

Grit and Grace: Liturgical Creativity - Three Suggestions, Lots of Questions

Copyright 2021 Amanda Udis-Kessler; amanda@amandaudiskessler.com

1. Start with everyday life

If “the earth and all that is in it belongs to Holy Love” (my rendering of Psalm 24:1), then any aspect of our regular lives is fair game for liturgical consideration and a reminder of who we are and to whom we belong.

As a quick example, when asked to write a short worship song for Baseball Sunday at a friend’s church, I chose the music to “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” and wrote the following for the congregation to sing:

God of beauty and baseball, God of pleasure and fun,
Bless us this day as we celebrate hits and strikeouts and joy that is great.
At the root of all that is sacred, your love is always the same.
We are one in singing your praise as we play this game.

(It helped to have an organist who could mimic the sounds of the organ used in baseball games.)

You’ll notice some playful messing with the original language of the song (“at the root of all that is sacred” from “for it’s root, root, root for the home team” and “we are one in singing your praise” from “for it’s one, two, three strikes you’re out”), appropriate for this kind of mash-up.

2. Start with the lectionary passage or another pericope and ask what meaning it has for us

Years ago, I wrote a sermon based on Exodus 1:8-14:

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’ Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.”

What I found powerful in this passage was how oppression, slavery, and violence were linked to the fact that the king in question “did not know Joseph.” In those four words, I found a way into the Exodus story that is still relevant. My sermon focused on how our mistreatment of other people (especially members of socially devalued groups), our self-destructive tendencies, and our careless violence against the planet had to do with the same lack of knowledge (and therefore of love) that we find at the beginning of the Exodus story. Not knowing Joseph, not knowing the story of what Joseph did and of how Israelites and Egyptians could work together, it was easy for

the king to become paranoid and oppressive. All of us today are like that king. If we don't know and love ourselves, it is easy for us to mistreat ourselves. If we don't know and love others, it is easy for us to hate, fear, and dehumanize them. If we don't know and love our planet, it is easy to despoil it. The sermon flowed from these points.

3. Start with Jesus

As I wrote in one of the essays for this workshop,

“Jesus’s creativity is particularly manifest in his parables and his sayings. Jesus was a genius at coming up with parables and sayings that reached people where they were but then took them someplace else, someplace new, by juxtaposing the familiar and mundane with the ridiculous and unthinkable, the ho-hum and ordinary with the uncomfortable and barrier-breaking. Unlike the deity described in the Biblical creation stories, Jesus is not making something out of nothing; as a creative human being, he is taking ideas and images that already exist and troubling them in the service of his vision of Beloved Community (or Love’s Domain or the Kin-dom of God). For example, the phrase “good Samaritan” in the context of Jesus’s time and among his Jewish audience would have been an oxymoron, something like “beloved enemy.” Which was, of course, exactly the point. It’s one thing to tell your followers to love their enemies; it’s quite another to tell a story in which your enemy treats you lovingly and tends to your wounds while your own people pass by along the side of the road.”

We can get creative with Jesus’s creativity by revisiting his stories, parables, aphorisms, and deeds, or by attending to the many questions he asked and re-asking them for ourselves.

Here are some prompts and questions based on things Jesus said and did according to the Synoptic Gospels. There are literally hundreds of additional possibilities along these same lines.

1. The kingdom of God, or Love’s Domain, is like _____
2. In today’s world, the Priest and the Levite who walk past the wounded traveler would be... and the Good Samaritan would be _____
3. In our society, healing the sick looks like _____
4. Today, we can proclaim the good news by _____
5. Something miraculous we can do in our time is _____
6. Under rapacious capitalism, the parable of the vineyard owner and the workers teaches us _____
7. Blessed are the _____, for they _____
8. Woe unto you, _____, for you _____

9. The Temple tables that need overturning today are _____ because _____
10. The hypocrites Jesus would rail against today are _____ and Jesus would say to them, _____
11. We would be with the sheep when we _____ and we would be with the goats when we _____
12. The most important way to love God today is to _____
13. The most important way to love our neighbors today is to _____
14. We have heard it said that _____ but Jesus says to us, _____
15. We can best love our enemies by _____
16. We are most tempted by _____ and we can best resist temptation by _____
17. Praying the prayer Jesus taught in our times means asking for _____
18. We cannot serve God and _____
19. Today, striving for Love's Domain and holy righteousness means _____
20. Today, not judging would look like _____
21. What would it mean to do to others as we would have them do to us?
22. What are the characteristics of the narrow gate and the wide gate? How do we equip ourselves to choose the narrow gate?
23. In today's world, false prophets often look like _____
24. What would it mean for us to leave the dead to put away their dead?

As a modest example, this is from an essay I wrote for Whosoever, a resource for LGBTQ+ Christians:

“And he spoke to them and said, ‘What is the Community of God like? It is like a Pride parade filled with a great diversity of people, decked out in rainbows and beads and drag, marching down Fifth Avenue in New York City, twirling batons, roller skating. And among the marchers is a young man whose parents threw him out. This is his first Pride parade. He sees protesters on one corner and he is filled with terror and shame. But he keeps marching. And on the next corner, he sees a group of older men and women holding a huge banner reading, ‘Free Mom Hugs! Free Dad Hugs!’” His eyes meet the eyes of one of the older men, and the man holds out his arms and beckons the young man over. The young man falls into the older man’s arms,

sobbing. They embrace for a long time. Then several other men and women from the group take over, hugging the young man into joy and gratitude and connection. This is what the Community of God is like. All who have been exiled will come home, all who have been judged will be loved without condition, all who have been oppressed will be free, and all who have been excluded will be welcomed. Behold, this is the good news!”

Here are some of the questions Jesus asked, that we could ask anew. Again, there are dozens of questions raised by Jesus in the Gospels.

1. If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?
2. If you love [only] those who love you, what reward do you have?
3. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?
4. Why are you afraid, you of little faith?
5. What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?
6. Who is my mother, and who are my siblings?
7. Who do you say that I am?
8. What were you arguing about on the way?
9. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?
10. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?
11. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?
12. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?
13. (And, to take us back to the beginning...) What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?

The resources are there for all of us. We simply need to approach them with open hearts and minds and sufficient energy to wrestle with them as Jacob wrestled with the spirit of the holy. If we wrestle earnestly and in good faith, our frailties will be revealed but we will also be given new identities.