

As Judged By Those we Serve: The Mission of the Liturgical Musician

I am honored and delighted to be here. I rejoice to bring you greetings from St. Paul's Parish in Cambridge; from the archdiocese of Boston; from the Benedictine Sounding Center of Reading, and from the varied limbs of the ecumenical body in Massachusetts. Grace and peace in Christ Jesus.

I want to explore with you the notion of liturgy as performance, and ask some questions about the attitudes and skills that we as pastoral musicians can offer to that performance. I begin with a story.

Several weeks ago I went for medical care to my local health clinic. It's a big institution. I felt vulnerable, both because of my distress about my ailment and because of my sense of powerlessness in the face of this large medical bureaucracy. I stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the third floor. As the elevator moved, I happened to notice, pinned to the wall, the mission statement for the health clinic. It began:

As judged by those we serve . . .

Our mission is to provide high quality health care and comfort to the ill, to prevent illness among the well, and to advance medicine through education, research, and the improvement of clinical practice.

As judged by those we serve. . .

Our vision is to be a not for profit group practice, functioning as a regional system of health care professionals working in partnership with others to provide the highest quality, comprehensive, integrated care to the individuals and communities we serve. We intend to deliver this care so that it is accessible, affordable, efficient and effective.

As judged by those we serve . . .

We will care for individuals regardless of their circumstances and will treat our patients and their families, our employees and colleagues, with honesty and respect.

As judged by those we serve. . .

I breathed deeply, and my heart and mind expanded with the awareness that I mattered to these people: they were prepared to take my experience and my perspective seriously. As judged by those we serve . . . I could bring my freedom and imagination, memory and hope, into this place and work together with the professionals and the grace of God to effect my healing. I walked out

of that elevator an empowered being. I have found that, for the most part, the staff there act in a manner which embodies that mission statement. My subsequent dealings with the clinic have been charged with a sense of blessing, dignity, integrity, and yes, effectiveness. That health clinic is performing very well indeed.

Well, then I went home, and in prayer over the next week, day by day with the lectionary, read the gospel stories of Jesus' preaching and healing from the second and third chapters of Mark: There is no fasting while the groom is here; put new wine into new wineskins; Jesus and his disciples picking grain on the Sabbath to satisfy their hunger. The Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath; Jesus healing the man with the shriveled hand on a Sabbath; great crowds following him because they had heard what he had done. He had cured many, and many more than that came on now, pressing upon him, reaching for the touch of his hand or the touch of his voice; Jesus naming twelve of his followers to multiply his ministry of preaching and healing. The weekday readings seemed to tumble toward the next Sunday's proclamation of Jesus' public ministry according to Luke:

Jesus came to Nazareth where he had been reared, and entering the synagogue on the Sabbath as he was in the habit of doing, he stood up to do the reading. When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, he unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

*The spirit of the LORD is upon me;
therefore God has anointed me.*

*God has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives,
Recovery of sight to the blind
and release to prisoners*

to announce a year of favor from the LORD.

Rolling up the scroll he gave it back to the assistant and sat down. All in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him. Then he began by saying to them, "Today, this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4: 14-21

Fine words. Inspiring words. But just words. And as I reflected on them it occurred to me that if Jesus had not actually, effectively, healed people, in their bodies, their minds, their spirits, we would not be here today. If he had not performed, there would have been no gospel story. People listened to the words of Jesus because he effected healing in their lives. Healing as judged by those Jesus served. If he hadn't, he would have been written off as just another religious nut with messianic delusions, and he would have been a threat to no one, and never been crucified, and never risen from the dead. But of course, that's not what happened. He did preach and teach and heal and suffer and die and rise, and 2000 years later here we are, continuing to live this life of being healed and healing, being fed and feeding, teaching and suffering and dying and rising. For the Gospel isn't just the words, or the saying of the words. It is the doing of them. It is, one might say, the *performing* of them.

And it occurred to me that, in some important ways, the health clinic's mission statement is not far off from a viable mission statement for our communities of faith. As judged by those we serve. When people come into contact with the church, do they actually experience healing, grace, the fullness of life, glimpses of God's saving love at work, for real, in their own estimation? If they do not, why should we expect that they would give one whit about anything that we say or do? If our performance is not effective, we are irrelevant to the life of the world.

Our performance, as the presence of Christ, as the gathered Body of Christ, matters. We can do it well, or we can do it poorly, and it makes a difference in the world which it is. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the liturgy is the source and summit of our life as Christians. If our performance as Christians matters anywhere, surely it matters here, at liturgy. But what might it mean to say that what we do at Sunday liturgy is a performance? First of all, what does it mean to perform?

Here are some definitions from the Random House Dictionary:

- *to carry out, execute, do: to perform miracles.*
- *to go through or execute in the proper or established manner: to perform the marriage ceremony.*
- *to carry into effect, fulfill: perform what you promise.*
- *to act, (a play, part, etc.) as on the stage.*
- *to render (music) as by playing or singing.*
- *to accomplish (any action invoking skill or ability) as before an audience: to perform a juggling act.*

Perform, discharge, execute, transact mean to carry to completion a prescribed course of action. Perform is the general word, often applied to ordinary activity as a more formal expression than DO, but usually implying regular, methodical, or prolonged application or work.

For years I have assumed, in a vague and semi-conscious way, that the word performance was derived somehow from the Latin word *formo*, meaning to shape, to form, to fashion. In the context of the performance of liturgy I thought the word might refer to the execution of certain "forms" or "rubrics." But no. Our word performance comes from a word in old French, a word native to that tongue and not derived from Latin. The word is *parfournier*. *Fournier* means to accomplish, to furnish, to bring to completion, to present a finished product. The prefix *par* intensifies the meaning, so that it becomes: to really, intensely, thoroughly DO something. The focus is not on the form or the method or the rubrics, but on the intensity of purpose, the quality of presence, and the very process of the doing of it. Ah! Performing the liturgy means bringing an intensity of purpose and a quality of presence to the doing of it. And it implies a steadfast commitment to actually accomplishing the purpose of doing the liturgy.

So. What IS the purpose of liturgy? To answer this, it may help to look at the meaning of that word. Our word liturgy comes from the Greek *leitourgia*. When Christians first began to talk about what they did together in worship, they needed a word for it, and they needed a word to which the wide Greek-speaking world could relate. They chose this word *leitourgia*, which, interestingly, had absolutely no religious meaning at the time. *Leitourgia* was a completely secular term, and it meant "public works," in the sense of a sewer system, or, say, the Kansas City Power and Light Company. A *leitourgia* was a nuts and bolts, practical, "real world" operation designed and run by a group of people for the well-being of the entire city. Early Christians understood their worship to be a *leitourgia*: a practical, necessary, effective civil service, performed by Christ, present through the Spirit in the gathered assembly, out of love, on behalf of the whole world: celebrating the wedding feast of heaven and earth, bringing to birth the new creation.

It was not primarily an occasion for private devotion, therapy, education, or entertainment, although within the context of the performing of liturgy individuals were surely moved to prayer, healed, enlightened, and engaged. The overall focus and purpose, however, was decidedly public and corporate.

Allow me to highlight one simple point about this act of public service: who is performing this liturgy, in the Spirit of Christ for the love of the world? The gathered body of Christ. The assembly. Not the presider. Not the musicians. Not the lector. Not the congregation. No one part, but the whole, gathered assembly, all together. The ministers of various kinds serve the assembly. The assembly performs the liturgy. There are no spectators. This performance has no audience, neither within the church building, nor really anywhere in the whole world, for in fact, all of creation is invoked and drawn into the action: *Earth unites with heaven to sing the new song of creation as we adore and praise you forever* (from the preface for the Fourth Sunday of Lent).

In your packets is a white paper with a number of questions on it. The questions are designed to help you think about your own particular assembly, its liturgical performance, and your role in its service. We will examine these questions in my breakout session later this morning. I also encourage all of you to take these questions back to your own communities and continue to reflect on them and talk about them.

We are many here - - PRAISE GOD!! - - and we are from, I am sure, a wide variety of local circumstances. Not being able to address your individual situations in this context, let me say that, for me, overall, the single most performance skill I practice is to continually renew a core vision in my mind and heart as I go about my work: the vision of the whole people of God performing the liturgy with all skill and power and fullness and effectiveness, making heaven break open on earth. I try to make every decision I face about worship in the light of that vision. I ask myself: will this or that action of mine, as a pastoral musician, help or hinder the movement of the gathered assembly in its growth as the primary actor in the performance of the liturgy?

In practice, I find that renewing the core vision has three phases: Uncovering the spark, Fanning the flames, and Becoming fire.

Uncovering the spark

What is already happening in my assembly at prayer which I recognize as good and can help to build on? The first good I can claim is: I am there, in that community, now. And there is grace waiting to unfold in our midst. Can I recognize it? Where is the spark of spiritual life in my community? In my community's liturgy? Let me not get stuck in grumbling and bitterness about what I don't have or what is not happening. Let me be a partner with God in the ongoing creation and redemption of this gathering of the Body of Christ to which I have been called, blessed and broken for the life of the world.

Fanning the flames

The flames of the Spirit. I often hear the words of Paul echo in my heart:

I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God that is within you. For God did not give us a give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1: 6-7).

I try to pay careful, close attention to the movement of spiritual energy in the room during liturgy. To notice when and where it ebbs and flows. Is there a pattern? Are the music ministers affecting that movement of energy? For good or for ill? I ask myself: who are the really awesome music ministers I know? What do I think makes them so good? How do they do what they do? How can I grow in those gifts which I recognize in them?

Becoming fire

If we take seriously the notion that the Eucharistic assembly is the Body of Christ, gathered to do the work of salvation in love for the world, then it follows that the sounds the assembly makes are nothing less than the sounds of Christ, indeed the very voice of God in our midst. Like Moses at the burning bush, when I become aware of this, my instinctive reaction is awe - - let me bow down, let me take off my shoes, for this is holy ground. The prayer of the assembly, the real presence of the Body of Christ, this voice of God, deserves all my respect, dedication, and love.

When I begin the opening song, am I doing my best to play the introduction in a manner which invites, encourages, inspires the assembly to sing? Does my accompaniment draw out the fullest, richest possible sound from the assembly? When I sing the verse of the responsorial psalm, am I doing my best to actually become the voice of the assembly in prayer at that moment? When I chant the litany, do I create a rhythm which the assembly can count on and confidently respond in? When I improvise at the keyboard between the end of the offertory song and the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer, am I doing my best to actually sound the prayer of the assembly as I sense it in that moment? Am I willing to give over all my talent, skill, attention and energy to sounding the prayer of this gathered assembly? Am I willing to be overshadowed, as Mary was, by God sounding the creative Word within me?

All these suggestions have something in common. I name that something as the cultivation of an attitude of praise and thanksgiving. Find out what God is doing, and become a partner with God, singing praise, giving glory, bringing new life into the world. The word Eucharist means Thanksgiving, and we are nothing if not a eucharistic people, a people centered in praise and thanksgiving. What Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of the poet I believe is equally appropriate to the gathered body of God in Christ, and to the music ministers who serve it:

*O tell us, poet, what do you do?
I praise.
But the deadly and the violent days,
how do you undergo them, take them in?
I praise.
But the namelessness - how do you raise
that, invoke the unnamable?
I praise.
What right have you, through every phase,
in every mask, to remain true?
I praise.
- - and that both stillness and the wild affray
know you, like star and storm?
Because I praise.*

Liturgy is a performance done by the gathered Body of Christ. The purpose of the performance is to deliver of all creation into the fullness of life. How can we tell if we are accomplishing this purpose? How can we tell if we are performing the liturgy well? How can we tell if our liturgy is "working"?

Scripture gives us some guidelines: if the saving work of God in Christ is flourishing in our midst, we might expect that Jesus's account would be accurate for our situation:

*Go and tell what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news brought to them (Luke 7: 22).
Liberty to captives, release to prisoners, a year of favor from the LORD (Luke 4:18-19).*

Or Paul's:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Are we practicing our ministry of music in such a way as to make these descriptions come alive in our midst? As judged by those we serve?

In closing, I want to invite us, right here and now, to practice what we preach! Augustine said that in the end what converted him to Christianity was not the intellectual arguments or the works of social justice or the love of community (though all of those became important parts of his ministry). What converted Augustine was "the sound of the Alleluia's rolling like thunder through the cathedral." We are blessed to be living our lives, as disciples of the LORD and ministers of the church, steeped in that song of praise. Let us perform a thanksgiving right now:

(And we moved into an ALLELUIA improvisation based on the familiar Gregorian tune, sung with body, heart, and soul by gathered assembly, 450 strong. Folks may not remember what I said. But I believe they will remember the singing with one another, and the sound of ALLELUIA rolling like thunder through the sanctuary.)

Questions for Liturgical Musicians

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1. Picture, in your mind, the community you serve. Imagine yourselves on a normal Sunday. Imagine a stranger showing up at your door, and in they come and liturgy begins. Do you suppose it is abundantly obvious to this stranger that whatever it is that is going on here, it is being done primarily by the entire gathered assembly, all together? Is it clear that the various ministers, from ushers to cantors to acolytes to presiders, are not the star attractions, but rather are servants of the gathered assembly, who is the main actor in this performance?

2. Think of a time when you were blessed to be part of a liturgy which you experienced as especially grace-filled, alive, and powerful. Think about the gathered assembly's role in that liturgy. Was it somehow different from what you usually experience? What made that difference possible? How might you, as a musician, cultivate that difference in yourself and in your people?

3. To be ritually competent, the gathered assembly needs many skills. Today we are focusing on music. What are the musical skills necessary for the assembly's ability to perform the liturgy effectively? How can we as pastoral musicians support and develop these skills in ourselves, in our ministers, and in our congregations?

4a. Giving Voice.

- Does your assembly feel free to sing? If not, why not?
- Are they inspired to sing by the proclamation of the word, the preaching, the liturgical action? If not, why not?
- Are they drawn to sing because of their experience of God in their lives outside church on Sundays? Do they recognize and affirm God's presence and action in their daily lives? Who is supporting them in this journey of faith?
- Can they hear themselves, one another, and the musical leadership and support clearly?
- Do all the ministers sing with the assembly as a matter of course?

4b. Keeping Silence.

- Silence is an integral part of music, and of living liturgy.
- Is your community comfortable with keeping silence?
- Does music-making always have a particular meaning and purpose in your worship, or is it sometimes used as "filler" to "cover " silence, thereby demeaning both the music and the quiet?

4c. Listening.

- Is the assembly able to do its part in receiving the living Word of God?
- Does the assembly know how to really listen? How can they respond from the depths of their being in song if they have not deeply taken in the Word?

4d. Responding.

- Is the music in worship performed in such a way as to clearly communicate that it is an integral part of the liturgical action? This has to do with content, timing, rhythm, and physical placement of ministers.

4e. Learning.

- by ear
- by reading
- Does the assembly have excellent models of singing and learning to sing in their cantors and choirs?

4f. Repertoire.

- Is it in a musical style appropriate to the assembly?
- Has adequate time been given for the assembly to assimilate new repertoire?
- Is this repertoire of such a quality as to be able to stand the test of time?
- Are you shaping the musical content of your worship in a way which supports its liturgical structure?
- Here's a repertoire checklist, taken from the American bishops' document, *Music in Catholic Worship*, beginning with the most important:

Acclamations

Gospel Acclamation

Holy, holy, memorial acclamation, Great Amen

Processional songs

entrance

communion

Responsorial Psalm

Ordinary Chants

Lord, have mercy

Glory to God

Lord's Prayer

Lamb of God

Profession of faith (Creed)

Supplementary Songs

Offertory Song

Song after Communion

Recessional Song

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Litanies (Prayers of the Faithful, Invocations of Christ in the penitential rite)

I would add:

Prelude, Postlude, and other instrumental music

Do you use this structure as you plan liturgies, and just as importantly, as you plan what new repertoire you want to teach your community over time?