

## The Gifts of God in the Divine Service

“Theology begins and ends with the divine service.”<sup>1</sup> This statement comes from a book all first-year seminarians are required to read. It is simple but very profound. Our Lutheran theology is not a set of philosophical notions that are thought about and have no real application for Christians; rather, our Lutheran theology and faith is lived. There is no better place where this is seen than in the worship service on Sunday morning.

The structure and source of our orders of service have such richness of God’s message of salvation, that even the terms we use teach us what God has done for us in Christ. You will notice in our hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*, that the titles of the orders for the main service on a Sunday morning are called the “Divine Service.” This is because God is the one who is doing all the work on a Sunday morning. God serves you, his children, with the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that have been won for you on account of Christ. The only thing you and I can offer to, or “do” for, God is to give Him our sin. This great exchange of our sin and Christ giving us His righteousness can be seen throughout the entire service and in the words of the hymns we sing. We are living our baptismal life each and every Sunday morning.

In many of the seminary classes we take, there is an intentional connection made, beyond our classes in worship, to show the relationship between the divine service and whatever topic we are learning...be it a class on the Psalms, doctrine, preaching, or a host of other things. How we worship reflects what we believe and vice versa. When we change how we worship, it affects what we believe, teach, and confess. There is a reciprocal relationship that exists between doctrine and practice.

This past Sunday was the 3rd Sunday of Easter. On Sunday we used the order of service Divine Service Setting III, which is based on the communion service in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (page 15 for those of you who grew up with TLH). In this service and the various other settings, some of the parts of the service that we sing or say have been said by Christians for close to 2,000 years, or in some cases even longer! The Christians who have gone before us and many who died for their faith in Christ, some in the coliseum of Rome, worshiped in a similar way as we do today. Their faith is our faith; we share the same faith in Christ and this is reflected in how we worship.

This service served personally as a great source of comfort for me this past Sunday as I stood singing the words of the liturgy. To be able to sing of what God has done for me in Christ, and looking outside of my sinful self to the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ, gave me a peace that surpasses understanding. A few days earlier I was with a couple in the congregation, sharing in their sorrow and grief at the loss of their child. I have visited many of you in the hospital and in nursing homes. I have seen as your vicar many of the sufferings that you have had to endure on this side of heaven in my short year at Lutheran Church of the Cross. Yet, in the midst of the sadness and suffering, and even during the times of great joy, the words of the divine service that have been sung for centuries proclaimed to me that Christ remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. His unchanging word of salvation is proclaimed and confessed on Sunday morning. This past Sunday at Lutheran Church of the Cross, it was a great comfort to be able to put down my worship folder and be able to sing from memory the service that God is using to bring and proclaim our salvation in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> *Theology the Lutheran Way* by Oswald Bayer page 93.

For a number of years, there has been a push in the Christian church for so-called “contemporary worship.” This term is used in various contexts, is defined in a number of different ways, and is often meant to imply a more informal setting where a structured order of service is replaced with singing of songs that are more subjective and emotionally driven in nature, and are sung by a “praise band” of some sort. The rationale for these services is as varied as the people who attend them, but it often boils down to wanting to attract younger people or the unchurched by incorporating modern culture into the church. There are some who will say that our liturgical, historical, Biblical, Lutheran Divine Service is not with the times or is different than the culture around us. That is true and that is a good thing! The Lutheran Divine Service transcends time and remains constant because Christ and our Christian faith do not change. This is actually a very contemporary thing. Each time you come to worship at Lutheran Church of the Cross, no matter if it is during a time of great sadness or a time of great joy, the same message of salvation is applicable to your life. Your contemporary life and faith is contemporarily being fed by God through word and sacrament. This is “contemporary worship.”

This summer, a group of our youth are going to experience a great event as we attend the Higher Things conference in Nashville, Tennessee. I explained a couple of months ago what Higher Things is, but one of the main focal points of their organization centers around the Lutheran Divine Service and the Lutheran liturgy. Our seminary classes and other sources from various Christian groups and organizations show us a very interesting fact about our youth today. They love the liturgy! This is also true for the future pastors of our church, as an overwhelming majority of the seminarians, especially those my age (the young guys) have a great love and appreciation for the liturgy. Higher Things in the past few years has been growing like wildfire. The youth who attend the conferences keep coming back, and one of the things they respond to and like the best are the worship services during the course of the conference. Higher Things now has two conferences every summer for youth, and they continually add campus groups at various colleges around the country to meet the demands of those who are becoming involved with Higher Things and “Daring to be Lutheran!” What an amazing opportunity our youth have this summer as they travel to Nashville.

The Lutheran liturgy has been an important part of my life in the Christian faith and it will continue to be for the rest of my days on this earth. I have and I will continue to use it as source of pastoral care for the flock that, the Lord willing, I am entrusted with to shepherd some day. The liturgy flows through my preaching, teaching, and care of God’s people because the Word of God is at work and is the substance of the liturgy. As a future pastor, I love to teach about the liturgy, because if we don’t understand why we say or sing what we do or how our theology is being confessed and affecting our worship, then our liturgy becomes empty meaningless words and ritual rather than a great blessing and gift from God. Our current topic in Bible Talk is on this very subject of worship and liturgy, and what a privilege it has been to study this with you at Lutheran Church of the Cross. The Lord continue to bless and keep you in the faith handed down to you by the apostles and which you were baptized into.

Your brother and servant in Christ,

Vicar Wright