vision, but is rather one that invites: the weak power that does not coerce but welcomes. The church, he has emphasized, is a "field hospital," that opens its doors to the weak, frail, sick, and homeless, and whose ministers are themselves broken. Its purpose is to envision and inspire us to live out the church's mission and for us to become the body of Christ. Expressions of power and its absence work through the actions, language, and spaces in which we dwell. We would do well to consider their power more closely.

Liturgy as Weak Power to Transform

I think it would be fair to say that many of us, perhaps especially women, find ourselves often feeling very powerless in relation to the liturgy and the sacraments, at least according to

the official rules that continue to exert strong juridical power. Pope Francis's recent comments to women religious on possibly reviving the diaconate may offer some hope, but I am not holding my breath for any change, at least in my own lifetime.¹⁸ I think there is a longstanding fear of women's power that is disguised by references to complementarity, the "feminine genius," or feeble attempts at humor—all of which have the effect of marginalizing and diminishing women. Looked at from the side of "the world," the magisterial church's claim that it is powerless to go against the mind of Christ, with relation to the question of women's ordination, is disingenuous. We have all heard these arguments too many times, and I am not going to go into them further here. Yet despite the frustration of many, including myself, the liturgy continues to have the potential to nourish, sustain, and inspire, often despite the forceful, powerful actions of the institutional church, presiders, language, and spaces. This is an ambivalent and ambiguous power that can both nourish and starve, elevate and demean.

Here I would like to offer three avenues of thought for "weak power," the liturgy, and the promotion of justice. In all of these considerations, I want to emphasize the significance of context—the environment that shapes our ability to be affected by or exercise power. In some situations, some of these points may be helpful and some may be unhelpful. None of them is intended as any complete "solution," but rather as a suggestion for how we might see ourselves responding when power is at issue. The first is a strategic and critical use of the concept of self-gift. The second is an examination of liturgy as "weak" transformative power. The third is a consideration of what I will call "liturgies of strategic interruption and disruption."

I frequently hear from my students, and I am sure the parents reading this are very familiar with the complaint, that the "Mass doesn't do anything for me." Especially for young people whose quite natural and youthful narcissism leads them to see things from a somewhat narrow perspective, the repetitive nature of the Eucharistic liturgy, combined, perhaps all too frequently, with poorly prepared (if at all prepared!) preaching and anemic music in parish contexts does not make for an attractive combination. Often, parishes and Newman centers go to great lengths to make their liturgies relevant for young people with dynamic presiders

and popular liturgical music. By no means do I mean to criticize these valiant efforts, or the work of youth ministers (where parishes can afford them) to make young people feel welcome.

Yet I wonder if there is something important missing in this. If the Eucharistic liturgy is about anything, it is about Jesus's gift of himself to the world, the celebration of this gift of self, and the congregation's becoming the Body of Christ through Word and Sacrament—in a very real sense, losing who we are as a group of discrete individual people to come together with our gifts to be transformed. I want to be very careful here about the language of self-gift, since it is such loaded language. It is used extensively in the Theology of the Body, where every sexual act is to be a complete self-gift of body and soul to the other, an understanding of relationship and sexuality that I find more utopian than realistic or helpful.¹⁹ It can also be used to encourage an unhealthy sense of selflessness which has, as we all know, different effects depending on one's sexual and/or social context, as is true of any language of self-sacrifice.²⁰ I am not advocating here that kind of selflessness. We need to be very careful when using such language. But the need for care in using this language does not mean that we ought to drop it altogether. It has taken me the better part of a lifetime to learn more and more deeply that the liturgy is not all about me and that my aesthetic or liturgical tastes really don't matter if the liturgy is effective. (Don't take this to mean that music or good preaching is not important; not at all!) My point is that there is an essential dimension of *giving oneself over to the liturgy*, becoming a part of the gathered community, that is, at the same time, very countercultural. The liturgy is the collective act of the people of God, not the act of the individual, and giving oneself over to the community as one part of the Body of Christ is who we are when we worship. This is true for both presider and congregation.

I am trying to walk a very fine line here. On the one hand, I am not arguing that one's particular liturgical community does not matter at all; in fact I do not attend my geographical parish in part because of some experiences of really offensive preaching. But on the other hand, there is no perfect parish, no perfect liturgy (although I keep trying to find one!); the liturgy is not my personal weekly aesthetic experience. There is a giving up of my own needs here in order to become part of a larger reality that is not focused on me and that, in fact, draws me out of myself to

others. Only if we recognize this can we link liturgy and justice.

Self-gift needs to be a consideration on the part of everyone involved in the liturgy, and the liturgy itself needs to be seen as nourishment for the gift of self and community to the world. While in a sense the liturgy is an end in itself—it is not utilitarian, to be used only as a means for doing something else—nevertheless the liturgy is one critical part of the life of the Christian community, not the whole thing. There needs to be a connection with the local community and the world as a whole. It is a positive step that the institutional church no longer seems to hold to the requirement of “Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation,” as if that were all that was needed to be a “good Catholic.”

This means that self-gift as a “weak power” needs to be exercised by both presider and congregation. The Eucharistic presider’s role is to be transparent, so that his own distinctive personality is the means of communicating God’s presence among us but in such a way that we recall the message rather than the personality. And the entire congregation’s role is to become the presence of Christ in the world. As Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it so well, “Liturgy is for giving voice to life oriented towards God.”²¹ And the God to whom we orient ourselves works through invitation and hospitality, as we should too. Much more can be said here.

Second, the liturgy prepares us to transform ourselves and the world. Drawing on Sallie McFague’s helpful characterization of Jesus’s ministry as “inclusive, destabilizing and nonhierarchical,”²² I suggest that we need to pay more attention to the ways that liturgy challenges us to change and how it can incorporate these qualities. Homilies of course need to be well prepared and scripturally based; inclusiveness needs to be the aim of every liturgy and, if we are to consider Jesus’s practices with his community, they are, if anything, nonhierarchical. Women’s inclusion in the diaconate, if not the priesthood, would in fact confirm the “weak power” that ministry is intended to be, which may well be an unspoken dimension of clerical resistance. Recall Sandra Schneiders’ insights about the unexpected gifts of women’s spirituality or Christine Gudorf’s point that what the sacraments do is what women ordinarily do, but raised up to a clerical level.²³ Schneiders notes that since so much of women’s ministry has been unritualized until recently, it is a much more personalized ministry of service than exercise of power. Gudorf makes the point that what the sacraments do is

what women ordinarily do, considered to be unremarkable, mere mundane or human actions, but once raised up to a clerical level, they become significant.

The destabilizing force of the liturgy should serve to resist the temptation to set liturgy apart from its lived context. The nostalgia for transcendence in liturgy is too often a desire to have the liturgy be completely “other” than the world, in a place set apart, where one thinks of God, not the world. This is not to say that there is not a transcendent dimension to life that needs to be recognized and expressed in the liturgy, but the tendency, to quote Wolterstorff again, is that “the inclination of most of us religious people is first to do our singing and then, if time, energy, and persistence are left, to tend to justice.”²⁴ Inclusiveness also means paying attention to context, becoming aware of temptations of insularity, making efforts to open a parish’s life to challenges in its social and economic situation. The current debate on the worth of Black lives and the apparent lack of discussion in many parishes is a genuine challenge to Catholics.

Third, I suggest that we consider participating in what I am calling “liturgies of strategic interruption.” The feminist liturgical movement that arose in the 1970s and 1980s provides one model, but also some cautions. What this movement did was to empower women as liturgical subjects, and that is no small accomplishment! Freed from the idea that the altar was accessible to women only when it needed cleaning, women developed new liturgical practices that celebrated moments otherwise considered unremarkable, not a significant part of human experience, or even a dimension of women’s experience that was considered unspeakable, such as menopause.²⁵

It is interesting to consider the life of these alternative liturgies. For many, including myself, these liturgies were almost thrilling moments when women could see ourselves as liturgical leaders. They served as a way to give voice to what had been silenced for so long and to inspire action. Yet there is also a life cycle to these liturgies. I was part of some women’s liturgical groups for a time in the 1980s and 1990s, and while I found these celebrations inspiring and creative, giving me a community that I did not find in the institutional church, the need to develop something “new” for each liturgy eventually became something of a burden. How many new ways can one celebrate women’s creative power, the

beauty of nature, the cycles of the moon, without repeating what was done before? In addition, issues of inclusion raised questions, at least for me, of the public character of liturgy and the invited character of the groups. It seemed to me then and now, that the relatively closed nature of these groups posed a challenge to what ought to be the open nature of the liturgy. The Eucharistic liturgy in particular is one place where one should *not* get to decide with whom one sits. So I suggest that “strategic liturgies” have an important place that can remind us what our Christian life and liturgy are all about. My point is to consider how they can be used to energize and perhaps even on occasion disrupt our liturgical “business-as-usual,” pointing our attention to the need for action for justice in the world.

The liturgies I have in mind include the Chicago Good Friday Stations of the Cross as practiced in Pilsen each year, stopping at the places where daily crucifixions—shootings, murders, crushing poverty, helplessness in the face of addiction, gross injustices practiced by official government agencies—take place. Such liturgical practices help to more directly connect life as it is lived “on the streets” to what we pray for in church. They are forms of “weak power” that function symbolically to raise awareness and galvanize people to action. They could also include ways in which the racism bred into the American way of life is recognized, lamented, and confronted. In the spring of 2016, Father Michael Pflieger spoke at a colloquium at Loyola on religion and violence and reminded us that the daily death count of lives shattered ought to disrupt our liturgical lives. The frequent marches and protests that he organizes are other examples of these “strategic liturgies of disruption.” The power of movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter to engage in symbolic actions that help to shake the complacency of the lives of the privileged and comfortable are an important and necessary resource. And it is important to note here their destabilizing role in the community. Encouraging and reclaiming such liturgical actions would also serve to empower the people as a whole to be agents of liturgy rather than simply passive recipients. My point is that some of the “loss” of lay-led liturgical power that followed the almost complete focus on the Eucharist after Vatican II can be reclaimed. There is a need for a variety of liturgical actions, not just regular feasts during the year. I am reminded of what Walter Wink has said about Jesus’s actions in confronting power: rather

than seeing “turn the other cheek” as an expression of passivity and weakness, he shows how in its context it actually “disarmed” the enemy by forcing the use of weak power.²⁶

Eucharistic gatherings themselves are by definition places of weak force where we submit to the power of the liturgy to gather together, to be inclusive, to hear God’s word, where the counter-story of Jesus is the meaning of the liturgy: “The liturgy is the place where this process becomes conscious and intentional. It is the place of assent, of openness and meeting.”²⁷

The liturgical theologian Richard McCall writes: “If human beings are made in the image of God, it is our ability to act in time and space and not some state of being which defines that likeness.”²⁸ McCall’s point here is that the *imago dei* is not a static quality but rather something dynamic. He goes on to say, “Because it only ‘happens’ when there is a sacrifice on the part of each actor, a letting-go of the intention to define the plot, it is not what is happening in most of life. The sacramental plot which is enacted in liturgical events is the very sacrificial act by which Trinity enacts creation in continual letting-go. Because the sacraments involve us (if we will be involved) in the plot which is the ‘inner life of the Trinity,’ they ‘effect what they signify.’”²⁹

To conclude: I have tried to offer some ideas that might help us to think and act liturgically in ways that demonstrate the weak power of the Gospel and its transformative power. In some ways, we are all a bit like my friend David: confronted with ecclesiastical, social, and political institutions that wield powers that can exclude and dehumanize. We cannot change all of these powers magically, and resisting by force is most often not even possible. Yet this does not mean we cannot resist at all. Our liturgies and our lives have the power to resist in ways that can transform our imaginations and, perhaps, to move us a little closer to establishing and living in the realm of God’s power where death is transformed into life and our fragile bodiliness is where we truly encounter God.

Notes

¹See <http://www.reconcilingworks.org> for a description of the movement.

²John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

³Ibid., 13.

⁴Ibid., 5.

⁵Ibid., 8, 12, 33, 42, 59, 153; there are numerous allusions to theology as “rouged and powdered.”

⁶Ibid., *Weakness*, 12.

⁷Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 53.

⁸Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford, UK, and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 35.

⁹Ruth Meyers, in “Unleashing the Power of Worship,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no.1 (January 2010): 55-70, does a helpful job of spelling this out.

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ST III, 61, a. 1.

¹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ST I-II, q. 4, a. 5, ad 4.

¹²Kearney, *Anatheism*, 91.

¹³A fuller treatment of this issue of attractive power would need to deal with the role of law. In some important instances, injustice cannot be overcome by persuasion, as in the case of US civil rights.

¹⁴Edward Schillebeeckx developed this idea over the course of his career. See especially *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 5ff., “The experience of radical contrast in our human history.”

¹⁵For Hegel, see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Chapter IV; for Foucault, see Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹⁶The USCCB Instructions say: “So as not to disturb the celebration, the priest celebrant normally remains in the sanctuary,” with allowances for weddings and funerals. See <http://www.usccb.org>.

¹⁷See Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

¹⁸See Jamie Manson’s comments in *The National Catholic Reporter* (May 19, 2016) which articulate what many are thinking: <https://www.ncronline.org>.

¹⁹See, for example, Christopher West, *The Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body”* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003).

²⁰The literature on selflessness goes back to Valerie Saiving’s pioneering article in 1960 “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (April 1960): 100-112.

²¹Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Justice as a Condition of Authentic Liturgy,” *Theology Today* 48, no. 1 (April 1991): 17.

²²Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 48.

²³For Schneiders, see “The Effects of Women’s Experience on Their Spirituality,” *Spirituality Today* 35 (Summer 1983), 100-116; for Gudorf, see “Sacraments and Men’s Need to Birth,” *Horizons* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 296-309.

²⁴Wolterstorff, “Justice as a Condition,” 17.

²⁵The literature on this topic is voluminous. Some of the more significant authors to consult would be Teresa Berger, Lesley Northup, Janet Walton.

²⁶See Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: The Third Way* (Minneapolis:

Fortress, 2003); I am grateful to Anne Patrick who first directed my attention to Wink in her book *Conscience and the Creative Process* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011).

²⁷Richard McCall, "Liturgical Theopoetic: The Acts of God in the Act of Liturgy," *Worship* 71, no. 5 (September 1997).

²⁸*Ibid.*, 410.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 413.

LITURGY AND POWER

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