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The Non-Verbal Languages of Worship

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C23: The Non-Verbal Languages of Worship

Don Saliers

Christian liturgy has employed a wide range of “non-verbal” languages since the beginning of assemblies for the worship of God:

TIME, SPACE, SIGHT, SOUND, TASTE, TOUCH, GESTURE, MOVEMENT,
RITUAL OBJECTS AND “SIGN-ACTIONS.”

Each and all of these (while not in every tradition) are deeply related to:

SOCIAL MEMORY (biblical and communal), central acts of ANAMNESIS and EPICLESIS, OPEN SYMBOLS, and the worshiping ENVIRONMENT OF CARE, LOVE, RESPECT and the FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT.

Implications:

- The words used in worship depend greatly upon the non-verbal dimensions of our assemblies. Training in how to participate in the self-communication of God to us in what we see, hear, touch, move toward, taste and ritualize is crucial. Words can fail and become cliché without attention to the non-verbal.
- Each form or element in worship (“liturgical unit”) bears a connection and “opening” to the whole of the service. Each form/element may be enacted in a variety of ways-- depending upon the “sub-culture” of the assembly. Examples: prayer forms, reading of Scripture, musical forms in a wide range of actions: eucharistic, baptismal, reconciliation, healing, blessings, and commissioning to ministries.
- How we live our lives outside the liturgy is a central aspect of our receptivity (and resistance) to forms of worship. Cultural influences currently both change and challenge the perceptual patterns we may bring (including “synaesthetic” elements).
- Deepening participation in worship depends on how the ministries and structures of care become visible, audible, and palpable in the assembly. What and whom do we pray for? What do we lament? What do we give thanks for? In what ways do the “tacit” dimensions of ministry and service enter our perception (hearing/seeing)?

Six interrelated questions for local congregations:

1. Does our common worship form and express our lives in AWE and WONDER over time in response to God’s self-communication?
2. Does our common worship form and express our lives in GRATITUDE and HOSPITALITY?
3. Does our common worship form and express our lives in DELIGHT and SURPRISE (“surprised by grace”)?
4. Does our common worship form and express our lives in TRUTH-TELLING (LAMENT, CONFESSION, TESTIMONY)?
5. Does our common worship form and express our lives, over time, in COMPASSION and MUTUAL RESPECT AND CARE?
6. Does our common worship form and express our lives in HOPE (for justice, reconciliation, and the eschatological promises of God to the creation)?