

Essay written by Jason Glaser in response  
to the Open Conversation after worship on June 3, 2007

One of my relatives in the Lake Preston area of South Dakota once related to me a story that carries some additional significance for me as I think about how it relates to Grace, the ELCA, and Lutheranism in general:

In 1986, the building manager of the VFW sent out letters to his regulars telling them he was having trouble meeting his bills. He feared he was going to have to either soon close the doors for a few months a year, if not permanently. Another option was moving to a smaller facility some distance from town. One of the regulars had a son who was a business consultant, and they appealed to him for help. He agreed to help, and set about interviewing and surveying the VFW patrons and the community for additional information about their thoughts and hopes regarding the VFW. They regaled him with fond memories and insights into the establishment's better days. Some time later, when the results had been analyzed, the consultant called a meeting for all concerned to tell them what he'd found.

"From what I can tell," he said. "What it seems like everybody really wants is for the VFW to be filled up again with World War II veterans. If that's the case, then we have a problem, because they're not making any new ones."

"Is there anything we can do?" one person in the crowd lamented.

"Well, it also seemed to me that people would be just as happy if the place were simply bringing in a bunch of customers who had been around for twenty years or more. And that, believe it or not, is something I can do."

A ripple of enthusiasm passed through the crowd.

"The catch is that you have to give me twenty-five years to get there."

The consultant's point was, of course, that if he wanted people at the VFW who had been there for over twenty years, he was going to have to look decades ahead to the time when today's new visitors were to become the old guard.

This is the situation that today faces not only Grace Lutheran, but the church as a whole, every time we contemplate a shift in worship. The adoption of a new hymnal, and thus the contained worship settings, often carries with it some perceived slight, as if the phasing out of a text meant that our own spiritual attachments to worship were somehow equally obsolete.

I remember when Gloria Dei Lutheran in Rochester (where I am from originally), held a meeting to determine how many copies of "With One Voice" to order. One lady, who was considered a church elder of sorts, despite not having attended church for many years, made it a point to attend once she learned a discussion on whether to adopt the "new hymnal" was to take place. At the very onset of the meeting, she stood up and appealed to the crowd, "I'm so glad we're finally having this meeting. I've always believed the old hymnals were good enough, and I don't know why people think we have to make this change."

"So you're in favor of just worshipping from the old hymnals only?" the moderator affirmed.

"Yes, yes," she said. "Those green hymnals are completely unnecessary. Why we ever wanted to move from the red hymnals I'll never know."

As one of the pastors of Gloria Dei once told me after that meeting, “You just have to remember that every tradition was new once.” Our own Pastor Joel spoke a great deal about tradition during this last week’s message, stating at one point that “tradition is a smoke screen to prevent change.” I knew immediately that, in a congregation that constantly identifies “connection to tradition” as one of Grace’s strengths year in and year out, that “them’s fightin’ words”. Even I took a few moments to discuss with Joel the importance of “tradition”, and how it relates to the more important “ritual.” After all, these things can connect us to previous generations, and can be part of a shared experience that cultivates a common ground between people.

To further explore this question, I used a new, emerging tradition and standard in communication – I used an Internet discussion board and instant messaging to consider the difference between “tradition” and “ritual” with Christians all over the world. One young pastor mulled it over and gave his answer, which I like quite a bit.

“Ritual is something that you’ve done the same way each and every time and you can explain precisely the reason why it’s important. Tradition is something you’ve done the same way each and every time and you have no idea the reason why it’s important.”

“And superstition,” chimed in another, “is doing something the same way each and every time when the only reason it’s important is because you think everything will go straight to hell if you don’t.”

There are times, I think, when what we think of as tradition begins to cross the line into the realm of superstition. My father believed that it all but invited disaster to clap in church, no matter how moving the choir’s rendition of “Hallelujah Chorus” might be. He couldn’t tell you why, exactly; just that it wasn’t right. When I first came to Grace, a big point of contention was whether or not to allow liturgical dance, as many believed that it was “dancing on the altar,” and a path to some undetermined disaster.

It is important, therefore, that I think each time we contemplate a shift in worship, whether it be the adding of a new worship service or the addition of a new hymnal to our sanctuary, that we use the opportunity to reconnect to the core elements of not just our means of worship, but of our faith. We must distill the rites – the ritual – from amid the tradition.

Some things, I guarantee, will never change. Sports celebrations aside, baptism will always be administered with water and not with Gatorade. The cross is immutable, the body and blood of Christ eternal, and the forgiveness of sins undeniable.

But hand in hand with this comes the one that always changes – always **MUST** change – if the church is to survive, and that is the language of worship. As a scholar of Latin, I can appreciate the elegance of a Latin Mass. As a scholar of Greek, I often dig out the Greek New Testament to try my own hand at a translation of a peculiar bit of the Gospel that catches my attention. But I would be the first to protest a return to these as the only acceptable means of worship and study of the Bible.

The concept of preaching to the masses in their native tongues is as old as Pentecost. It was crucial among the works of Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into the vernacular of Germany. It is at the heart of the work of missionaries in countries around the world who work tirelessly to translate the good book into the language of the people.

And yet, what we do with delight for the foreign nations of the world, we do only begrudgingly for ourselves. I knew a man who once said he’d rather die than recite the “bastardized” modern version of the Lord’s Prayer. I sometimes wonder if it is as important to him that he “art” in heaven today as it is that he is simply there by any means, or by any language.

At the open discussion following the service last Sunday, one worshipper declared, “Today we had a traditional style worship, and I think people really responded to it and enjoyed it.” Shortly thereafter, another worshipper demanded, “Where are the youth? Why aren’t they here in worship?”

I believe that the second question can be partially answered by the first question. Last Sunday’s service was indeed quite traditional, hymns included, which at one point had the congregation sing

*Lo, the apostolic train, join your sacred name to hallow. Prophets swell the glad refrain, and the white-robed martyrs follow. And from morn to set of sun, through the Church the song goes on.*

Allow me to be both honest and blunt when I say that while these words are English, this is not the language of the day, much less that of the youth or the current generation, and there likely isn’t anyone under the age of 21 singing in the congregation who could tell you what that verse even meant.

If you raided the rooms of every K-12 student at Grace, you would be lucky to find a King James Bible for each hand. And even if you could find one nose-deep in Shakespeare or Chaucer to give them a healthy dose of “thee”, “thy” and “livest,” the words “cherubim” and “seraphim” (appearing twice in last Sunday’s hymns) aren’t going to be there. Rail against the education if you will. Grumble about the incomplete teachings going on at Sunday School (while simultaneously finding three or four reasons why you won’t be able to take a class next fall). But know that the very language of traditional worship often does more to isolate the newer generations, the visitors, and the strangers, than it ever does to invite them.

Like Pastor Joel, I love the pipe organ. I love classical music. I can appreciate chanted psalms and liturgy. But these things will not go far in communicating with the lost and wandering sheep we have been commissioned to find and tend to. In that world, liturgy is not spoken here.

Worship is intended to serve God. By contrast, tradition serves us. Or others just like us, should we happen to find them. Many of you have already heard that over 90% of new members in the Christian church are transfers from other churches. Does that surprise us? Retail chains like Target have long realized that by establishing a “traditional” standard for its stores that people will be as immediately comfortable in a store in Omaha as a store in Chattanooga. Is it no wonder that these new, transferring members often speak of “feeling comfortable” as a primary reason for joining a new congregation? Even then, or perhaps especially then, “traditional” becomes relative as visiting “traditional” worshippers from other churches rankle at our no longer using the first or second setting of the green hymnal exclusively, having to stand to receive communion, or passing on chanting “Glory to you, O Christ” before the Gospel reading (which are all things contrary to what I was comfortable with, I should point out).

In the minds of many, the drive to sustain Grace beyond the predicted point of demise of the ELCA comes down to one crassly-expressed idea: “putting butts in the seats.” For some, the priority is in preserving what we have, rallying around the existing membership, and (God forbid) not doing anything that flies in the face of our traditions (or perhaps superstitions). From them, I hear the idea that “we can’t afford to lose anybody.” As regards those who would leave over a point of worship, I suspect we have lost them already. We have lost them to tradition, even in the face of ritual.

I often get the feeling that people at Grace would be happiest only if we could draw upon a wellspring of parishioners who knew what it was like “back then,” whenever “then” might be for them. But like with the World War II vets at the VFW I spoke about in the beginning of this piece, they ain’t makin’ any new ones.

Do not misunderstand me regarding traditional worship. I support traditional worship. I enjoy it, and do and would regularly attend it, for many of the same reasons as others at Grace. I oppose anything that would disrupt

the expressions of Sunday morning worship that have been cornerstones at Grace since before I was born, and am proud to now be associated with.

But catering to tradition is diametrically opposed to catering to mission. If we want to speak the Good News to the people in the world who have not yet heard, then we need to speak their language. That language might be expressed to some through in the new hymnals, as the ELCA has hoped. It can be expressed to some through services that involve more discussion and group involvement. It might be expressed to some through familiar, more modern, musical settings. It might even be expressed to some through plasma television screens. How many of these options we pursue, or how deeply into them we reach in pursuit of the great commission is uncertain, but if we at any point, or to any degree, consider ourselves to be mission based, then they must be addressed and explored.

I find myself wondering what the face of that VFW I heard about looks like today. Is it still around, or did it close? Who would you find there? Is it thriving, or still just hanging on? Yet consider this: It has been 21 years since that crisis reared its head. The consultant said that he could fill the building with people who had been there for twenty years or more if only they gave him twenty-five years. Did the VFW see the wisdom in the consultant's message? If I were to go there now, would I find people who are sustaining the building they love because twenty years ago someone invited them to share in the ritual without beholding them to tradition?

This leads me to the question I pose to any church who honestly believes it should be involved in mission and outreach. It is easy to see the part ritual plays in our faith, and these are the things we pass on to our children in Sunday school and in confirmation. But are we willing to critically examine the importance of tradition not only as befits a means of worship, but to a people of mission, called by God?