

One of the truisms of life is: the only constant is change. The past year has certainly made this abundantly clear. Changes in schedules. Myriad changes in work circumstances. Changes in infection rates. Changes in travel (or the lack thereof). Changes in daily routines from the drive for a gallon of milk to the COVID checklist prior to entering school and so many other ways. Change was probably a bit too constant for us this past year. Indeed, all the changes underscored our enduring desire for rhythms that are stable, predictable, orderly. We can breathe a little easier, because we know what to expect. We can engage on autopilot, for we are cruising above the turbulence. Yet, change changed all that. It became the proverbial bull in a China Shop.

While our worship changed from in-person to live-streaming this past year, the rhythm of liturgy did not. I suspect that this reality was a deep comfort to many. Hymns, prayers, texts were all recognizable and familiar. The “flow” of the service remained. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter all followed with calendric precision amidst the uncertainty and vicissitudes of daily life. Again, I think that this truth offered great solace to many.

Thus, I was not surprised by the comments after the first Easter Sunday regarding certain changes to the liturgy. The hymns and texts were there. A few new wordings for prayers and affirmations of faith were added. I think the comments were more a confirmation that, indeed, certain things were changed, rather than a critique of the prayers themselves. However, we all have our favorites. Favorite hymns. Favorite texts. Favorite Sundays. And Favorite prayers. There is nothing wrong with this. As a matter of fact, possessing such “favorites” enriches our spiritual life, because we internalize various phrases or lyrics that stay with us. We can call upon them in times of trouble as well as in times of ease. They are a part of us.

Yet, there are moments when the “favorites” we enjoy become the “way we always do it.” In the best of situations, we hopefully can allow for a different way of doing something. At its worst, such an attitude can become a calcification that obstructs the very Spirit that we desire to enter into our worship. This became clear during a recent class that I taught on Buddhism. In setting the context for the rise of Buddhism, the textbook noted that the predominant Hindu tradition at that time in India had become stale. The formulas for prayer had become more important than the gods. Thus, Buddhism gained a foothold in part because of its insight, but also because the spiritual soil of the people was fertile for something new, or at least authentic.

Now some might argue that changing prayers here and there is akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. We need more drastic measures. And I certainly recognize this in the context of dwindling formal religious participation in the United States. I, however, am an incrementalist. Transforming worship so that it is unrecognizable to those who practice it would be wholly unhelpful. Tweaking things so that the larger rhythm remains, and particular changes force us to hear anew or afresh what the gospel is about seems appropriate. I hold up a new confession for this week as exhibit A. It is known as the Belhar Confession. It is a piercing call

to the Church to be the Church of God that consciously and actively seeks justice. It made me sit up and pay attention when I first read it. I hope that it engages you.

Here it is:

We believe That God has revealed God's self as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; That God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged. That God calls the church to follow God in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; That God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; That the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; That in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. AMEN.

We will continue to introduce new prayers and confessions and Eucharistic liturgies. The changes will be seasonal (and in the long Sundays after Pentecost, we will make a couple adjustments). The hope is that these changes allow you to hear afresh the word, to not simply move through worship in a rote manner but bumping up against words and phrases that remind you of what we are all about. The beautiful thing about these types of changes is that they can be made together. I would like to resurrect the old liturgy committee to meet periodically to consider different prayers, etc. for worship. If you are interested, please let me know.

It only seems appropriate that we would have a committee for this. Conveniently and importantly *Liturgy* means “the work of the people.” So, let’s do it.