Milligan College

The White House with Red Shutters:

Liturgy, Narrative, and Incarnation in the Everyday

Elijah Hook

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Dr. Todd Edmondson

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Introduction

I was not raised in a church setting that was even mildly liturgical. The churches of my youth acknowledged Advent and Lent at best, and even then it was often only in passing. But in the first semester of my graduate program, I began attending a weekly, ecumenical, liturgical prayer service called Adoration. My early experiences with liturgy in that semester were confusing, overwhelming, and even unsettling at times. I still recall the first time I saw the procession of the cross. I didn't have any particular reason to dislike it, but neither did I particularly like it. It felt foreign, unnecessary, and perhaps even a little idolatrous. Nevertheless, I approached liturgy with a desire to understand.

But understanding did not come easily or quickly. In fact, I still have much to learn. After an entire semester of regularly worshiping in a liturgical setting, I felt that my grasp on liturgy was still nearly as weak as it was at the start. My appreciation for it, however, had grown immensely. It was enough to make me return again the following semester.

I continued to worship in that setting each week, seeking all I could to better understand what was happening in each service, and why things were done as they were. It was not until the first week of Lent that I finally glimpsed some of the bigger meaning behind what we were doing.

We don't normally pray the *Kyrie* in our service, but in the first week of Lent we sing a modified, experimental version of it. Everything goes as normal, but in between the calls for mercy a member of the congregation reads aloud a history of the Church. This is not a history of the Church's accomplishments or triumphs, but rather of its atrocities, atrocities committed in the name of God.

Hearing this narrative of Church history brought this aspect of liturgy into focus. Finally, I thought, I had a story to guide me through at least part of the liturgy. Through this story, I was able to understand the purpose of praying not only the *Kyrie* together as a congregation, but of penitential prayers in general. I was able to use the story to situate myself within the Church and the liturgy. Story quickly became the best way I could find to understand liturgical worship. All liturgy, religious or secular, is itself an enactment of a particular story. The liturgical calendar follows the life of Christ. The liturgy of the word tells the story of God's interactions with humanity. The liturgy of the Eucharist tells the story of Christ's death, resurrection, and the unity we find in salvation. Stories continue to act as my primary mode of understanding liturgical worship. If I can find the story, then I can find my place in it.

My primary goal here is to understand the ways in which liturgy and narrative interact and inform one another. While this project works as a cohesive, integrated whole, its structure is threefold. First, I examine some of the narrative structure embedded in liturgy. What is the story of its formation? How is it specifically designed to depict a story? How may I read that story so as to best engage with the liturgy? Second, I look at how liturgy promotes further stories, and how these stories inform our understanding of liturgy. For this, I look to two authors that I believe explore liturgy in their creative works. These authors are Madeleine L'Engle and Wendell Berry. Their work punctuates the conversation throughout. Lastly, I engage both narrative and liturgy in my own creative pieces. In doing this, I hope to show not only that narrative enhances our understanding of liturgy, but that liturgy can also help clarify our own narratives.

Why Narrative?

Before diving headlong into liturgical theology, it is best to lay some groundwork for my approach. If it is not clear already, this project is approaching liturgy through a lens of narrative theory. My reason for choosing this, first and foremost, is that narrative is the primary means by which I learn. Stories have always been my most accessible learning tool. If I can latch onto a story, I can remember and more fully understand the lesson at hand. But beyond personal preference, there is quite a lot of research to back this up. In fact, some scholars believe that narrative is the basis for all human communication, that the human brain processes and organizes information according to basic elements of narrative, such as plot structure, characterization, and metaphor.

For the past several decades, there has been what some call a "narrative turn" across academic disciplines. There has been widespread recognition that the analysis of stories is beneficial to a range of fields, whether they are those more closely related to narrative such as communications, history, and philosophy, or those seemingly more distant such as medicine, psychology, and engineering. Narrative theory reveals "the need to use stories to negotiate the multiple (sub)cultures, traditions, and ways of seeing being brought together into ever-closer proximity by the forces of globalization" (Herman 2). While each discipline applies narrative theory for its own purposes, the primary goal in using narrative theory is to establish what constitutes narrative, how it may be set apart from other modes of communication, and how it opens up broader dialogue in the areas in which it is engaged.

At its core, narrative theory is interdisciplinary. One might be tempted to relegate it to literature or communications, but it cannot find its home in a single discipline. There is not, in fact, a clear answer as to where narrative theory originated. Michael Bamberg, a psychologist and prominent narrative theorist, describes the interdisciplinary nature of the narrative turn, saying that is has offered ways of “rethinking the dynamics between the individual and the social and has become a center piece of qualitative inquiry” (4). That narrative theory has strong interdisciplinary potential is quite evident in much of the academic work of Stanley Hauerwas. Known primarily for his scholarship in ethics and political theology, Hauerwas is closely associated with narrative theology. Two books which he has edited, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* and *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, display critical use of narrative theory in the discipline of theology. The first is a collection of essays that characterize the broad use of narrative theory in theology. The second takes up the topic of Christian ethics, framing its approach through Christian practice and narrative. In his introduction to *Why Narrative?*, Hauerwas says that “narrative is neither just an account of genre criticism nor a faddish appeal to the importance of telling stories; rather, it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions” (5).

The Christian convictions of which Hauerwas speaks are at work in the practices and worship of Christians, also known as liturgy. Liturgy is practice. It is ritual and tradition. It bears meaning beyond that which is immediately available upon its enactment. The ways in which we practice our faith tell a story about our faith. This story is key in understanding liturgy, and it takes time to unpack. The use of narrative is, thereby, integral to understanding and fully participating in any Christian liturgy, whether formal or informal. In fact, it is integral in participating in any liturgy at all, Christian or otherwise. As the work of James K.A. Smith reminds us, we are surrounded by liturgies whether we realize it or not. Liturgies are, most simply, “identity-forming practices” (Smith, *Desiring* 35), and can be either sacred, such as those performed in churches, or secular, such as those performed in shopping malls or stadiums.

Most often, we enact cultural liturgies without realizing it. Why? Because we fail to attend to the stories behind them. We do not question why things are the way they are, how they came to be. We simply do as we have always done. But behind every practice, ritual, or tradition is a story worth understanding. James K.A. Smith argues that “perhaps some of our worship habits are a missed opportunity; that we fail to draw on the formative riches of the tradition and thereby shut down channels for the Spirit’s work” (*Desiring* 153). The “formative riches” of tradition of which he speaks may be attended to through story. The story lends purpose and conviction to the practice.

This is why I choose to use narrative as a lens for approaching and understanding liturgy. I want liturgical worship to be a practice that is inspired, filled with purpose and conviction, not merely an enactment of meaningless motion. And in turn, I want it to infuse my everyday practices, to lend meaning outside of its usual settings.

Creative Engagement with Liturgy in the Works of L’Engle and Berry

Shortly after catching a glimpse of narrative in the experimental version of the *Kyrie*, I began to contemplate how I might engage with liturgy through a more creative medium. If I could understand the story told in liturgy, then perhaps it could inspire me to tell other stories. As usual, I found that if I had an interesting idea, someone else has already had it as well. I first came across Madeleine L’Engle’s poem “For Lent, 1966” in that same season:

> It is my Lent to break my Lent,
> To eat when I would fast,
> To know when slender strength is spent,
> Take shelter from the blast

> When I would run with wind and rain,
> To sleep when I would watch.
> It is my Lent to smile at pain
> But not ignore its touch.
> It is my Lent to listen well
> When I would be alone,
> To talk when I would rather dwell
> In silence, turn from none
> Who call on me, to try to see
> That what is truly meant
> Is not my choice. If Christ's I'd be
> It's thus I'll keep my Lent. (*Ordering* 287)

This was the first piece of creative writing that I encountered that was overtly inspired by the author's liturgical practices. I have chosen to continue with some of L'Engle's writing as it is quite clear that her worship is directly infused into much of her work. I have chosen to include Wendell Berry as well. While Berry is much subtler in his writing, the rhythms of liturgy are evident all the same. There are many other writers whose work I could have included here as well: Mary Oliver, Marilynne Robinson, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Flannery O'Connor, to name just a few. But it so happens that both L'Engle and Berry, in addition to having large bodies of creative fiction, have also written many essays detailing their approaches to writing, faith, work, and community, all of which prove to be quite enlightening to their fictional works.

Madeleine L'Engle's most well-known and beloved work is the children's science fiction novel *A Wrinkle in Time*. It tells the story of Meg Murry and her quest to find her missing father. Accompanied by her friend, Calvin, and her little brother, Charles Wallace, and with the aid of three angelic beings, Meg travels through time and space in search of her father. She visits different planets, meets all different sorts of beings, and faces the darkness that has captured her father. *A Wrinkle in Time* is the first novel in L'Engle's *Time Quintet*.

L'Engle was raised in an Episcopalian home. As a child, she attended an Episcopalian boarding school, and remained in the Episcopalian Church for the majority of her lifetime. There is no doubt that her worldview was shaped by her Christian practices, as was her approach to writing. In much of her writing, she seems to be concerned with time. To many readers, her reflections in the *Time Quintet* may seem more in line with philosophical musings, but for her they were deeply rooted in the traditions of her faith. In her non-fiction book *Walking on Water*, she discusses the notion of *kairos* as a sort of time different than the usual *chronos*. *Kairos*, for L'Engle, is more real than *chronos*; it extends much wider and deeper. It is a place in which one can be totally unselfconscious. The artist at work and the child at play are both engaging in *kairos*. "In *kairos* we become what we are called to be as human beings, cocreators with God, touching on the wonder of creation" (L'Engle, *Walking* 88). When Meg and her companions travel through time and space, they experience something larger than themselves, something that cannot be contained within *chronos*, whether for good or bad. When they return to time as usual, their understanding of the world is shifted.

This is one of the ways in which L'Engle incorporates liturgical practice into her writing. Liturgy, it seems, shapes the way in which she views time. This is also evident in her poem "For Lent, 1966." She could have very easily left off the "1966" from her title and no one would have thought a thing about it. But including the year displays an important part of her understanding of the liturgical calendar. While her poem is no doubt a beautiful reflection for any Lenten season, she recognizes that each Lent will be different for her. The liturgical calendar follows the life of Christ. Each year we experience the life of Christ alongside our own everyday lives with the intention of becoming more like Christ through each cycle. As Joan Chittister describes it, "The liturgical year is the year that sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus, the Christ" (6). L'Engle recognizes that Lent will come each year, but she will never experience it in the same way twice. With each passing liturgical year, with each completion of the cycle, she ought to be more attuned to Christ. Her understanding of her faith will shift and grow year to year, expanding further into *kairos* with each cycle of *chronos*.

Similarly, the work of Wendell Berry draws upon some of the more repetitive and rhythmical aspects of liturgy. As a farmer, he is attuned to the natural patterns necessitated by changing seasons. The need for rhythm and routine, much like that of the liturgical calendar, comes through in his writing. But more so than this, his work bears significant sacramental influence. The notion of pansacramentality, “the idea that all things hold sacramental potential and are thus able to represent God in the world,” (Gustafson 346) is readily evident in Berry’s works. He says in his essay “Health is Membership,”

> “I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.” (*Crank* 89)

Berry sees God in all the world, and thereby feels called to love and attend to the world. He does this primarily through his attention to community and his caring for the earth.

Berry’s faith is not as public as that of Madeleine L’Engle. It seems that it is not something that he feels called upon to share very frequently. It would seem that his faith is centered more upon practice than proclamation. This is evident in the lives and personalities of his characters. They rarely tell us what they’re going to do or attempt to explain their actions. Instead, they merely act, with the knowledge that they are being viewed by their community, and that their actions will be understood within that context. The practice of faith is also evident in the community formed by his characters. Ultimately, community is one of the highest achievements of the individuals in Berry's stories. It is an end goal in itself. The simple act of being together. By being together, by attending to one another, they attend to the image of God indwelling one another, a practice of faith perhaps stronger than any proclamation.

These two writers, while writing from very different views of literature, faith, and everyday work, provide two examples of the ways in which liturgy and narrative interact. They have experienced liturgy in some way, and choose to respond to it through creative narrative. Their work provides a gateway to understanding liturgy outside of its formal practice. While they approach liturgy and narrative from very different perspectives, their work comes together under a single notion: incarnation. Incarnation is an integral concept to liturgy and Christian faith on the whole. It is the belief that Christ took on physical form in order to bring salvation to creation. It is also closely tied to the embodied practices of Christians. To work within incarnation is to bring the Kingdom of God into physical being on earth. It is present in sacrament, in gathering together with other believers, and in practicing liturgy.

For L'Engle, art is incarnation. She claims that "all true art has an iconic quality," meaning that it in some way bears the image of Christ (*Walking* 20). Consequently, "to paint a picture or to write a story or to compose a song is an incarnational activity. The artist is a servant who is willing to be a birth-giver" (8). Not only does she imbue her stories with elements of liturgy, the story itself, in the very fact that she wrote it, is an act of liturgical response. Just as liturgy seeks to bring the Kingdom of God to earth, so does her art.

Berry's approach to incarnation looks a little different from that of L'Engle. Rather than participating in incarnational activities, he sees himself as being already surrounded by reminders of incarnation. Writing from a view of pansacramentality, Berry sees in everything physical examples of divine grace present and at work on earth. Berry's work is particularly attentive to earth and the flesh, seeing both as vital to understanding God and humanity. He says in his poem "Healing," "A creature is not a creator, and cannot be. There is only one Creation, and we are its members. To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep oneself fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew" (Berry, *People* 9). Rather than participating in the incarnation of God's creation, Berry's work stands as a response to that which he cannot help but see all around him, that of which he himself is a part.

Liturgy and Memoir

The goal of this project is, ultimately, incarnation. What follows is a collection of stories and poems arranged according to the basic pieces of a liturgical worship service. Each piece is a story or recollection of times spent in the home of my maternal grandparents, the white house with red shutters. Much like a church, their home was a place of gathering, of communion, of refuge, and of love. It was a place where community was embodied through food, hospitality, and familial embrace.

As I first began to contemplate what it would look like to explore liturgy through narrative, I found myself continually drawn back to this house. Stories have always played an important role in our family dynamic. This is especially true of the family gatherings that used to be held in my grandparents' house. There was hardly a time when a story was not being shared. Stories strengthened our bonds, gave us common ground, marked us as belonging. Storytelling is a practice as bound to our family as the practice of eating together, or of greeting one another with a hug; it is a natural response upon entering into fellowship with one another. The stories told by my family shaped and continue to shape my understanding of the world. It is only right that I should return to these stories as I seek to better understand the ways in which I worship.

The following is not arranged chronologically, but rather thematically. There are five sections, each attending to a specific portion of a typical liturgical service. They are as follows: *Gathering*, *Introductory Rites*, *Liturgy of the Word*, *Liturgy of the Eucharist*, and *Concluding Rites*. Each story is meant to draw upon the communal or theological significance of specific liturgical practices. Following each story is a piece which expounds upon these particularities.

In his book *The Wellspring of Worship*, (a work to which I am enormously indebted) Jean Corbon, a Maronite Catholic priest, describes the difference between the liturgy celebrated (practiced in a worship setting) and the liturgy lived (how we acknowledge it outside of a worship setting). He says that when we practice liturgy,

> Our lives take root in the celebration and begin to open and expand. When the kingdom finally comes, the celebration of the mystery and the living of the mystery will be forever one. In that eternity, to live the mystery will be to celebrate it, just as even now to celebrate it is to enter into "the long, eternal day of light" that is life. (Corbon 205).

This body of work represents for me an attempt not just to understand what it is I am enacting in the performance of liturgy, but to allow the inspiration of such worship to infuse all that I do, to live the liturgy that I celebrate. In allowing it to color the stories of my past, I hope to see it take on greater meaning in my present.

Part One: Gathering

An Assembling of Saints

Each day begins in silence, awaiting
The first signs of wakefulness to call us
To our glory, to stir the morning's song.
Shifting sheets, feet on floorboards cue the start.
Restlessness builds; this is what we came for.
In silence, we linger. The song begins.

Each day begins in silence, awaiting
Our rest, the work of gathering is done.
Long hours spent in preparation end
Here at the start, where we may feel the soul's
Fulfillment. This is what we came for, to
Be where we belong, here among the saints.

Each day begins in silence, awaiting
Incarnation. To gather is enough.

Mornings in the White House with Red Shutters

I wake up to the light of mid-morning. I'm in the twin bedroom in my grandparents' home, an old farm house in Indiana, the white house with red shutters. Our bedroom, one of many in this house, takes its name from the two twin beds tucked under the eaves in opposite corners. This is where my sister, Abby, and I always stay. My mother and all five of her younger siblings stayed in this room at some point in their childhoods. Vestiges of their occupancies remain in objects discarded or forgotten in drawers and in secret scribblings on the closet wall. Mixed among these reminders now are marks of our own residency: our clothing brought from home as well as gifts brought to us by our younger aunts, still taking youthful pleasure in spoiling nieces and nephews. The room is a palimpsest of its inhabitants, past and present, temporary and permanent.

I sit up. I've remembered that this morning it's not just Abby and me; our cousins, Meghan and Anna, ought to have arrived in the night. Before going to sleep, we helped Grandma pull out the extra mattresses stowed underneath the beds, scooting them out and leaving brush marks in the plush blue carpet. We pulled sheets and blankets and pillows from the hall closets, all smelling familiarly clean and old. We made up the beds to welcome them. They were scheduled to arrive long after our bedtime, which would make falling asleep a near impossibility.

Going to sleep in that room is never easy, but it's mostly our fault; we always stay up late talking. When all four of us are together, we pass most evenings telling stories and playing games. But we always do so with caution. We do our best to stay in our beds and keep as quiet as possible. The twin bedroom is far away from the parts of the house occupied during the day. The grownups cannot easily hear us, and should they come up to check on us, the groaning stairs and creaking hallway give us plenty of warning. Even so, we remain cautious. On the occasion that we grow too loud, we inevitably fail to hear the quiet footsteps of a snooping parent. And then we are in big trouble. Last night Abby and I had tried to stay awake, in hopes of seeing our cousins when they arrived. But we fell asleep, as our parents had predicted.

I look down at the floor. Meghan and Anna are there, still sound asleep. Cora is probably with her parents, still too young to join us. It will be some time yet before she can graduate to the twin bedroom. My eyes find their way across the room to Abby's bed. She's still asleep too, so I lie down again.

As the oldest, Meghan decides when to get up. It is our unspoken practice to defer to her superior judgment. I'll have to wait until she wakes up to begin getting ready. As I wait, I listen for signs of activity in the house. While we always wait for Meghan's call to get up, Meghan waits for Grandma. We do not rise before Grandma for the simple fact that we would not know what to do if we did. There would be no one to greet us in the kitchen, no one to help us find breakfast, no one to direct the morning's activities. Often when we arrive in the kitchen, we find that our parents are still asleep, taking full advantage of a grandmother eager to take care of her grandchildren.

I do not hear any snoring, which means Grandpa at least is awake. Grandma is likely awake as well. I listen intently to hear if she is rustling about in her bedroom across the hall, but I hear nothing. This is a good sign. It means we only need to wait for Meghan to wake up.

In the silence, my anticipation grows. I fear it will become unbearable. What am I waiting for? What about today is so important? Nothing in particular. I simply get to be with my cousins. No one knows what the day will hold, or if it will hold anything of significance at all. But to be with my cousins is excitement enough.

I look across the room again. My eyes meet with Abby's, who is now awake as well. We acknowledge each other, but do not say anything. We are both silently willing Meghan to wake up.

Presently we hear a whisper, "Is anyone else awake?

Instantly Abby and I sit up, and the day has begun. Gone is the long and torturing silence. We talk and laugh freely now. Anna takes some rousing, but she comes around quickly, not wanting to miss something important. Abby crouches by the small window under the eaves, and checks the day's weather conditions. This will determine the range of possible activities. The sunshine promises a day of outdoor activities.

We spend a good amount of time catching up. Abby and I describe the agonizing day we spent waiting on them to arrive. Meghan and Anna describe the agonizing day they spent in school and then driving into the night. Soon, we decide it is time to join the rest of the family for breakfast, and we begin making motions to get dressed.

The politics of dressing are peculiar. As the only boy, I often have to cross the hallway and dress in the bathroom. On the occasion that multiple girls want to use the restroom, I am free to change in the bedroom. Today I gather my things and cross the hall. When I return to the hall, Meghan is already there, as usual. Slowly, we gather in the hallway, fully dressed, shoes and all; no matter how hard Grandma cleaned, her kitchen floors remained dirty, turning our socks black, thus shoes were worn at all times. In a line, we proceed. I trace a finger up and down the lead-painted walls, feeling the magic of that place, not yet fully aware of how lucky I am to be protected within it.

The work of gathering is done; the joy of gathering is here. Together we go downstairs, ready to take on the day together.

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Gathering is perhaps the most essential part of worship, and it is often not given its due attention. That we should gather together for worship is rather assumed, taken for granted. Of course we gather to worship; worship does not make much sense outside of a gathering. Philip Kenneson, in his essay, "Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation," says that "human gatherings always involve worship, and worship always implicates human gatherings" (Hauerwas, *Blackwell* 53). Moreover, "human gatherings are inevitably formative, not least because such gatherings construct an imaginative landscape (a 'world') within which all future action and reflection upon it will take place" (55). There is, it seems, something of vital importance in the act of gathering. It is our primary means of establishing community, and thereby shapes our understanding of the world and our place within it.

Furthermore, as Kenneson notes, all gathering implies some form of worship. James K.A. Smith expounds upon this in the three volumes of his *Cultural Liturgies* series in which he takes up the notion of secular liturgies. His core claim is that "liturgies—whether 'sacred' or 'secular'—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world" (Smith, *Desiring* 25). In short, that around which we gather reveals what we worship. His opening example is that of a shopping mall. The fact that so many hundreds of us flock to shopping malls and places of commerce (and that we enact specific liturgies of practice in these places) reveals a certain worship of material goods around which our society is centered.

But beyond gathering merely displaying that which is important to us, there is more at work in this practice. We must ask, of course, what story are we telling when we gather? Scripture has quite a lot to say about the act of gathering. One verse that readily comes to mind is

Matthew 18:20 in which Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (NRSV). We believe that by the simple act of coming together we invoke the presence of God. However, there is something perhaps even greater at play as well. Ephesians 1:9-10 says that God “has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (NRSV). Gathering is an eschatological act. It is an enactment of God’s ultimate desire to bring all creation together to Godself. When we gather in worship, we are participating in what is to come. This is the story that we tell when we come together as believers. It is the story of what we believe to be our ultimate goal.

It is no mistake that in his writings on the mystery of liturgy, Jean Corbon begins with John’s vision on Patmos. While trying to understand what it is about worship that sustains us as believers, Corbon finds in Revelation an image of the communion of the Holy Trinity. It is toward this communion that we are all moving, but we cannot yet fully experience “unless the veil of mortality is rent asunder” (Corbon 31). For in this life, on this earth, we are in what he calls the time of promises:

> The time of promises is a time that runs its course but is still empty, a time that bears the wound of absence but is sustained by expectation; it is a time on the way toward fullness and the presence that lies over the horizon of our nostalgia. It is a time of the luminous cloud but not yet of day. ‘That day’, after so many preparations and prefigurations, will mark the coming of the mystery. (35)

In gathering, we may glimpse this communion toward which we are all moving. Our understanding of and engagement with the mystery of liturgy may be expressed in our participation in communion, in our attempt to gather, however imperfectly, in this life.

Wendell Berry illuminates this principle beautifully in a vision he gives to Jayber Crow. It is not uncommon for his characters to experience visions. In addition to Jayber, Andy Catlett and Hannah Coulter also experience visions. It is one of Jayber's visions that I wish to focus on here. After cleaning the graveyard, Jayber has a vision of the community gathered:

> My vision gathered the community as it has never been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time…And so there we all were on a little wave of time lifting up to eternity, and none of us ever in time would know what to make of it. (Berry, *Jayber* 205)

This is a vision of the gathering that is to come. Our gatherings in time cannot be perfect, but that does not mean they are not worthwhile. As Berry carefully depicts in this passage, our gatherings in time prefigure a gathering in the eschaton, and in this there is some value to be had. No matter the shape of a gathering, where it occurs, who is there or who it not there, what is done or left undone, there is some basic human need being accomplished. If God's final picture for the flourishing of humanity is one of gathering, then we achieve something of this flourishing even in the smallest, most poorly conceived gathering.

Also important to note in Jayber's vision is the presence of those members of the community who have died. It is no mistake that this vision occurs in a graveyard. When we gather, it is important to recognize the presence not only of those physically present, but of those who are no longer with us or cannot be with us. Liturgy helps to illuminate this aspect of worship in several ways. Formal liturgy is a standardized set of worship practices. Whether it involves praying, reading scripture, or partaking in the Eucharist, liturgical worship unifies congregations separated by time and distance. In liturgical worship we may be constantly aware that other believers are doing the same in other places. Liturgical theology, too, upholds the communion of saints, or the belief that those who have physically died on earth are still living and worshiping and praying with us. When we engage in these things, in worshiping and praying, we join with them.

These are the narratives, the stories, we tell whenever we come together. Narratives of unity and flourishing, narratives of the past, present, and future. As Kenneson notes, our practices determine our imaginative landscapes. If we do not regularly gather in the present, we cannot properly imagine our future gathering, the very thing that God desires for humanity. Each gathering is a glimpse of God’s desire for humanity, the ending to our story in time, and in this we may find some rest.

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It is often thought that childhood is carefree, or at least ought to be. Children, should they be lucky enough, can go about their days without worry or responsibility. It is days like these, those days with my cousins in the house that raised our parents, that make me wary of such a belief. To be sure, my cares as a child were less than now, but they were cares and anxieties nonetheless. On mornings in the white house with red shutters, however, I knew what it was to be carefree. It took a lot of work to get to there. There was packing followed by an early morning, which led into a day of discomfort and nausea and longing during a thirteen-hour drive. Then, once we arrived, we sometimes found that our cousins were not yet there. The periods of waiting were the worst.

All of our work led to the point of gathering. Our whole purpose, at least as children, was merely to be together. What happened beyond that often did not concern us. It was enough to gather, come what may. The twin bedroom illuminates this beautifully. Its primary function was as a place of rest. We kept no toys or games there, and very rarely returned there until nighttime. We did little else aside from resting and being together in that room. It was a space carefully prepared for us, constantly awaiting our return.

On the whole, my grandparents' house was a safe space for us as children, and likely for many adults as well. It was a space which placed few demands upon us, beyond those of civility and the occasional chore. It was a space which allowed us to be as we were, even encouraged it. The house itself, having been added onto many times, did not follow the rules of traditional architecture. One room led to another room which led to another room. It had bathtubs with no running water, fireplaces not capable of holding a fire, bedrooms with sinks in the corner, and secret doors hidden in dark paneling. It was a house that became whatever it needed to become to suit the purposes of those who lived there.

In its spaces, we saw opportunities to think and act creatively, to explore the people we might become. A grand piano was an excellent place to build a fort. A cellar seemed an appropriate place to stage an impromptu play. A dark den provided an excellent backdrop for Grandpa's nightly scary stories.

The house molded to our needs. But mostly, it allowed us to be together. Its safety and familiarity drew us back continually. Gathering was our goal. The things we did together did not really matter. From exploring the depths of the cellar to riding the bag swing high into the trees, from mopping the back-porch floors to polishing the staircase bannister, our activities were filled with joy. From the moment that we broke the morning's silence and tramped down the creaky old stairs, we were pleased well enough simply to be together, the promise of strong familial ties always before us. No matter our adventures, the story we told was always one of gathering.

Part Two: Introductory Rites

Entrance

A Procession of Light

The door on rusty rollers squeaks a chord
Familial. Conversations grow dim
As anticipatory looks gather
Around the corner, waiting to greet this
New light, waiting to meld into welcome
Accord, old disputes gone away in joy.

The door on rusty rollers squeaks a chord
And grown-ups stand. The children run toward
Its source, eager to see and to embrace.
We all wonder at who might appear this
Time, whose return shall we witness, whose long
Unfelt presence will bless us tonight.

The door on rusty rollers squeaks a chord
Announcing, “Finally, we have arrived.”

Hook-and-Eye

On Sundays at Grandma and Grandpa's we go to church twice, once in the morning and once in the evening. I know better than to complain about this. I'm sure somewhere there's a verse about not complaining, and probably even one about not complaining about going to church. And I'm sure Grandma knows it and will quickly apply it to any complaining I might do. Even if there isn't a verse, she would likely explain to me that time spent worshiping God is never wasted, and should be cherished. So we go to church twice, no question about it.

No matter how hard I try to spin it, going to church with grandparents never feels fun. If you go to grown-up church with them, it's just boring. The pastor is incomprehensible, and the pews are uncomfortable. If you go to children's church without them, it's just awkward. You don't know the other kids, and feel no particular need to get to know them because you'll be gone by next Sunday. We could be at home, enjoying the evening together. But going to church is never a waste of time, so we go twice.

Tonight we learned about Jesus visiting the Disciples after his resurrection. We colored a picture of Jesus knocking on a door. Some kid colored his door blue. Idiot. Mine was brown, like wood.

After church, Grandma and Grandpa lingered far too long in the lobby, sipping coffee out of Styrofoam cups and talking to the same people they talked to this morning. But I don't mind too much, so long as I'm not in children's church anymore. Abby and I keep close, hovering around Grandma's floral Sunday skirt. When we finally leave, it is well after sunset. We pile back into the old Suburban and make the short drive home.

As we pull into the driveway, I take in the house that I love so much, admiring its haphazard shape and chipped paint. My admiration is interrupted when I notice two figures sitting on the stairs by the back door. Frightened, I ask who they are. Grandma and Grandpa aren’t sure. They don’t seem worried, or certainly not as worried as I think they should be, especially given the scary stories Grandpa tells us before bed. Don’t they know this house is almost certainly haunted?

By the time we park and reach the door, it is clear that Grandma and Grandpa know them. I get a better look at them, and I think I may remember seeing them at church sometime. Grandpa opens the door and we process in together. He leads them to the bedroom off the kitchen.

Abby and I stay in the kitchen where Grandma gets us some milk and cookies, a little snack before bed. I ask her who they are. She says they are some friends. They’re diabetic and needed a place to take their insulin. There seems to be something she’s not saying. If they were really friends, I wonder why they waited on the doorstep instead of just going inside. Everyone who knows my grandparents knows that the back door is always unlocked. None of us ever knock before entering. We just slide open the door and walk in, often shouting to whomever may or may not be there.

On my way to bed, while passing through the dining room, I peek through the bathroom and into the bedroom. I see the couple sitting on the edge of the bed, the old man helping his wife with something on her hand. I wonder what brought them here, and where they’ll go when they leave.

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There are two doors to choose from when entering my grandparents' house. Although they are along the same side of the house, and only several yards apart, we refer to them as the front and back doors. The front door is inside the front porch, called such because it lies closest to the road. The back door enters into the back porch, an enclosed room at the end of the house farthest from the street.

The front door is much what you might expect of a door. Rectangular with hinges, a knob, and a deadbolt. It opens into a corner of the living room. The back door, however, is an old-fashioned barn door hung on rollers. Nine panes of glass fill the top portion, while the bottom is occupied by a large red X set against a white background. It has no seal and no lock beyond a simple hook-and-eye latch mounted on the inside. It opens into the back porch, a comfortable and sometimes unkempt room with many windows and toys and small points of gathering. When sliding open, the back door makes a distinct and shrill noise that can be heard throughout the lower level of the house. To most it might seem like an annoying problem to be fixed; but to us it is quite special, a sound unique to that place.

To us it is the sound of arrival, of union and reunion. For me it often felt triumphal. After a long drive, walking through the back door was a moment of highest satisfaction, of being rejoined to some forgotten piece of myself.

I rarely used the front door, except when told to sweep the porch for company (although most company never set foot on the front porch), or for the purposes of whatever game my cousins and I had cooked up. For the most part it stood shut, a fabric draft stopper shoved along its threshold. Given that all of the parking was toward the rear of the long farm house, most of us used the back door. For many years, in fact, I thought it was the front door. It was some time before I questioned its placement in the room we called the back porch. Those of us who knew the house knew that there was never any need to knock. The door did all of the announcing necessary. If ever there was a knock, whether at the back or front door, we were all alerted to the arrival of a stranger. To approach the back door and open it with confidence was to lay claim to one's place in the house. It marked you as belonging.

It always seemed strange to me that my grandparents never invested in a better lock. My parents always locked up our house whenever leaving and before going to bed. While I never felt unsafe in my grandparents' house, I often questioned the practicalities of a latch that can be undone with the flick of a screw driver.

There are several stories of strangers entering the house which remain in the family lore. They are told and retold at many family gatherings. One occurred on a Sunday morning, when my mother was no more than two or three. Grandma came down stairs, my mother and her little brother in tow, intending to head to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Upon entering the living room, she found a strange man asleep on the couch. She did not panic. Grandma knew that her marriage to my grandfather had brought her quiet, middle class, suburban upbringing into direct contact with the rough and unpredictable life of a man who had been raised as a migrant worker and apprenticed as a carpenter; she knew this and she welcomed it. As such, it was well within the range of possibilities that my grandfather had allowed an old friend to borrow the sofa for the night. Rather than engaging with the stranger, she called upstairs to Grandpa. She told him to put on his pants (a part of the story she always relished in the retelling), and to "get down here right now!"

As it turned out, Grandpa had no idea who the man was. He did his best to find a way to help him, but the man, likely still drunk from his late night out, only grew belligerent. He eventually told Grandpa that he needed to comb his hair, and buy a new pair of boots. At this, Grandpa called the police.

Looking back on the diabetic couple that my grandparents hosted, I am certain I do not know the full story. But I am left with a distinct understanding that my grandparents willingly and routinely opened their house to those who needed it. I think often of my fleeting glimpse of this couple in the bedroom off the kitchen. It was the same room where Meghan got a splinter in her hand while we crawled under the bed; the same room where my parents often stayed during our visits; the same room where Grandma was to die in her sleep only a few years later. That room was many things to many people. In that moment, it was an unfamiliar sanctuary to an elderly couple in need, made comfortable by the welcome of those to whom it was familiar.

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In the opening chapter of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeleine L'Engle depicts a very odd entrance into the Murry household. It's the middle of the night, and a wild storm is raging around the old house. Meg, Charles Wallace, and their mother are awake in the kitchen when the dog alerts them to someone coming in through Mrs. Murry's laboratory door. We are told that, "Mrs. Murry had done her best to train the family to come into the house through the garage door or the front door and not through her lab" (14). That someone should be trying to come through the lab is very troublesome to Meg as it means they are almost certainly a stranger.

As it turns out, the stranger is Mrs. Whatsit, one of the angelic beings who will guide Meg on her journey. But before Mrs. Whatsit can find her way in, Mrs. Murry must go out and lead her in. In doing this, Mrs. Murry takes away some of the strangeness of Mrs. Whatsit's entrance. She displays her welcome to Mrs. Whatsit, and extends to her some measure of belonging.

In a liturgical service, the entrance, or the procession of the cross, is a very solemn moment. The cross, carried by the crucifer, is followed by torchbearers carrying candles and a reader carrying the Gospels. Members of the congregation bow as the cross passes. It is solemn, but it is also marked by joy. Often we sing about light as the procession takes place, and it is a moment in which we reflect on the arrival of Christ in our midst.

The entrance enacts two narratives simultaneously. The first, and more readily perceived, narrative is that of Jesus bearing his cross on his way to crucifixion. John 19 says, “So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to was is called The Place of the Skull” (NRSV). John is the only account which specifically mentions Jesus carrying his cross, while the other three canonical Gospels make mention of Simon of Cyrene being employed to help Jesus. As Matthew 27 says, “As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.” As the entrance takes place, we see not only an image of Christ bearing his cross, but also an image of Simon of Cyrene walking with him.

A secondary narrative taking place in the entrance is that of Palm Sunday, Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This entry is what many Jews had looked for in their Messiah, even though it did not play out as they had supposed it would, with the Messiah riding in on a donkey rather than a horse, signifying peace rather than military dominance. What’s more, Luke 19 tells us that Jesus came into Jerusalem from “Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives,” meaning that Jesus followed the traditional path of a sacrificial lamb, foreshadowing his coming sacrifice and further reinforcing Jesus’s peaceful intentions.

From our position in a modern worship service, we can hold together both the sorrow of the cross and the triumph of Christ's entrance in solemn joy. We know the outcome, and may rejoice in what it means for us. The entrance, in its most basic meaning, is an image of incarnation. It is Christ becoming human and dwelling among us. It is Christ sharing in our suffering, and the Church standing with Christ in his crucifixion.

In the weekly liturgical service that I attend, all the elements of the entrance, the crucifix, torches, and Gospels, are carried not by priests or deacons or other ministers, but by lay members of the congregation. When I see another member of our congregation bearing the cross, I can just as easily see myself doing the same. I have, in fact, born the cross in the processional. When we process, we process not as individuals but as the whole Church. We stand together with Christ, and find belonging together with Christ.

Tish Harrison Warren notes this belonging in her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*. She says of entering her church's sanctuary:

> In many liturgical churches baptismal fonts are situated at the back of the sanctuary. As people walk into the church to worship, they pass by it. This symbolizes how baptism is the entrance into the people of God. It reminds us that before we begin to worship—before we even sit down in church—we are marked as people who belong to Jesus by grace alone, swept up into the good news, which we received as a gift from God and from believers who went before us. (Harrison 17-18)

The entrance calls us to recognize the image of God that we all bear as humans. When I see a fellow congregant carrying the cross, I see the image of Christ not only on the cross but in the spirit of the individual carrying it as well. I see this image in myself, and recognize its unifying power every time I enter our sanctuary.

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In the years after my grandmother passed away, the back door saw less activity. It was still frequented by family members, but the gatherings grew smaller and fewer. For a few months, my Aunt Connie and her husband and their two kids moved in with Grandpa. They were waiting on their new house to be built. I've gathered that it must have been a strange time for my aunt, returning to her childhood home, once filled with siblings and distant relatives, where now only her father remained. She had a recurring dream throughout her time there. In it, she saw a lion pacing by the front door, waiting to enter.

When she described this dream to the rest of the family, it stirred something familiar in us all. That house was a protected space, and yet we were always aware of that which tried to disturb its safety. In her dream, my aunt knew that the lion could not enter while our family was still there. She and her family were safe, no matter how menacing the lion felt.

It is interesting to me that the lion prowled by the front door, not the back. Only a stranger, someone entirely unknown to our family, would come to the front door. This represents what is perhaps the most peculiar thing about the house. It was made safe not by the flimsy hook-and-eye latch on the backdoor, but by the family that inhabited it. Like a church that offers sanctuary to refugees, those who enter find safety not merely in the physical structure of the place, but in the customs and norms that are observed as a part of its very being. That house was a refuge, its spaces held sacred by our family. The back door was the point of entrance, known only to those who already knew it. Whoever entered through that door was welcomed as the true saint they were, while all else was held at bay.

Penitential Act

A Prayer of Confession

My thoughts and deeds do not align with love,
Even though in love I claim to react;
Rightness of pride blights wholeness of body.
Come, oh Lord, renew our story once more
Yet though it is not the first, nor the last.

Collective Bewilderment

It's September 3, 2002. A Tuesday. I sit in my grandparents' den with my sister and my cousins. We're watching a movie together on the small television set. The den is not our normal spot of choice; it's dark and scary. The taxidermied deer head hanging over the mantel watches our every move. A large, shadowy painting of a raccoon peering out of a tree hangs in the corner. There are only a few small windows to shed light on the dark, wood-paneled walls, and one of them is usually covered with heavy drapes. The den is a room typically reserved for scary stories. We mostly avoid it. But in here we're mostly out of the way, which is precisely where we need to be today. Forty-eight hours ago, none of us expected to be here in this house. But here we are, and for the first time in any of our lives, it's the last place we want to be.

Sunday, just two days ago, was my eighth birthday. It was pretty much like any other birthday. I spent it at our home in Maryland, had a few friends over, had some cake and opened presents, and talked to a lot of family members on the phone (a perennial source of terror for a child like me who finds physical discomfort in talking on the phone). Most of the calls were relatively innocuous, easily survivable, and wholly unremarkable. But I remember my conversation with Grandma and Grandpa with particular clarity. Grandpa asked me if I knew what was so special about that birthday. I thought maybe it was because he was driving down soon to bring out the playhouse he had built for us. I was wrong; it was actually because the number eight was the same upside down, which meant I didn't have to remember how to write it. Before we hung up, Grandma happily promised to see me soon.

As it turns out, that birthday wasn't special because I was turning eight. It was special because that was the last time I would speak with my grandmother. She died in her sleep early the next morning.

On Monday morning, Labor Day, Dad woke us up early. None of us had school, and he was off work too. Normally we would all be sleeping in. I knew that something was off. My brother Nathan got dressed, while Abby and I stayed in our pajamas. Dad brought the three of us into the living room. Mom was already there, seated on the plaid sofa. This was another clue. She and Dad always sat in their matching chairs, but these were left open for me, Abby, and Nathan to find a place. Dad took his place next to mom, and I then noticed she was crying. Abby, having already been awake for some time, had made small crosses out of twisted-together pipe cleaners. She passed these out before sitting down, one for each of us.

This was when Dad delivered the news about Grandma's death. Aunt Connie had just called to tell Mom. Abby started crying immediately. Nathan and I did not.

Grandma had just had knee surgery, and was sleeping in the bedroom off the kitchen while she recovered. Grandpa came downstairs to make breakfast and let her sleep in. When breakfast was ready and she still hadn't stirred, he went in to check on her. He found her dead, but quite recently so. She had died of a blood clot that probably started in her leg. No pain or awareness that anything at all was wrong.

We immediately packed up and made the drive to Indiana. Before we left, Dad pulled us kids aside and told us that he needed us to be on our best behavior. This week especially, but all year too. It was going to be a hard one for mom, and we needed to help in whatever ways we could. If we were asked to do something, we should do it quickly and without complaint. We should be aware of the needs of others. And above all, we could not argue with one another.

Thus began one of the most bewildering weeks of my life to date.

Sitting now in the den, I am well aware of the fact that I still haven't cried. Of course I'm sad, but isn't this how things go? The grandparents die first, then the parents become grandparents, the kids become parents, and new kids come around. So long as the oldest generation is doing the dying, everything is as it should be. It's sad, yes, but it's also the natural order of things. It's not the same thing as when a child dies. But then again, how should I know? I've never experienced any sort of death.

Since arriving yesterday, my cousin Meghan and I have stuck pretty close to one another. On numerous occasions, the two of us have been accused of being ornery, despite the fact that we have no idea what we have done to be ornery, nor what the word ornery means. In fact, given the number of muddled accents on display in our family, we can't even quite agree on how to pronounce the word, much less feel the weight of its discipline. Many of the freedoms that have characterized our time spent in this house are stripped away. The adults have neither the time nor the energy to keep track of our whereabouts, so we are told to stick to one place. No excursions behind the barn. No apple-picking at the Johnny Appleseed trees. No hunting for arrowheads along the tree line. Just movies and card games in the den.

Never have my parents and my aunts and uncles, some of the adults whom I most admire, seemed so distant. They're not capable of expressing their grief to us, and we are not able to understand it. So we hide away in the den, one of the rooms we like least in the house. Even it has lost its vague ghostly appeal. Grandma died in this house. The ghosts, it seems, have fled in her wake, either out of respect for the dead or the simple reality of death itself. I come to see that death separates more than just the living and the departed. It can separate the living from the living as well.

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I did not know it at the time, but the years to come were to be some of the most difficult for my family. The effects of my grandmother's sudden death were to linger until the passing of my grandfather, sixteen years later.

That the death of my grandmother was reshaping our family became immediately evident. I had passed my first eight Christmases in the farm house in Indiana. Christmas was a loud and joyous occasion, often witnessing seventy to eighty people, relatives and friends both close and distant, gathering for brunch. But this year, we opted to share Thanksgiving together, rather than Christmas. All five of my mother's siblings and their spouses and children came to our house in Maryland. Grandpa brought the playhouse, a little later than promised. We spent Christmas in our own homes, and came together for a gathering in Indiana in the days after. This was to become the norm in the coming years.

It was a full year until Mom began to seem normal again. A year before she stopped crying at small things. A year before we did not have to tread so lightly around so many topics. It seemed like an eternity. I realize now that this is fairly typical for grief.

I experienced grief often without even realizing it. In that year, I had dreams of terrible things happening to my family. Every time a phone rang I found myself praying that no one else had died. I got sick a lot, and lost a lot of weight for an eight-year-old. Although I didn't believe her at the time, my mom began to wonder if it was because of worry and anxiety, the only ways in which my grief seemed to manifest. While she did not bring this up, I was acutely aware of the fact that I still had not cried. I did not understand why things were the way they were, why I reacted as I did. This only increased the severity of my worrying, as I worried that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do, to grieve as I was supposed to grieve.

But all of this was just grief as usual. My grandfather, however, seemed to take things further. In retrospect, he was at a total loss without my grandmother. Two years after her death, he remarried. His new wife was also a recent widow; so recent, in fact, that there was some question as to whether or not she and Grandpa had been seeing each other while her husband was still on his deathbed. My mother did not attend their wedding.

I have never learned the full details of my grandfather's behavior during those years. I don't think I need to know. What was abundantly clear, however, was that his actions and his children's reactions caused rifts in the family. There were never any full-blown excommunications, but tensions were often high. His new wife, with her careless tongue and inconsiderate behavior, did not help the situation. Ultimately, my grandfather's decisions paved the way to him losing the business he had started when my mother was a baby, and losing the house where he had raised his family, and losing the respect of his community.

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Formal penitence is not something that I grew up with. The churches of my childhood make no communal request for forgiveness during gatherings, and the sacrament of confession is certainly nowhere to be found. Asking for forgiveness is an entirely personal matter, something only done between you and God and the person you wronged. It need not involve the entire church.

The penitential act, the unified request for forgiveness, was perhaps what I felt to be the strangest part of liturgical worship. When I first experienced liturgy, it was right up there with bowing to the cross as it passed by in the entrance. That we should all get on our knees and recite a few lines about forgiveness was entirely foreign. Why should we bother? Am I to believe that because I said these words in a large group of people that all of our problems are resolved? Forgiveness only means something if it is done personally, and this seemed entirely impersonal.

It was not until Lent that I began to have a greater understanding and appreciation for the penitential act. The experimental form of the *Kyrie* that we recite in the first week of Lent, in which atrocities committed in the name of God and under the approval of the Church are listed in between calls for mercy, helped me to gain a better understanding of what is taking place in the communal act of asking for forgiveness. These stories show me that it is not merely asking for the forgiveness of personal sins, although that is certainly part of what takes place. These stories display that the bigger picture is the recognition of the sins of humankind, and those of the Church in particular. It is a recognition of our entanglement in the sins of our brothers and sisters. It is a request that God extend mercy to us all. Furthermore, it is a single prayer, not many prayers, being offered to God on behalf of the entire Church. For this reason, it is important that it is recited together. It was pointless for me to try to find a personal reason for reciting it together, for the whole point is that we are offering the prayer as one body.

Despite this, it does have some personal implications. Reciting a penitential prayer should only be done if we are actually reconciled to those with whom we are going to share communion. This is where penance comes in to play. Penance is the formal dealing with of sin in a congregation. It is given not so that an individual may find forgiveness with God, something which is freely given, but as a recognition that sin causes disunity within the church. John Berkman, in his essay “Being Reconciled: Penitence, Punishment, and Worship,” gives several important insights on the purpose and execution of penance. First, it is “a form of fraternal correction.” Second, it is “not a substitute for forgiveness.” Third, it ought to go on “in the context of the Church community." And lastly, it is administered by a leader "on behalf of and in the name of the Church" (Hauerwas, *Blackwell* 98).

Berkman's outline of penance consistently points to it being a structure situated within the Church for the purpose of maintaining unity within the body. It is not something done between the individual and God, but rather between the individual and the Church community. It follows then that a penitent, one who is acting out penance, is barred from partaking in the Eucharist. The Eucharist, or simply communion, is the single most unifying act in the liturgy, and should not be taken by those who are not reconciled to one another. Disunity must be recognized and repaired before coming to receive communion.

Wendell Berry displays this need for reconciliation well in his novel *The Memory of Old Jack*. Jack thinks back to the time when he hired a black man named Will Wells to help him with his farm work. When Jack and Will first begin working together, Jack remembers that "they were from the beginning equals before the work." But he also notes that it was "in the work itself, not anything that the work came from or led to, that they made the terms and the comfort of their comradeship" (Berry, *Old Jack* 59). They work together well for a time, but Berry tells us that, "A vast difference lived between them, even while they worked together—the difference between hopeful and hopeless work…They cannot be reconciled, for no real peace ever existed between them, and they are far off in history from the terms and the vision of such a peace" (64). Ultimately their relationship ends with a fist fight, and Jack is left alone and injured, lying in the mud.

For a time, work serves as a form of communion for Jack and Will. They partake in it as equals. But they fail to recognize that they are not fully reconciled to one another. Personally, they have never done one another any harm. But centuries of racial injustice stand between them.

In failing to address their communal history of racial abuse and exploitation, they fail to find true communion together. It seems acceptable to them to go about work as usual; but the work of reconciliation is never work as usual. They ignore the past, and therefore destroy the potential of a future together.

The same is true of the Church. It is not enough to merely acknowledge our own sins. We must acknowledge the greater sins of humanity, the sins of the traditions in which we stand, those that allow us to gather as we do today. When we step back and look at the historical narrative of the Church, we see that our current position, particularly in Western society, is bound up with sin. Colonialization, under the banner of evangelism, was responsible for the displacement and exploitation of countless people groups, and is just one example of the Church's power being invoked for personal gain. The story of the Church is not one that we may ignore, and that includes its many sins. We may not have had a hand in the Church's history, but to be so proud as to say that we are not bound to it in any form is to deny membership in the Church body. If one member causes disunity, all members are consequently involved and must seek reconciliation. It is our responsibility to acknowledge the failings of our Church body, and to ask that God's mercy be bestowed upon us.

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It took years for my grandfather to apologize, to recognize and admit to his failings. He had allowed his grief to overtake him, and he brought about disunity in our family. My mother and her siblings were not faultless in the matter, to be sure, but they had much sooner sought reconciliation.

After his apology, things did get better. We were better able to find a place for his wife in our family. Gatherings were less fraught with looming grief. But the penance was still to be paid. Our family home, the place of our gathering, was gone, given up to the lion pacing on the porch. With it, many of our familial traditions were broken. No more Christmas Eves in the twin bedroom. No more scary stories told around the old stone fireplace, under the watchful eyes over the mantel. No more walks through the woods to the houses of our aunts and uncles. No more arguing over who has to cook the bacon and smell like it all day. It was penance paid not just by my grandfather, but by all of us. When unity is broken by one, it must be repaired by all.

And our unity was repaired. We found new places of gathering, and developed new traditions. At the heart of our time together we still find joy in the same things. We linger on the same stories that were told around the fireplace, now told around a kitchen island or the living room sofa. We recognize and acknowledge the spirits of those who are not with us, felt in their absence and reflected in the faces of others. It is a unity as imperfect as it was before Grandma died, but now it has been tested and proven strong.

Part Three: Liturgy of the Word

Cleaning the House

Chores are a regular part of our time spent in our grandparents' home. Whether it is mopping, dusting, cleaning the bathrooms, or washing the dishes, my cousins and I do it all. When company is coming, Grandma is quick to put us to work. Often before we can go play, we have to check off a list of tasks. We have learned that, "If you're really that bored, there are plenty of closets to clean," and consequently that, "Smart children don't get bored." We are very smart children. Even so, cleaning is a regular occurrence.

When I walk through the house on 46th Street, I am reminded of so many stories, stories about my family and the spaces they inhabit, stories that have been told to me and that I myself witnessed, stories that shape the way I exist in this house. Individually they may inform or instruct, frighten or comfort, but together they tell the story of how and why we came to be how and where we are. These stories are inscribed upon each room, and are read by those who pass through, sometimes silently and sometimes aloud. They are passed around and around, year after year, becoming more ingrained in our familial mythos with each reading.

Cleaning is always a time to take note of a house's intricacies and smaller oddities, to examine the stories that layer each space. It is an intimate time in which we can care for and appreciate the places that provide us with shelter and comfort. These spaces tell the stories of our family, how they came to be here, how they exist and cohere in this house. Cleaning is a routine ritual which forces us to read and remember these stories as they are engraved upon our spaces themselves.

A Reading from the Back Porch

At present, the kitchen and the back porch are floored with a hard, ceramic tile. It's cold, beige, utilitarian as all get-out, and generally in need of a good scrub. It's been this way since before I was born. But before the tile, there was hardwood.

The wood, while I'm sure it was beautiful in a rough, unfinished, farmhouse sort of way, was full of splinters. Ask any of my aunts and uncles, their cousins, or their friends, and they will tell you the horrors of the back porch floors. Just as we wear shoes on the back porch to keep our socks dirt-free, they wore shoes to keep their feet splinter-free. The wood floors were also difficult to clean. Add that to the fact that the dirty work boots of my grandfather's employees regularly tramped through, and the picture becomes even more grim. Thus, the tile flooring was a matter of both practicality and comfort.

I contemplate this as I fill the mop bucket with Grandma in the laundry room deep sink. I fetch the mop from behind the door while she carries the bucket to the back porch. Starting by the back door, I work my way across the porch. It's quite easy work. I paint the floor with soapy water in large strokes, enjoying the satisfaction of covering the tile completely. It's also satisfying to know that what I'm doing now will in some way make a more pleasant experience for whoever it is that will walk through later. I hope they will notice how clean it is, and feel all the more welcome for it.

As I approach the laundry room door, I am reminded of what lies beneath the tile. For while the tile is certainly preferable on several accounts, it also came with the loss of something of great interest to me: a trapdoor to the cellar. Before the tile, I am told that there was a door that lay flush with the floor, just outside the laundry room. It was rectangular and opened onto a rickety staircase ending in the dirt-floored cellar. When tornadoes loomed, Grandma would open the cellar door and everyone would descend. The children were sent through the narrow hallway, into the farthest reaches of the cellar, while grandma stood at the exterior cellar door, assessing the storm. To me it seems like a story right out of one of my favorite books, and I wish I could have used the door just once before it was tiled over.

My mom often tells the story of one particular evening when they had a tornado warning. No one was too worried; it was a fairly frequent occurrence in Indiana. With practiced regularity, they all moved toward the back porch. Unsurprisingly, however, there was too much stuff piled on top of the trapdoor to bother getting it open. The safer and faster option was to gather in the downstairs bathroom, a centrally located room with no windows. Suddenly thrown from their known routine, the family rushed to the bathroom door, only to find it locked. Grandpa was inside taking his bath. Being the modest and stubborn man that he was, he refused to get out of the tub, thus leaving his family in mild peril.

For as long as I can remember, I have loved to learn and think about buildings and architecture, my grandparents' house being no exception. Castles are also a longstanding favorite subject of mine. Trapdoors are, therefore, among my favorite types of doors. As I mop over the spot where I know the trapdoor still sits, I regret its loss. But underlying my regret is awareness of the protection offered by the house. At a glance, the old farmhouse could be construed as quite unstable, and in many ways, it is; its multiple additions, foundations, and rooflines seem likely the break apart into their respective pieces at any moment. But we feel quite comfortable here. Perhaps it is merely our best or only option, but we trust it to provide shelter and protection from the wildest of storms.

A Reading from the Living Room

I

The old Victrola gathers dust with poise,
Still stately under its veil, thin and gray.

I circle around, cleaning as I go,
Keeping time with my rag in smooth motions.

The veil falls off, leaving it exposed.
Bared before me, I study its shape.

Its wood lacks the old luster of its youth.
Dull and dry beyond real restoration.

The crank shows its age; tarnished, I think.
Oxidation settles in greenish stains.

II

Even back then, the Victrola was old and antiquated.
But I suspect they found something endearing in its style.

I'm told they used to roll back the carpets to make enough room
For the release of eager tapping toes and a big brass band.

They could dance for hours, taking tedious turns at the crank,
Each turn bringing the joy of renewed familiarity.

Friends danced to relive days past, seeking some former freedom;
But old nostalgia fled when they danced the jitterbug like new.

You would never know it now, after decades without practice.
It's true though; Grandma and Grandpa could dance better than them all.

III

Polishing the now silent Victrola,
I try to uncover its youth again.

If I watch closely, I can see the signs;
They appear sometimes in fleeting glimpses:

Grandpa gives a little skip or a jump,
His old quick hands bely perfect timing:

Grandma hums an old, familiar tune,
Her motions follow, practiced and precise.

It’s there, persisting in spite of old age,
Persisting though dry, cracked, and tarnished.

A Reading from the Dining Room

There are several points throughout our family’s home that, when stepping from one room to another, it is clear that you are entering into another portion of the house, either older or newer. The doorway between the kitchen and the dining room is one of these points. For one matter, the dining room was carpeted, rather than tiled. It marks a boundary for me and my cousins, the sock-line, if you will. It is the point at which our shoes either have to go on or are permitted to come off, the kitchen tile being too dirty to go barefoot.

The transition also marks a change in formality. The décor in the dining room is fancier than that of the kitchen. It is lighter and brighter, and clearly reserved for more special occasions. The large, solid wood door separating the two rooms further enforces this transition. In the days before central heating, the door’s purpose was to save the home’s occupants from having to heat the kitchen with the rest of the house. The door could be shut to trap the heat in the rooms where they would rest and entertain. There is one other door like it, and it stands at the top of the stairs, preventing the heat from escaping into the upper portions of the house. I have rarely seen the doors shut. They are generally propped open by old-fashioned irons, and we pass by them without much thought.

I pass by as Meghan cleans and polishes the door with Pledge. She stops me and shows me how it looks like snow when you spray it continuously on a single spot. I'm jealous that she has the privilege of using Pledge, but do my best to hide it.

I have the slightly less exciting job of wiping down the baseboards. I take my damp rag and start at the doorway opposite from Meghan. It's a quick and dull job. But there is one point of interest. Along the baseboard, if you look closely enough, just before the bathroom door, there is a neat set of bite marks. They were put there by my Uncle Eric. When he was only three or four, he decided it might be a good idea to stand on a dining chair, facing backwards, hands gripping the back of the chair. My mother, his older sister, insists that he knew better than to do this. As you might guess, his weight tipped the chair backwards, and with no means of catching himself, he face-planted into the baseboard. He left his mark there while also knocking out his two front teeth.

Most of the time I walk right by the bite marks. They mark a funny story of my uncle's youthful negligence. Today they remind me that the dining room is one of the few places in the house not good for playing. Its tight corners and big furniture don't leave much room for falling. I'm also reminded that my parents' rules have reasons. But more so than this, I am struck by how long my family has been here. They moved in when my mom was about two. She doesn't remember living anywhere else before here. This room is the site of the time my uncle first lost a tooth, but it's also seen much more than just that; and I am fortunate to be a part of it.

A Reading from the Den

The den is quite possibly the most frightening room in the house. It was added on sometime in the 1920s. Dark wood paneling covers its walls, and conceals hidden cabinets. One such cabinet opens to reveal a small bar. A tap in the cellar ran up through the walls, leading to a tub hidden behind a false wall in the attic. During Prohibition, the owners of the house would haul in liquor from the woods and fill the tub for later use in the den. Other doors conceal small storage areas, and often pop open, seemingly of their own accord (although it is likely just due to over-filling). The whole room exudes an air of protective mystery. Who knows what's gone on in there?

The focal point of the den is the fireplace. The stones that compose it, like those that form the house's oldest foundation, were taken from the property. At its center is a slate shield, decorated with arrowheads and a tomahawk head, all found on the property as well. And as if those aren't foreboding enough, a decaying deer head is mounted over the fireplace.

If I could avoid the den, I probably would. Unfortunately, the only way to get upstairs is through the den. Walking up and down the stairs I always feel that I am being watched. It's the sort of staircase where your feet become visible to those in the room as you descend before you can see who is there. The possibility of anonymous observation is always a reality. Most often I assumed it was the deer doing the observing, but one story taught me otherwise. I think of it now as I enter the den alone to clean. Grandma sent me in to sweep the fireplace hearth. The grout in between its rounded stones easily collects dirt, and requires frequent sweeping. I take the small straw broom and begin to work in the crevices, keeping an eye on the rocking chair.

Just off the den there is a bedroom, one that my grandfather added on. My mom and my Aunt Amy shared it for some time. My Aunt Amy's bed was situated in a bay window that looks out on to the busy street. While lying there, she could see out into the den, a sidelong view of the fireplace. One night she awoke to a full bladder. She decided to make the long walk to the bathroom (a task not taken lightly in the dead of night). But upon looking out into the den, she knew she would not be able to leave her room. There, sitting in the rocking chair by the fireplace, was an elderly woman, stern-looking, but not necessarily ill-intentioned.

The old woman's look indicated to Aunt Amy that she was to stay where she was. If she left her room, she would be in trouble. Somehow, she managed to go back to sleep, seemingly capable of ignoring her physiological urges and unperturbed by the strange woman in the den.

I've never known quite what to make of that story. I don't know what she saw that night, but I certainly believe she saw something. Whatever it was, I am well-aware of it every time I pass through the den, and certainly now as I clean the fireplace. I wonder if the old woman often sits in the rocking chair, watching us as we descend the stairs.

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The Bible is often a difficult text to reckon with. It sets out rules that seem nearly impossible to follow. It depicts a God that is seemingly capable of both violent vengeance and unending mercy. Its words are used as weapons to destroy and as balms to heal. It often feels as though it leaves us with more questions than answers, and yet we continually return to it in search of understanding.

In her book *Inspired*, Rachel Held Evans addresses many of her own personal struggles with reading and loving the Bible. As she puts it, "While Christians believe the Bible to be uniquely revelatory and authoritative to the faith, we have no reason to think that its many authors were exempt from the mistakes, edits, rewrites, and dry spells of everyday creative work" (Evans xxiii). Clearly, it is a book with flaws. And yet we cannot just abandon it. It is still, in spite of whatever issues we may perceive in it, an authoritative piece of inspired writing which has guided the Christian faith for centuries. So what do we do with it? Evans suggests that "God is still breathing," and it is our duty to "ready to the sails and gather the embers, to discuss and to debate, and like the biblical character Jacob, wrestle with the mystery until God gives us a blessing" (xxiv).

Liturgical traditions attempt to engage in this struggle by following what is known as a lectionary. The lectionary determines what portion of scripture is read and preached on any given week. There are several different versions of lectionaries, depending on the tradition. The Catholic Church's lectionary follows a three-year cycle. Each year covers a different Gospel, with the Gospel of John being read every year during Lent and Easter. The Gospel readings are also accompanied by other selections which, depending on the time of year, will come from the Old Testament, New Testament, and Psalms. In addition to Sunday readings, the lectionary also provides readings for every day of the week.

During Ordinary Time, the liturgy of the Word will follow this pattern: first reading from the Old Testament, responsorial Psalm, second reading from the New Testament, Gospel reading. While it is not always immediately clear why the readings are paired together, it is generally understood that some underlying principle may be drawn out across all four readings. When preparing a homily, the homilist may decide to attempt connecting all four, although focusing on one is sufficient.

At the end of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg is preparing to make her final journey to save her brother, Charles Wallace. Feeling doomed to some dreadful fate, Mrs. Whatsit comforts her by describing life as a sonnet:

> It [a sonnet] is a very strict form of poetry, is it not?...There are fourteen lines, I believe, all in iambic pentameter. That's a very strict rhythm or meter, yes?...And each line has to

> end with a rigid rhyme pattern. And if the poet does not do it exactly this way, it is not a sonnet, is it?...You're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you. (L'Engle, *Wrinkle* 191-192)

The metaphor she builds displays well the function of the lectionary. It is the imposing of a rigid structure onto something living, something that is constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted. We have the structure of tradition, but within that there is freedom. We may all read the same passages and connect them in different ways, each connection possibly just as valid and insightful as the next.

It is a given in most worship settings that some form of scripture will be read. Across faith traditions, written text is a necessary requirement for maintaining faith. Scripture provides a unifying base, a structure around which we can come to common understanding. The lectionary strengthens the ability of scripture to unite the body of Christ by requiring that we read the same passages, no matter where we worship. Beyond this, liturgical scripture reading and interpretation is always meant to be done publicly. It is not something to be done in private. This is rooted in the principle that we do not stumble onto truth on our own, but rather in prayerful communion with the Spirit and other believers. N.T. Wright says that the Bible "is designed to function through human beings, through the church, through people who, living still by the Spirit, have their life molded by this Spirit-inspired book" (20). This is not to say that we should never read the Bible alone, but rather that public reading should be privileged over private contemplation. As Jean Corbon puts it, "The more we listen to the Word made flesh and receive him, the more we become his body" (149-150). Scripture trains us toward becoming the body of Christ, and it sustains us as it does so. If we are to become the body of Christ through the reading of scripture, however, it must be read together.

In conjunction with this, the lectionary does not allow us to pick and choose the biblical texts that we prefer. The Bible is meant to be read in its entirety, not in stand-alone portions. It is only in reading the Bible as a whole that we are able to see it as the story of God and humanity, and in this we will find purpose. Madeleine L'Engle speaks beautifully on the role of stories in scripture in her life. Having never gone to Sunday school as a child, L'Engle always approached the Bible as a storybook. The stories she found there brought her comfort and encouragement. They challenged her understanding of the world and her understanding of God. She says, "The stories in the Bible have nourished me all my life, as has the poetry, the long lists of laws, the history, and even the begats…During my morning and evening reading of Scripture I do not skip" (*The Rock* 119). It is in this, the reading of the whole Bible, that we may come to understand the greater narrative of scripture. It is a story of humanity struggling with God, and failing time and again, only to have God extend mercy once more. When I listen to lectionary readings, I look for this story playing out. It is this narrative that helps us, as the Church, position ourselves toward God, scripture, and our communities. It tells us something of where we come from, and gives us something to cling to as we determine where we are going.

This is the true value of liturgical scripture reading. We read the whole Bible, and we read it together. When we do this, we better understand our place in the world. We see that our struggle with God is not new, and it is not meaningless. We see that we were made to be together, that God desires unity. We see that our faith, no matter how messy it may be, is one step toward this unity, and is, therefore, worth pursuing.

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There are many instances in the stories of the Old Testament in which the Israelites erect some sort of memorial, an Ebenezer, to commemorate an act of divine assistance. These memorials served as historical touchstones (sometimes quite literally). They informed their culture and taught them how to be in the world. They reminded the Israelites of their faith and who they were called to be. But when those memorials were no longer accessible, due to distance or destruction, the responsibility of remembrance fell upon the Israelites themselves. This is perhaps most evident in the Babylonian exile, during which the Israelites had no access to the temple or scripture. Stories had to be passed down in oral form in order to preserve their culture. The same is true with the stories told by my family. The stories told above are just a sampling of the ones told within that house. There are countless others that accompany them. They used to come up quite naturally when we gathered. Physical reminders in our inhabited spaces did the work of memory for us. Now that we no longer gather in that house, the work of memory falls to us. It is our job to remember and share these stories with one another.

With each telling, it is likely that some detail is lost or changed. Sometimes these are corrected when told together; other times these changes pass by unnoticed. But the truth of each story remains. The exact details no longer matter, so long as we settle together on the truth. It is here that we find unity and instruction, a common understanding of who we are and where we come from. These stories shaped our way of being in that house, and continue to shape our way of being a family. In us they are just as alive as when they first occurred.

Part Four: Liturgy of the Eucharist

Human Hands

It's a Friday in mid-summer, the morning air is bright and humid, warm, but not yet laden with the oppressive heat of the afternoon. My brother, sister, cousins and I began our day much as usual, with brushing our teeth, with a good washing of our faces, and with breakfast in the kitchen. Today, Aunt Margie came over early to fix us breakfast. It's not every day that her nieces and nephews are in town, she told us. Food is her greatest display of love. It seems she is at her fullest being when she is serving. Today she made us pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse, and we all willingly accepted the pleasure of allowing another to love us. After breakfast, Grandma gave us bowls of cat food to take to this summer's litter of kittens. Each summer we pick our own kitten, and take the responsibility of caring for it. We took the bowls to the back door and set them on the outside steps where the kittens wait for us. It's fun for us, but I think it's also Grandma's subtle way of teaching us to attend to the needs of others.

Having dispensed with the morning's physical necessities, we are now outside taking turns on the bag swing. Just yesterday Grandpa sent out Tony and Scott, two of his employees who may be related to us, although I'm not certain, to replace the worn-out burlap sack with a new one, filled with fresh straw. Our excitement at a new swing quickly faded when we sat on it; the new burlap is still rough and scratchy, and the straw hasn't yet settled into a shape even remotely comfortable. Even so, I grab a hold of the knot where the bag meets the rope and walk to the edge of the patch of dirt where we have killed the grass from hours of swinging. I begin to run in circles, making several laps around, gaining speed each time. Suddenly, I jump and pull myself onto the swing, wrapping my legs around the bag, ankles locked together. The swing continues in the path I set for it. There is a sense of magic in relinquishing control of something only to watch it play out exactly as you intended it. I feel this as I make my small revolutions under the trees, the satisfaction of a spell well cast. It is a simple pleasure, as is the dizziness that follows.

We go around and around like this every day. We can do it for hours, if time permits. But before long, Grandma calls us back up to the house. The whole family, and likely a few more, are coming for dinner tonight, and she needs our help preparing. By the back door she has two sacks full of corn in need of shucking. It's a job best done outside, and needs to be started before it's too hot out.

We all sit down together on the concrete steps by the door and I grab an ear of corn. The kittens return to wind around our feet, hoping we have more food for them. Grandma shows us how to dig our fingers through the thick, fibrous husks and pull them back in large chunks. She tells us to get as many of the strings as we can. Wrapping her hand around each ear, she removes the strings with a quick twisting motion. I try to do the same, but my inexperienced hands leave many behind. I suspect my hands are still too small, and I don't think Grandma will mind too much if I don't get them all. When we get to the bottom of the ear, we firmly grab the cob and the stem in each hand and snap them in two. We then add the cob to a large black pot, and stuff the empty husks back into the sacks.

The five of us make quick work of the corn, and we soon have a pot piled high with naked ears. Grandma takes them inside and asks us to follow. What comes next is something for which we would all remember her. Beyond her enduring kindness and hospitality, Ruth Anne Wymer was known for her cooking. And beyond her cooking, Ruth Anne Wymer was known for her bread.

Bread making in that house was a regular occurrence, at least biweekly by my estimations, but probably more than that. I don’t recall ever eating store bought bread there. Everything from the morning toast to midday sandwiches to buttered dinner rolls were made by her hands. I don’t think any of her children are as dedicated to the practice as she was, but it remains a cherished ritual of many meals.

In the kitchen, Grandma gathers the four of us around the butcher block. Noon is approaching, and the shortening rays of morning light still linger over the kitchen sink. She has already prepared some of the elements necessary. A stick of butter was set out early that morning to soften. A big metal bowl sits alongside some basic ingredients, flour, yeast, and warm water. She shows us how to mix these things together to form the base of the dough, the warm water activating the yeast without killing it. We’ve seen it before, but we still wonder at the living, growing yeast. I question what it is that makes it alive, for it neither moves nor grows on its own. I also wonder when it will die.

We add in the remaining ingredients, mixing them together until we have a large ball of dough. Grandma turns the dough out on the counter. We pass around the soft stick of butter, each scraping off a small piece and smearing it over our hands. Grandma then allows us to take turns kneading the dough. When she deems it ready, she puts it back in the bowl and drapes a damp towel over it. We eat lunch while it rises.

Afterwards, we see that the dough has now doubled in size, rising well above the rim of the bowl. Every time we make bread, one of us gets the privilege of being the first to punch the air out of it. This time it’s Abby. She stands on a kitchen chair backed up to the butcher block and plunges two small fists into the soft mound. It collapses, losing much of the volume it had accumulated. It seems counterintuitive, but I know better than to question the process.

We pass around the stick of butter and slather our hands in it once more. Grandma divides the dough into four equal parts, and gives one to each of us. We gently work it, holding it in one hand and slapping it with the other before molding it into loaves. We then place each loaf into buttered tins, and allow them to rise while the oven heats.

Grandma has never had a dishwasher, and likely never will. All of our dishes must be washed by hand. My cousins and I form a line along the kitchen sink and counter. Meghan fills the right side of the sink with hot water and dish soap. She takes the stack of dirty dishes, and washes each one with care. I stand to her left, commanding possession of the empty side of the sink and the faucet. Meghan passes the clean items to me to be rinsed, and I pass them on to Abby and Anna to be dried. They will leave them stacked on a towel next to the sink, waiting for Grandma to put them away.

Grandma then sends us out to do other chores, mostly cleaning, to prepare for the company to come.

Days like these are among our quietest in this house; we do not have much time to explore its hidden recesses or engage in elaborate games. The quietness is, however, appreciated all the same. For when the family arrives, the quiet quickly hides in some forgotten corner, or slips out altogether. All five of my mother's siblings and their spouses come. Most of them don't have kids, but there are a few babies still too young to play with us. There are also a few expectedly unexpected guests: my aunt's best friend from college, one of my grandfather's employees who may or may not be related, the ex-wife of one of my great uncles. This is how it always goes. And Grandma always makes extra food.

Some of the uncles are pushing us on the bag swing (a real treat because they always push us high enough to grab leaves off the tree branches) when Grandpa hollers from the back porch to call everyone in. Years ago, Grandma had a large iron bell that she would ring to call everyone to dinner. It was mounted on a tree by the previous owners. It's still there, but the tree has grown bigger and taken over part of the bell so that it no longer swings. But hollering works just as well. We race our uncles back into the house.

In the kitchen, everyone gathers in a circle. It starts by the Dutch door leading to the back porch and winds its way by the end of the table, past the door to the dining room and past the stove, around the butcher block, past the refrigerator, and back to the door. Everyone steps aside to make room for us to squeeze in. We join hands, and Grandpa asks my dad to offer the blessing. It is not uncommon for Grandpa to ask one of his sons, or in this case his son-in-law, to give the prayer. I think it's his way extending his leadership to them, a gesture that recognizes the fact that his household is now made up of many households coming together.

During the prayer, I sneak a quick peek around the circle. There is something edifying in being surrounded by those who made you. We are most of us of the same stock. I can see familiar shapes in our faces. Should we have been barefoot, I would have been able to see similarly shaped feet; not particularly large, but wide at the front with short toes gently sloping from the big toe to the little. Our hands fit together nicely. And those of us whose DNA is not shared are interspersed naturally throughout, having been brought in and made welcome.

After the prayer, we form a line around the butcher block. We each take a plate and fill it with food. The kids all sit in the kitchen, as usual. Some of the adults sit in the dining room, but those who can't fit overflow to our table. There was never a true kids' table in that house, something for which I was always thankful. I sit with a collection of cousins and aunts and uncles. My parents are given a break from making sure I eat everything on my plate.

I glance around and see everyone eating the bread that I helped to make. I wonder which pieces came from my loaf. I think back on all that my hands have done today. They washed my face, fed and pet kittens, grasped the weather-worn rope of the bag swing, and peeled back the husks of corn. So many things to make them dirty, and yet they were still good enough to make bread for everyone to eat. Of course, Grandma made us wash our hands before making bread, but they're still the same hands. The hands that are so intimately involved in all of my daily activities directly handled the food that my family now consumes. It is a strange thought, one that I like but do not yet know what to do with.

* * *

The liturgy of the Eucharist is arguably the most important part of a liturgical worship service. Jean Corbon calls it "'the sacrament of sacraments' in which the body of Christ brings to bear all the energies contained in his transfiguration and 'accomplishes' his mystery in the church" (146). Eucharist, or the rite of communion, is one of the central practices of the Christian faith, and is the culmination of many gatherings. As important as it is to the Christian faith, many images are bound up within it; images of unity, of sacrifice, of humility, of love.

Similarly, the Eucharist displays many narratives being enacted simultaneously. There is the narrative of the Last Supper, as it is told in all four Gospels, a story which foreshadows the narrative of the cross. The first piece of the liturgy of the Eucharist, the presentation of the elements, mimics Jesus's journey to the cross. The bread and wine are carried to the altar where they are presented as a sacrifice. The second piece of the liturgy, the Eucharistic Prayer, details the events of the cross. The *epiclesis*, the part of the prayer in which the Holy Spirit is invoked to come upon the bread and wine to transform them into the body and blood of Christ, is also reminiscent of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus's disciples to unify them as the body of Christ. The last piece, the communion procession, is the time at which members of the congregation come forward to receive the elements. In this we see the narrative of the Church, its history and traditions being observed and practiced for centuries.

It is this, the human participation in the Eucharist, that interests me most. When receiving the bread and wine, the celebrant, according to the Holy Roman Missal, refers to them as "fruit of the earth and work of human hands," and "fruit of the vine and work of human hands," respectively (529). In this, the need for human incarnation is recognized. Jesus chose to take on human flesh before sacrificing himself, and the act of remembering his sacrifice thus requires the interaction of human bodies. This is similarly represented in the fact that faithful members of the Church bring forward the elements to the altar. The presentation symbolically offers not only the bread and wine but our own sacrifices as well, presented with that of Christ.

In this, the communion rite tells not only the story of Christ's sacrifice, but also that of the Church's engagement with that sacrifice. This is a central piece to Christian faith, and forms much of the basis for our community as a whole. It is in the common reception of Christ's gift of salvation and in the offering of our own sacrifices that we find membership in Christ's body.

A beautiful consequence of this act of membership is that it in some way nourishes the community that partakes in it. Communion is a physical reminder of divine grace, and yet it provides us with little to no physical nourishment. Rather, it gives spiritual nourishment. Wendell Berry depicts this quite well in his novel *The Memory of Old Jack*. The novel primarily takes place over the course a single day, the last day of Old Jack Beechum's life. Berry depicts two meals in the book. One occurs in the house of Jack's nephew, Mat. It's harvest season, and the men have been working in the fields all morning. The women have prepared lunch for them, and Jack is invited despite the fact that he has not been at work. Berry says of the meal, “In the presence of that hunger and that eager filling, Old Jack eats well himself. But his thoughts go to the older men, and he watches them…He watches them with a pleasure so keen it is almost pain” (*Old Jack* 84). Later that evening, when Jack has returned to the hotel where he stays with the town’s other elderly residents, he does not partake in the meal, at least not in the same way. “His attitude thus communicates a most tentative and passing relation to the table and the assembled company. He appears ready at any second to rise and be on his way” (129).

In these two passages, Berry gives a beautiful depiction of the spiritual, communal nourishment to be had in communion. Jack is old, his body no longer responds to food and its pleasures in the same way. His body, in fact, can hardly withstand food at all. He eats with his family not because he finds pleasure in the food, but because he finds pleasure in sharing the food with those whom he loves and by whom he is loved. At a table with people he hardly knows, food no longer holds any pleasure or value. He abstains from the second meal because for him it is only a cheap imitation of the meal he had earlier, a meal that was closer to the greater reality of joy found in membership in a community.

The Eucharist holds its value not in its physical nourishment, but in the community that comes together around it. We do not take communion to fill our physical selves, but to remember Christ’s gift of salvation and the community that it creates. It is a community that recognizes and receives Christ’s sacrifice, and willingly presents its sacrifices with him.

* * *

As I grew and became aware of our daily and weekly household rhythms, our time spent making bread with Grandma remained in the back of my mind. It seemed to me an impossibly exhausting task. Who knows how many loaves she made a week? Our family could consume so many in a single night, not to mention the number of loaves I saw her give away over the years. At Christmas, she made bread and distributed it as gifts to friends and families at her church, to my grandfather's employees, and to his clients. Her commercial-sized oven at times looked like nothing more than a glorified bread maker, turning out loaf after loaf. But she never seemed to grow weary of it. It was her work, the sacrifice she offered to her community, one of many.

Grandma's bread is the center of many gatherings. Around it we bring together all of our sacrifices, visible and invisible. The bread is a visible symbol of the many things we do to remain in communal care and support. It must be made with attention and regularity, and presented to all those gathered.

My grandfather's health declined slowly for many years. At the beginning of the summer in which he was to die, there was no denying that he didn't have much time left. We made a last-minute trip to Indiana to visit him so that he might see all six of his children together. We went into his room in groups, standing around his bed, each holding his hands in turn.

I was apprehensive about seeing him. Not that I didn't want to, but in moments of anticipation it's often difficult to find the right words. To make matters more difficult, Grandpa had lost most of his hearing at this point, and we primarily communicated with the use of a dry-erase board.

Approaching him, I thought of my many memories of him; sitting on his short lap while he bounced me around on his knee, or gathered around him in the den while he told a scary story, or riding next to him on his golf cart while he explained the uses of different pieces of construction equipment. It was not easy to see him bedridden; I tried to hold in tension the capable patriarch of my memory with the incapacitated man before me. Next to his bed I saw bloody tissues in the trash can, and I wished I hadn't; not because they disturbed me, but because I knew he would not have wanted me to see them and acknowledge the physical reality of his pain.

In the end, the best that I could do, and very nearly the most, was to hold his hand. His wide palm and short fingers, while weaker than before, still maintained some of their old roughness. They were not particularly beautiful hands, their nails were never well-groomed and their fingers were scarred from injuries and calluses, but they were hands at which many sacrifices were made for the good of our family. Like the hands of a dirty child being used to make bread for others, his hands did not always seem like the most likely tools for providing care to others. But they did, nevertheless.

In many ways, our gathering with him on that day was a culmination of our early lessons in bread-making. Homemade bread provided for us a tangible source of familial support. It was a way to show our love for one another, while also sharing in common nourishment. Even when our communion is not visible, when we are separate or at odds with one another, the sustenance of Grandma's bread stands as a reminder that our communion remains beneath it all. We have all learned to make offerings of our own, brought together with the offering of Grandma's bread. Grandpa offered us his sacrifices for many years, and at the end of his life we gathered around him and returned the blessing, standing at his bedside and offering the support of membership in our community. Having practiced it for many years, it was our only natural response.

Our family is lacking in many ways. We quibble over nonsense. We send passive aggressive looks over the dinner table. We confide our grievances behind the backs of those with whom we are aggrieved. But we have learned well the practices and traditions of those before us, and it is upon these that we rely in times of want and in times of plenty. In this we understand our place and purpose together: in gathering, in telling and retelling stories, in enacting tradition, we maintain the community which forms and sustains us, year after year.

Part Five: Concluding Rites

Blessing

An Anointing of the Faithful

Hat in his hand,
Now his hat on your head.
“Hey, little boy, where you hail from?”
Say in response, “Ar-kee-saw.”
Claim his heritage, his history and belonging;
He gives it in good faith.

I wear it now, his hat,
On my head or on a hook,
And bear the blessing it bestows.

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