

# Worship - The Redemption of Desire

Jeff Krantz

Ever since Michael and I started Preaching Peace, we have struggled with the desire (pun intended) to make what we do practical, to help what we've learned in and through the study of Rene Girard's "Mimetic Theory" to affect our daily lives, to change the world in which we live. Because of that, every Sunday's reflection on a lesson included a "So What?" portion, a place to reflect on that lesson's connection to the world in which we find ourselves. I think we've succeeded in that attempt, if somewhat unevenly.

I have continued, though, to find a deep disquietude in my feelings about my part in all this. There was something about this connecting of mimetic theory to real life that I wasn't getting, something that went well beyond offering "sermon thoughts" from time to time. In the last year or two, I've come to realize what lies behind my disquiet, but only recently have I been given enough understanding of it to begin to share it with others. This document is the beginning of that process.

## Scapegoats or Desire?

In our work on Preaching Peace, we have focused much of our energy on the way that the Gospel reveals the "Scapegoat Mechanism" and in so doing, destabilizes it. It is difficult to do much else, when the central figure of our faith hangs forgiving from the Cross. And yet while that image, like the Dali painting, soars above human culture and slowly undoes its very foundations, it does not give the follower of Jesus a clear image of her/his place in the working out of God's plan for the redemption of humanity. We cannot all hang on a cross forgiving in a way that shakes the very ground we walk on. Indeed, to the degree that we simply seek to imitate Jesus' act, we perpetuate the very process He came to unravel.

We cannot imitate Jesus' act. Only one death can be redeeming, and yet, we are surely called to the "imitation of Christ." If we are not to imitate His actions (and in so doing, create only another potential for rivalry among us) what then do we imitate? It is all well and good that we should come to know the bankruptcy of the sacrificial system in which we've been brought up, but this brings us only so far. As Rene Girard has observed, the more we understand about the scapegoat mechanism, the less effectively it serves to provide the social control we expect from it. The less well it works, the more violent human society will become. The more we preach the Passion of Jesus, the more we'll do violence to each other!

Unless.

Unless we can find what it is we are to do. We have been shown what we already do, and why that doesn't work, why it grieves the very heart of God. But we cannot "not do" something. We can't just choose not to make scapegoats. To the extent that we make a new prohibition about "scapegoating" we will only set up the "scapegoaters" as our next set of victims.

But there is something to do, something positive that isn't just an imitation of Jesus' suffering, it is the imitation of His desire. We can take the model of mimetic desire, and allow God to redeem the whole of it, by infusing us with the desire of Jesus for His Father. As we allow the Spirit to turn our hearts to the Father of All, there is a redemption of all desire, and it becomes, instead of the source of all conflict, the source of all healing.

The vehicle of this transformation is worship. This is the piece that I've been struggling to bring to Preaching Peace recently, the segment that has eluded me. It is in worship that we are moved from the keeping of prohibitions to the keeping of the Great Commandment. It is in worship that we are opened to God's infusion of Spirit in such a way that what is impossible for the unregenerate human spirit becomes possible "through Him who strengthens us." No amount of study or desire for change will bring a change that sets us free from the cycle of violence in which we find ourselves. No removal of "violent language" from our liturgies will remove the violence from our hearts. Only the encounter with the One Who Loves and Forgives makes that change happen.

## An Aside about "Worship"

A good friend, reading an early draft of this piece, remarked to me, "The only really 'jargony' word you keep using in the paper is 'worship'. I don't think all your readers will know what you mean when you say that."

After talking about it a bit, I realized that I had, in fact, taken a certain understanding of worship for granted, and that I was taking for granted an understanding of worship that I have only recently come to grasp myself. Probably not something I want to assume others have already acquired.

A part of the reason that I think I tend to take it for granted that everyone but me knew what "worship" means long before I did, is that I believe that the hunger for relationship with God expressed in worship is written into the very DNA of every human being. Shapes and flavors of expression may change, but the hunger is universal.

Still, in my own experience, and therefore probably in a lot of other folks' experience, "worship" has long been confused with "liturgy," or "church." For this reason, I remained a largely-starved Christian for most of my life, only nibbling at the edges of worship once in a while, barely sustaining my life with God at all. I learned, because I am a musician, how to do liturgy beautifully, and I drew an almost vicarious nourishment from beauty directed toward God. I did not learn until recently however, how to place myself in the Presence of Beauty Itself and let my music be an expression of that ecstasy.

And that, friends, is what worship is. Ecstasy. Ecstasy in the most fundamental root-sense of the word, standing outside oneself in response to a source of pure and unadulterated joy. Real worship transports the worshiper into the place where angelsong is the norm, the place where God's redeemed future breaks into our present, where we see Him face to face, and see ourselves as fully redeemed in the reflection in His eyes.

Of course, this true worship is independent of any style of music or speech. It will result in a multitude of different expressions as people of different backgrounds seek to give voice to that which resists being spoken. Every language and musical vocabulary will have its own "sound" as worship breaks forth. One other thing is also quite true. Much of what passes for "worship" in our churches today pays little more than lip service to the goal of ecstatic union with God.

This, then, is what I mean when I say "worship" hereinafter.

## Desire as the Ground of Worship - Healing of Desire as the Result of Worship

Why worship? If all we are doing is responding to a Commandment, we are still locked into the very violence we want to escape. Rene Girard has described for us the three "pillars of culture,"

Prohibition, Ritual, and Myth. All of these permit violence to stabilize society in one way or another. If we worship as duty, we may be avoiding transgression (prohibition) or perpetuating a system of modified sacrifice (ritual) but we are still playing at Satan's game.

What makes worship unavoidable, without making it a cause for victimization? Surely it is God's "otherness." In our haste to remove from our liturgies the quasi-divine justification for our violence, I have often experienced the resultant images of God present in them as unworthy of worship. God is not fundamentally different from us in this worship, though perhaps missing my violent streak. This God is very likable, but lacks the power to change me. This God may inspire me to desire to be non-violent, but He can't make me that way.

This hunger for "otherness" that is realized in true worship is the baby missing after we tossed out the bathwater of Ritual and Myth. It draws us toward the God Jesus knew as "Abba," while also rendering us available to Abba's ministrations. It promises the waters of life while making us radically aware of our own inability to create or find them for ourselves. Any "worship" that does not have this thirst, this hunger at its center, will fail to make possible the transformation God wants for us.

Girard, early in his writing, made clear the ground of this "otherness." It is "being." As Girard has put it, the imitation of desire for an object is not so much a desire for the rival's possession as for the rival's very being.

The object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at the mediator's being. Proust compares this terrible desire to be the Other with thirst: "Thirst-like that which burns a parched land-for a life which would be a more perfect drink for my soul to absorb in long gulps, all the more greedily because it has never tasted a single drop." ...Like Proust's, Dostoevsky's hero dreams of absorbing and assimilating the mediator's being....<sup>1</sup>

"Words like "being" and "ontological" seem pompously philosophical in the context of flighty adolescents, yet they cannot be avoided. Being is what mimetic desire is really after, Helena says so explicitly."<sup>2</sup>

In God's own self-naming, it is being that sets Him apart.

And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex. 3:14)

Only God has being-in-Himself. Ours is always derived, given, never necessary. We imitate each other's desire because we desire "being-in-ourselves," something we suspect that our rival derives from her/his possession. Only God is. Our being is, and always will be, contingent. It is from this awareness that both desire and worship spring! We first desire because we are created to know that "being" is more desirable than "contingent being." We worship because the One who has being-in-itself has bestowed being upon us, has given to us of Himself.

The story of the Fall can now be understood as a result of God's choice to make us aware of His own being-in-itself and our lack of it. The object (not the fruit of the tree, but the knowledge of good and evil) is desirable because it makes us "like Him." The very thing God created in us to draw us to Him in worship is also the very thing that leads us to the Fall! I think that this is the reason the Bible speaks of Jesus as "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world." (Rev. 13:8) God's choice to make the joy of worship possible meant that God would also suffer to redeem us from the corruption of that very possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966) 53.

<sup>2</sup> Rene Girard, *A Theater of Desire* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing 2000) 43

Without desire for what we do not have, there can be no true worship. With desire for what we do not have (being), we will always find ourselves in rivalrous situations that lead toward violence.

With worship of God, of I Am, our desire to be what we are not is transformed into a hunger for God that is satisfied, as He gives to us of Himself. Our surrender permits God to infuse His Spirit, and we discover in ourselves a being that is not something we have, but nonetheless resides in us. Gradually, (at least in my experience) this infusion creates in us the fruit of the Spirit... "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control;" (Gal. 5:22-23) This fruit, then, offers us an alternative to the sacrificial system. Restraint flows from love, not fear of retribution.

And as we worship, we see in ourselves that this love which makes possible a society founded on something other than violence is not a love we choose to "have" but rather one that, through worship, we have chosen to permit to take up residence in us! I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Gal. 2:20) It is not we who desire differently, but God dwelling in us, whose desires we now share!

This brings me to a discussion of what it means to share God's desires, at least in my case.

It is the reclamation, the redemption of desire that promises the only release to the captives that doesn't lead us all back into captivity at some point. We've talked ourselves blue in the face about the scapegoat mechanism. We can point to the murder/lynching that lies at the very origin of human culture, on which its pillars depend and from which they draw their authority. We can point to, and decry our violence until the cows come home, but until we can say with the psalmist, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water," and mean it, really mean it, we're still stuck.

Because violence isn't the problem, it's the symptom. The problem, the disease, is desire, bent desire. Luther, citing Augustine, spoke of humankind, "curvatus in se." Bent in upon itself. Apart from the intervention of God, even our most altruistic desires become bent and self-serving. Even our best intentions only serve to try to acquire "being in itself." A dear friend of mine used to say, "I just want to be good." (Until I most unkindly replied one day, "Oh, you want to be God!") The desire to be "good" is the desire to have God's goodness as though it originated in me. Until I abandon that desire to "be God," to know good from evil, to have being in myself, I will never, ever escape the traps of the World.

But I am convinced that as we grow in worship, our own desires are replaced by the the only two desires that find their origins in God. The first is the desire for God that manifests in us, in our fallen state, as a desire to have being-in-ourselves. Gradually, (again, in my case) our desire for being-in-ourselves is replaced by a new desire for the self-gift of God. As I have grown in my own relationship to God, I find that He shows me more and more places where I continue to seek being on my own terms. Would that I might be rid of them all at once!

Worship, a gift of the Spirit, leads me to a new place, a place of utter desperation. "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps. 42:2) I experience myself as one dying in the desert, craving the water of life that Jesus promised. This desire then obliterates all others, and miraculously delivers me from all rivalry. There can be no rivalry in this desire, because it is the only desire that is not imitated. I do not desire the being I suspect another of having as a result of some possession, I crave infusion of God's being, a craving I knew before I was born. The God who formed me in the womb created me with a heart directed toward Him. I may learn how to allow my heart to be re-turned to him by imitating others, but

the (true) desire of my heart is not something I can ever believe my model "has." I can desire this without any risk of being seen as rival.

In this passionate (and sometimes frightening in its early manifestations) abandonment of my false "being-in-myself" I experience the first fruit of true "worship." I die to myself in a way that has almost no connection to the worldly notion of sublimation of my own desires for the sake of another. (That way lies really nasty violence, as my frustrated desires begin to "leak out.") I truly lose myself in the pursuit of the One whose being slakes my overwhelming thirst. It isn't that I decline to pursue my own desires, it is that God actually removes them from me!

This is the first "true" desire I'll ever know. The "loving" of God with all my heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. Not something I can do, not something I can accomplish, but something that happens to me in the context of worship, of contemplation of God who is so "other" that I can desire Him and His self-gift without desiring to "have" His being.

But there is a second "true" desire that comes to me through worship, too.

As I learn to permit God to satisfy my hungers and thirsts I find that I discover in myself a new desire, God's desire for His children, indeed, for all of Creation. Here I find burning in my bones the fierce, jealous desire for us that makes the very ground we walk on shake. While infinitely tender toward all of us, this anger burns hot against the principalities and powers which bind us, which cause us to turn our faces from Him, which deny Him our companionship.

This desire is the one that I think gets most overlooked, and yet it is also the root of the second half of the Great Commandment. To the extent that we abandon ourselves to our desire for God, and allow God to fill us, we are filled also with God's desire for us, and our ability to "love our neighbors as we love ourselves" is radically altered. We are now able, by virtue of the Indwelling Spirit, to "love one another" as He has loved us, something utterly impossible apart from that infusion of God's very self.

There are, in my experience, two reasons that this infused desire is important for us to remember as we contemplate the worship we desire.

First is the reality that every human hungers not only for God, but to be desired, to be desirable. So much of our bent behavior in the present comes from our desire to be desired. We've all heard one or two (too many) sermons about God's "unconditional love" but how many times have we experienced God's fierce, unremitting desire to have our companionship? How many times have we heard that God thinks we're all "beautiful" without finding ourselves in the presence of One whose desire for us is so intense He'd harrow the very depths of hell to have us?

When we experience this desire of God for us in the context of our worship, we do it from a place of such utter emptiness and desperation that we simply cannot make the mistake of believing that this heart that God has for us is in any way the result of anything we've been or done. Like the Prodigal, we melt amazed into the arms of the Father, whose kisses cover our face as we know ourselves filthy and beloved all at once. This love is the Love that we meet at the foot of the Cross. This love makes it possible for us to live without our former means of "being." It is a love that frightens us because it threatens to swallow us, but as we stand in its Presence we discover a truer "self" in what had seemed to be impenetrable emptiness.

Secondly, this desire that God has for us, and which we experience also as His jealousy, His wrath, redeems our own wrath, our own rage. I've struggled with this notion, and with my own anger, for a long, long time. As with many folks who are drawn to peace movements, I have been wary of anger in general, and my own in particular. For the longest time, the notion of being angry just terrified me.

What happens when we feel this way is we deny our anger a lot of the time. Anger denied turns inward into depression or leaks out in unhappy ways, doing lots of hidden harm along the way. What also happens, and what I've been guilty of for a long time, is we deny the anger of others. We say "don't feel that way" to folks whose anger frightens us (because it threatens to make visible our own). I've done this to most of the people in my life at one time or another, I know. We may not say it just that way, but we attack all of anger's expressions, so that the only choice we leave those around us is to hide it or risk our repeated censure. What definitely does not happen is healing.

Worship frees both us and those around us from this hiddenness. It holds up even our anger and celebrates it, while at the same time protecting our brothers and sisters from its violent expression. Worship that empties itself to the Father finds itself filled with the Father's heart for all of Creation, Sons and Daughters of Adam. The fierceness of this love burns like a blast furnace against the principalities and powers that corrupt and destroy God's children. When we realize this, and see the object of this anger clearly, we discover the holiness of our own rage, and find that there is a fitting recipient for it, one that does not require a Scapegoat.

Worship, then, includes this beastly cry of anguish as we experience the Father's pain for those whose lives are filled with experiences that tell them that they are unloved, unlovable. Worship drives us to our knees in intercession on their behalf, and it sets us in ranks as agents of God's "spiritual warfare." Worship also delivers us from the presumption of entering into this contention in our own strength, or in fear or desperation. Worship experiences both God's wrath when faced with those things that keep us from Him and His unconquerable love in the same moment. We go to "war" armored by the righteousness of Christ and borne as on eagles' wings by the enormity of His love for us all.

I know that for me, all this language sounded much too risky for a peacemaker for a long, long time. I do understand that much of it has been misused, and that new victims have been made when they were confused for the principalities against whom the Father's wrath is truly directed. Still, to those who are still uncomfortable with what I've written so far, I would ask, "If there is no anger in God, how can we have it at all? Yes, ours is bent, misdirected, but must there not be some ground for our anger in God?"

I also understand that most of the peacemakers with whom I've been associated are loathe to come to grips with their own anger, their own violence. Because they reject it, they express it unconsciously. The rhetoric of the Peace movement is often every bit as prone to labeling and shaming (a precursor to the death of the Scapegoat) as are the words of the most violent. This unconscious violence often causes the rest of the world to laugh at them or disregard them altogether. All because they have not been shown, in worship, the holiness of this desire they find in themselves for God's children.

We are engaged in a mighty struggle for the soul of the Church (not to mention Creation). The Father's heart is for them all, even the violent, but it is against "those who do evil," that is, the structures and powers that enslave them. If we do not learn to worship in a way that permits us to express this anger in prayer and intercession, in "spiritual warfare" we will continue to confuse the servants of the principalities with the principalities themselves and create new classes of "victim" in the name of peace.

## The Implications for Public Worship

If anything I've said so far holds any water at all, then the implications for our worship as a gathered people are profound. "Non-Violent Liturgy" gets us nowhere. We can go on trying to tinker with the language or to update the music, but until we change our fundamental goals for the assembled Body of Christ, we simply will not see the Peace we want to preach blossom in the

hearts of our people. We may convince them of the necessity of change, but if we do not give them true worship as a means by which to reach out to the One who can make the change happen we only add a new layer of frustration to their experience of God. In their hearts, they want what we want, the safety and security that we know our Maker wants for us. They don't know how to acquire that except at the expense of someone else. Only worship opens the doors to a new way. Only worship brings down from a renewed heaven the new Jerusalem in which they can dwell.

What goals then will we have for our gathered worship? How do we put into words the desire to see the face of God? to lead our sisters and brothers into the bridal chamber where we can be swept up in a Love so magnificent and irresistible that our hearts melt in its presence? Perhaps the effort to express this is doomed to failure, but it is worth a try.

Rather than tackle the whole of "worship" at one time, I'm going to try to break it into manageable pieces, and explore some of the possibilities for each segment. I focus primarily on the two main liturgies of the church, called "sacraments" by some, Baptism and Eucharist. I have discovered, in my discussions with others, that for some the outward expressions of our public worship are devoid of meaning, except as they make visible certain inner realities already accomplished. That is to say, nothing really happens in Baptism, except making visible the commitment already accomplished. No grace is conferred in the act itself. In this way of thinking, God's self giving is not accomplished in the Eucharist, only reflected.

I confess that I find these readings of our worship truly saddening. While I do understand that grace is not limited to the act itself, I am confounded by the notion that our faithful call to God to come and act in this moment, to bestow upon us something of Himself, goes unheard. Yes, dying with Christ is a daily thing for me, but surely the prayers of the Gathered People of God make that moment a different one when I am baptized. Yes, I am fed daily by God, but I know for a fact that I experience God's self-giving differently in the company of the Faithful, gathered around the Table. For this reason, I will proceed in this paper acknowledging the assumption that there is a real and different kind of in-breaking of God during our worship, a response to our own request to be made one with and in Him.

## What It Might Mean for Baptism/Initiation

I believe that it was Dom Gregory Dix who once described the experience of a second/third century baptizand in a way something like this:

It is the night of Holy Saturday. You have waited the better part of a year to be baptized. There are no baptisms of convenience. Baptism takes preparation, and it is too important to the Body to be taken lightly, so it happens once a year. The new believer dies with Jesus in Holy Week, and is raised to new life with Him on Easter Sunday. This is the Great Vigil of Easter.

You have not been permitted to witness the Mystery of Christ yet (the Eucharist). Each Sunday, after the sermon, the bishop lays his hands on your head and blesses you. He may also put a bit of salt on your tongue, a symbol of the exorcism that is slowly being worked in you as intercessors and catechists prepare you for baptism. After this personal encounter with the representative of the gathered Body, you have been dismissed. You aren't yet ready to witness the re-enactment of Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples. You aren't yet ready to receive His Body and Blood.

But you're almost there. It has been a long Lent, with many periods of fasting and prayer, and this past week has been even more intense. On the Sunday of the Passion (also known as Palm Sunday) the bishop gave you one of the Church's most valued assets, the Apostle's Creed. This is

the "Traditio" the handing over of the Creed to those whose faithfulness has demonstrated that they are ready to receive it. During the week your catechists have taught you what each line of each paragraph means, what you'll mean when you "give it back" to the bishop in the moment of your baptism.

It is late, nearly midnight when you gather with the bishop and the deacon and the other baptizands in the baptistry, a building set apart from the place of general worship. The room contains a huge pool with moving, living water. It is divided in half by a great sheet, because modesty demands that when you strip off your old clothes as a symbol of your renunciation of your old way of life, the women and the men be hidden from each other. You remove your clothes when your turn comes and step down into the water with the bishop. Then you hear the question you've been waiting, aching to answer for nearly a year. "Do you believe in God the Father?"

The room echoes with the shouts of each believer as they are at last allowed to commit themselves fully to the arms of the Abba. "Yes, I believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth!" As you finish that first sentence, you are plunged into the water and held there. No little sprinkling, no quick dunk. You are held down until it gets scary, until you know you've just given your very life to God. Then, sputtering, you are brought out of the water and asked, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son?" You respond in similar enthusiasm to this and the next question, each time receiving a thorough dunking.

When you are done with all this, you emerge from the pool and are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. A new white gown awaits you, symbol of the righteousness that is given to you as gift. Then, before you go anywhere, you are drenched in fragrant oil, anointed as a symbol of the gift of Holy Spirit that is now yours.

When all of the new believers are dressed in their new status as members of the company of the redeemed, one of the deacons leads you all and the bishop up to the building where the rest of the Body of Christ waits anxiously for your arrival. They have been in prayer and song for you all the while, and your arrival sparks a new burst of enthusiasm as the newly baptized enter their midst. Cheers erupt among the singers as you are led by the bishop down the main aisle. Hands reach out to touch you, to be blessed by you as you pass! You are led to the front of the church, where the bishop sits down and lays hands on you one more time, confirming what God has done in you this night.

Then, when everyone is present, you become a part of your first celebration of the Eucharist. You don't even know the words you're going to hear. For the first time ever, you see the bread broken. For the first time, you hear the words, "This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat this in memory of me. This is my blood, shed for you. Take and drink it in memory of me."

I can't even type this story without weeping for joy. Here is the moment of the prodigal's return, the Father's celebration, the servants' joy. It is a moment that calls us to reflect on our own initiation rites. Is baptism a welcoming home? Is it a blessing worth waiting for? Is it something that makes us want to shout? To cheer as we see the newly baptized arrive?

Recently, our congregation went through the strangeness of the Long Island Marathon again. We're surrounded on three sides by the race, so that most of us can't get here from there while the race is going on. Between service, I join the watchers on the front lawn and cheer and applaud the runners. I'm especially fond of cheering on the ones an hour or more behind the leaders. They don't have many "clappers" left. This image taught me something about the role

of intercession in the preparation for baptism. This is an arduous process if we take it seriously, coming to grips with our sin in such a way that we can truly offer it to God for healing in worship. Intercession is an indispensable part of this journey. Not only the visible support that folks receive on Sundays, but the prayers that lift them up when they're struggling again in the world.

Is our initiation a renunciation of sin? Can we honestly say that when we baptize infants? What power does this renunciation have for someone 6 months old? Do we do "religion" instead of build the Body when we baptize babies? I was taught that infant baptism makes visible the truth that it is God who acts in baptism, not us, as God gathers us to Himself. I have also been heard to say that it shows that "understanding" what's going on isn't the important part. I guess all that is true, but for me there are now bigger truths to be reckoned with.

Yes, it is God who acts, who gives me this gift of righteousness when I am baptized. It isn't my doing. It is grace.

But let me ask you this. If my Father gave me a nice, new BMW when I was six months old, would I appreciate it? By the time I was able to drive it, it would be a rusting piece of junk. As much as I hate to say it, the faith of most of the folks in mainline churches is just that rusty. Nice to know it was given to you way back when, but you couldn't do anything with it, couldn't maintain it, couldn't enjoy it. It's just a nice memory with no power to get you from one place to another now.

Preaching Peace means bringing people into the Father's house at a time when they can understand what the party's about, when they can do something to sustain that joy in their own lives, when they can actually join the cheers for the next generation while they're still feeling the impact of their own return. How can they turn their desires to Him if they've never met anything desirable in Him? I think that the value of a prolonged period of preparation, of intercession (and yes, exorcism) is more important than a lot of Bible story learning. Many times, new believers are taught about Jesus without ever meeting Him. It is my hope that we raise up a new generation of catechists who burn with the desire to share Jesus with others. It is also my hope that we'll soon be delivered from the wasteland that is infant baptism.

## Eucharist and Peace

Recently, as I celebrated the Eucharist with a small group, I was utterly overwhelmed by the love present to us in it. As I held the "bread" (we still use wafers) and spoke Jesus' words over it, I knew in that moment the joy and the love and the pain He felt as he offered his Body to the disciples. It was such an overpowering moment that I could barely continue to speak, but I muddled through it and when I came to the wine, and heard Jesus offer us His blood, I thought I might die. His Goodness permeated every atom of every single thing and person in that moment, and I felt as though one of those huge "curlers" from Hawaii had crashed over me, turning my upside down a tumbling me over and over.

I've been a priest long enough to be able to keep the words going when my mind is in a whirl, so I don't know how much the few gathered with me noticed, though surely some saw the tears streaming down my face. That day, I received Him as I never have before, and I pray that those with me did too. That moment was transformational. In it God removed from me another layer of the fear and need that the enemy has used to manipulate me for most of my life. Not that I haven't heard the old voices of fear from time to time, but they're just not as convincing as they used to be. If I could cause that to happen for every one of my parishioners every week (which I can't) I'd be the happiest pastor on the face of the earth.

I am sure that I was given this gift in preparation for the final stages of writing this. I have known something of the Peace that the Spirit can infuse when I need it in the past. I have seen the way that God truly provides for me and mine in a way that makes "grasping" (as in Philippians 2) unnecessary. I have received God's comfort in times of great turmoil and fear and shame. But I had never ever received Him in that way. I could not have written about the way that God gives His own being to those who seek Him the way that I have before that moment. I could have spoken about it in the abstract, but not as one who knows.

But now I know, and Eucharist that does not have as its goal the communication of this sublime reality will forever leave me as cold as stone.

Eucharist is probably the place in liturgy that we run most frequently into questions of sacrificial theology. There is no question that the language of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer supports a "satisfaction" understanding of the Atonement. It's right there in the Prayer of Consecration in Rite I.

"All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again.

Cranmer tried, in that one sentence to touch all the major Atonement bases at once. It can be a mouthful, that's for sure, but more than that, it raises the question for us of just what it is we're doing. For the sake of this enterprise, I will set aside questions of Atonement as they appear in the Eucharist, while acknowledging that our liturgies often say things that just aren't true about what God was up to on Calvary.

It will not move us closer to Peace if we focus on what is wrong with our liturgies, and try to take those pieces out. We can try to take the violence out of our language, and the sacrifice out of the Passion, but the Passion was violent, and it was a sacrifice. We may not understand or teach well the nature of that sacrifice. At the risk of inspiring the wrath of many Colloquium (the Colloquium On Violence and Religion) folks, I'll even say it was a satisfaction. Trouble is, it wasn't God we were satisfying, was it? There was a blood-thirst demanding Jesus' death at work on that awe-full day, but it wasn't God's. We were in bondage, a bondage only His blood could break, but it wasn't of God's making or the result of God's perfect justice.

I want to celebrate a Eucharist that takes the blood and the gore of the Cross seriously. I want to celebrate a Eucharist that knows both the heartbreak and the joy of Jesus as he suffered to save me (from myself). I do not minimize the pain I believe He suffered, but I know too that each "stripe" was accompanied by a deep and inexpressible joy that came with knowing what it did for those whom He loved more than life itself. Our psychotherapeutic culture may have difficulty with that. Not surprising. It is a truth that can only be known through the Spirit. Paul speaks of the believer's participation in this mystery, "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ." (2 Cor. 1:5) The consolations in this suffering are real, not the masochistic imaginings of some Freudian straw-man.

So, instead of focusing our attention on what Eucharist is not, I'd rather explore what Eucharist is and can be. In the context of a Eucharistic celebration, there are several elements worthy of our attention:

The "breaking open" of the Scriptures in Preaching

The intercessions of the faithful.

The confession of sin and the experience of forgiveness/absolution

## Preaching

What is your purpose when you share a "message?" How does that purpose prepare your people to receive God's self-gift that will follow? I find that many of the sermons I've read over the years (I used to teach homiletics) have very little to do with that goal. Many sermons are essentially teachings, not preachings. I have no quarrel with sermons that teach. Indeed, many times it is both necessary and helpful to explain what's really going on in a text that's being preached. But sermons in the context of worship are not "how to" messages. They do not say, "Don't do this." They may say, "Look! With God's help, you can do this!" and include some teaching about what that might look like, how it might work.

Sermons that prepare us to receive God's self-gift don't tell me how good I am, or that I'm "okay." This is a false comfort that I know to be a lie in my deepest self. Yes, the Bible teaches me that Creation was good, but it also teaches me that it is very broken at the moment. I'm not okay. "There is no soundness in my flesh Because of Your anger, Nor any health in my bones Because of my sin." (Ps. 38:5) The failure of the theology I learned early in my life is that the "goodness" of the individual is something intrinsic to her/him, not something imputed to her/him by God. There is no worship in that relationship. God and I are good together, and we nod in appreciation of one another. God's "otherness" vanishes, and I am awarded "being-in-myself" that I know in my deepest self to be a lie.

The "me" that is "good" has no need of Jesus' self-giving. The Passion gradually degenerates in our estimation until with Schweitzer, Jesus becomes a misguided reformer who marched into Jerusalem unaware of the inevitable result his choices would bring. Or with Marcus Borg Jesus becomes little more than a wandering cynic philosopher in Jewish guise. All this because I am "good" and don't need rescuing.

Preaching confronts and convicts, but it always reminds me of Jesus' victory over it all. It confronts and convicts not because I need to be humiliated, but because I cannot appreciate God's self-gift without also appreciating my helplessness in the face of the principalities and powers that govern my life unless I have God's help.

Preaching points me to something about God I'd never seen before, something new to delight in, or something I'd forgotten in my rush to keep up with the world's wild pace. Preaching turns my eyes to the Father's, permitting me to enjoy the delight that dances there. Preaching helps me to hear His voice, to hear His Son. Preaching awakens me to the always present hunger I have for God's presence and all the benefits it brings. Preaching awakens me to God's jealous desire for me and for all His children, and sets my heart on fire as well.

## Intercession

This leads me to a brief consideration of Intercession as a vehicle for the transformation we so desire to see in ourselves and others. I have lately come to a different, wonderful place in my understanding of the source and purpose of intercession. For all of my life, I believed in the "power of prayer" but I still thought prayer was something I did, sometimes in concern for others, sometimes in thanksgiving for the blessings I've received, and sometimes just in obedience. Praying for my enemies was surely one of the latter instances. I did it, but I didn't like it.

This is a common way of understanding intercession, and one that I've heard taught in a multitude of settings. It isn't, however, the most effective, or even the biblical approach to intercession. Jesus is to be our ultimate model for intercession, and He did not pray as he desired, but what He saw the Father doing, He did as well. "Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner." (John 5:19)

Intercession then, comes not from the concerns of our own hearts (though the Father's concerns will become ours as we pray) but from seeking His face. Find ourselves in His presence, we discover His delight in and anguish for us, and we allow that concern to become ours. We do not pray our own prayer, but we pray the Father's good will for us and for others. Intercession stands against the influence of the Principalities and Powers, but only in the strength of God's already impassioned rejection of them. Intercession truly brings peace where there is no peace, but only because it serves to manifest God's peace through us. We do not cause anything, we allow what God is already doing to manifest itself in and through our prayers.

Among other things, what this means for corporate intercession is that it cannot fulfill its purpose apart from the worship that transports us into the presence of the One whose will we seek to release into the world. I am increasingly convinced that times of gentle worship and music that precede and support the time of prayer are almost indispensable. I only say "almost" because I am loathe to limit God's ability to act in freedom. I can't imagine, in a real-world setting, intercession that prays the Father's prayer from the Father's presence without this musical support.

Because intercession of this sort is so sweet, we needn't worry about the amount of time it might take to deal with as many prayer concerns as might arise when we open ourselves to the Spirit. I could spend hours a day in intercession if life didn't demand that I do other things too! Intercession that is a corporate recitation of listed prayers and responses, with the occasional opportunity to toss in a name or concern in addition to those on "the list", gets long. Really long, really fast. But intercession that is the discovery of God's desire for the person on our minds and the joy it brings to be permitted to release that desire into the world goes beyond expression. Indeed, it is here that the gift of tongues often manifests itself, as our prayer becomes a "groan too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

Intercession breaks our hearts on behalf of the world, but it does so with a sweetness that overwhelms the pain.

## Confession and the Declaration of Forgiveness

I grew up disliking intensely a prayer from the older Episcopal rites that was called the Prayer of Humble Access. Let me put it in here, so that you'll know what I'm talking about. This prayer was/is said just before receiving Communion:

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

The objection I learned, and that persists to this day among more "enlightened" Episcopalians is that this groveling is inappropriate for those of us who have been redeemed. Indeed, we have

said the Confession and received Absolution. We ought not to be claiming that we are "unworthy" even to gather the crumbs beneath the Lord's table.

I understand that thinking but nowadays I think quite differently about it. The difference between me of those days and me of today is this: Before, confession was about how bad I am. Now, it's about how Good God is. I experience no "sting" in the honest appraisal of my sinfulness, of my brokenness. (Well, not often any more.) But the more I look at my need for God's restoration, the more I am swept off my feet by His willingness to be all that I need.

What this means for me at this time, with regard to corporate Confession is this: I find little merit in a scripted Confession that has taught us that the experience of our sinfulness elsewhere in our time of worship is unnecessary and redundant. If we hold up the Goodness of God well enough in worship, the yawning chasm between who He is and who we are (if we look at honestly) will bring us to that moment of "Confession" over and over again! But the worship that allows us to see ourselves truly does so by permitting us to see ourselves as both Fallen and Beloved in the same moment! The more we encounter ourselves as we are in God's eyes, the more filthy and the more beautiful we become. Tears of sorrow and joy become indistinguishable. We Confess God's Goodness and our sinfulness all at once.

This isn't to say that a time set aside for dealing with special needs isn't appropriate. The Scriptures, or the Message, or the music may evoke some painful memory that requires healing. We are tasked, as leaders in the Body of Christ, with speaking reconciliation into the lives of those whose sins burden them. We may even do that corporately, so that those whose consciences are still weak will not be required to expose their pain to the gathered. (For the more "robust" conscience the sting is recognized for what it is, the work of the Accuser. While it may yet hurt, and drive the robust conscience to request help, there would be little reluctance to do so visibly. Let me be clear about one thing, though. I am NOT talking about publicly airing our laundry, only publicly seeking counsel with a trained confessor in the context of worship.) I continue to regret that we make so little allowance for that special aid, though, in our part of the Body.

In Closing

I've said about all I have the energy or insight to say about worship at this point.

This is my most important "So What" though.

We make scapegoats. So what? So worship.

We label people. So what? So worship.

We live as reflections of a violent god. So what? So worship.

So.

Worship.

## Appendix One – Mimetic Theory In A Nutshell

This paper was written with readers in mind who have considerable familiarity already with Rene Girard and his anthropology, known by many as “Mimetic Theory.” For readers who are wondering why I focus so on “desire,” and how it is that I see this as the aspect of our humanity that holds the key to a new way of “being-in-the-world,” I’d first recommend the summaries of different aspects of mimetic theory available at [PreachingPeace.org](http://PreachingPeace.org). For those who are reading this on paper and need a brief introduction, I offer this appendix.

Beginning with his analysis of certain great novelists, Girard began to describe an imitative origin for desire that had previously avoided detection. In his rejection of the “romantic myth” of desire that originates in the self, in many ways defining the self, Girard demonstrated that certain authors had shown an awareness that humans do not desire independently of one another, but learn what is desirable by noticing first what is noticed by someone else. It is the gesture of desire, the reaching out for the object by you that makes the object of your gesture desirable to me.

A favorite illustration of this is the image of two toddlers placed in a roomful of toys. Any of us who are parents or caregivers to children recognize that, even with dozens of choices at hand, there will inevitably be a squabble at some point over the same toy. Not because it is the best toy, but because it is desired.

This imitative desire, mimetic desire, is an important adaptive tool. In the animal world, it is invaluable as a teaching device for younger generations. But as the story of the children illustrates, this way of learning desire also leads to rivalry. Animals have certain built-in controls on this rivalry that humans seem to lack. For this reason, rivalry and frustrated desire have the capacity in a human grouping to lead to the utter destruction of the community.

Girard has described, moving from literary analysis to anthropology, the way that ancient human groupings preserved the life of the group by turning this undifferentiated rage, this war of “all against all” into a “lynching,” into the murder of one innocent member of the group, one “scapegoat.”

After noticing the “peace” that follows the murder of the scapegoat, the community gradually formalizes this process, repeating it as necessary to preserve the unity of the group. It is this formalization of the process of deriving peace through death that lies at the root of all human culture! Three “pillars” of culture can be clearly defined: Ritual – the formal re-enactment of the original murder as needed to restore peace, Prohibition – the enactment of law to prevent as much as possible the expression of the rivalries that threatened the community, and Myth – the retelling of the story of the death of the scapegoat so as to cover up the community’s complicity.

What Girard has said is that this recognition of the mimetic nature of desire and the human use of violence to control our rivalrous tendencies does not emerge from science or study, but from the Bible. It is necessary, for the “scapegoat mechanism” to do its job, that it operate below the level of consciousness, unseen. The Passion Narrative in particular, but in many other narratives of the Bible, the innocence of our victims, our scapegoats emerges. (“Innocence” here is not a moral judgment, but a way of describing the arbitrary way that the scapegoat is selected through some difference or other.) As the Bible has brought this process to light, especially in the death of Jesus who refused to collude in his execution by accepting the guilt thrust at him or by retaliating in any way, the effectiveness of the sacrificial mechanism has gradually declined until, in Rene Girard, it could be named.

What I am hoping to accomplish with this paper is add a rarely-heard element to the discussion of

mimetic theory. In my reading, a great deal of attention has so far been focused on "Violence" and the "Scapegoat" and on "Sacrifice." "Violence Unveiled" (Gil Bailie) was one of my earliest texts on Girard, and a wonderful one. "The Scapegoat" (Girard) and "Must There Be Scapegoats" (Schwager) were two other favorites. A recent, well-reviewed text on the Atonement is entitled, "Saved From Sacrifice."

This is the reason for my paper. I do not believe that we can change the spiraling of human violence by being "against violence" or "against sacrifice." Neither do I believe that we can be "against desire." Instead, desire that leads to rivalry must be replaced by desire that leads to communion. I think that it is in worship that this transformation becomes possible.

## Appendix Two – A note on inclusive language

To those who find my way of speaking about God, using exclusively male pronouns, painful, I apologize. I do also, however, say that this piece is an expression of personal faith and experience of God. My experience of God is as Father, and so I write from that place. I do not believe that this manner of speaking is the only accurate one. I know God as "mother" also, but my piety is formed by masculine language. I am not troubled by others' preference for feminine language for God. I ask only that my own way of speaking be tolerated.