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## Creative Rites

### *Assessing Pastoral Ritual Need*

✿ We begin by taking up the challenge of perceived conflict between the great story of creation and redemption and the person's story, and presenting creative rituals as the way to make a deeper and effective connection between those stories. There are two kinds of effectiveness. First is the *theological/doctrinal*, which is how the great story has been interpreted institutionally. Next is *experiential/operational* effectiveness, which is how persons have or have not been able to deepen in faith through ritualizing their stories. Both kinds of effectiveness can be honored through competently creating rituals that are spiritual and ethical. The starting point for doing so is care for persons whose stories render them spiritually vulnerable.

In their engaging book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, a teacher of pastoral care, Herbert Anderson, and a teacher of liturgy, Ed Foley, make the point that stories and rituals go together.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes there are rituals without stories (thin or empty rites), but other times there are stories without rituals (ritual absence). For stories to be celebrated and made real, they need rituals. But not just any ritual; they need the right rite, an ethical rite, the spiritually appropriate rite. They need a rite that interprets their story in light of the great story.

Indeed, creative pastors across the generations have understood it to be their spiritual pastoral role to bring the liturgical worshipful resources

of the churches to bear upon the needs of their people, from retirement and empty nest to illness and loss of every kind. There have been official and unofficial rites and supplemental services, privately and as part of Sunday morning worship. Done in the Russian Orthodox Church, they are called *moliebens*;<sup>2</sup> in the Roman Catholic Church, *sacramentals*<sup>3</sup> or *blessings*;<sup>4</sup> in the Episcopal Church, *occasional services*<sup>5</sup> or *pastoral offices*;<sup>6</sup> in other Protestant denominations, *rituals of pastoral care*<sup>7</sup> or *liturgy in the gaps*.<sup>8</sup> Since the second half of the twentieth century, such rites have been done by women for women in what has been known as “women-church,” feminist liturgy, and the women’s liturgical movement.<sup>9</sup> And in the twentieth-century radical renewal, begun in the openness of Vatican Council II (1962–65) and continuing in new worship books in major Western denominations, there has been an awakening to the need for spiritual support of all the baptized toward fullness of their lives and ministries. The church’s liturgical wisdom, when turned toward ritual action beyond Sundays, can mediate the ongoing grace of God unleashed at baptism. There is a quiet yet growing sense that rites in the churches are one important means to enable the baptized to grow fully into the likeness of Christ and to carry them over the stiles of “stuckness” into transition and across the pools of pain to healing.<sup>10</sup>

Rites of healing and transition, then, are not a new idea. What’s new is the awareness that the rites in official worship books are insufficient. There can never be enough books of rites to cover all the occasions when rituals of healing and transition are needed, both for groups and for individuals. What’s new is the awareness that if churches really want to engage the authority of the laity in ministry, they must support their maturation in every way possible, including with ritual. Conversation, therapy, and desire are important means to a person’s growth, but sometimes they are inadequate to enable persons to really change; a ritual is necessary to enact the change. What’s new is the awareness that creating particular rites for specific circumstances requires a skill set, a gift for ministry, and a call that may or may not be synchronous with ordination. Typically, those educated in rite making and rite leading are the ones assigned to do that work: clergy. However, not all clergy are gifted or called to engender life-giving, healing rites for others, but some laypersons are so called.

It is the role of the churches to learn, teach, and practice the conducting of both corporate and personal rites with life-giving competence. This book is specifically focused on personal rites, offering principles so

that called and gifted persons who have the skills and desire will be better able to generate and conduct rites needed to support the fullness of life and ministry of all those baptized into Christ (and others as well).

So here begin six ritual-creating principles intended to help spiritual leaders make rites in relationship to personal stories that need to be acknowledged and honored. My goal is to awaken ritual awareness, invite ritual competence, and build practical theory, which are needed both for carefully planned rites as well as for quickly determined improvised rites. My intention is to awaken a liturgical spirituality with an application in pastoral ritual practice.

But because ritual as a spiritual-pastoral practice is not new, yet has been largely latent, and because the need is so great now as the churches are edging out of Christendom (with its privilege but also its cultural syncretism), it is important to step back and take a fresh look at how good rites are made, and what process is needed to assure that unintended negative consequences do not arise. Some leaders will see the value of intentional “custom-made” rites as a source of spiritual healing and growth, but may not have the ritual competence to carry them off. Others are not inclined to attempt this ritual work, so that people with a spiritual-ritual need find themselves bereft.

This chapter begins the process of addressing both groups by opening the way for composing rites consciously and competently, the way music-theory books open the means for composing beautiful and satisfying music. Books of rites are a bit like musical scores: they are not the music; they do not convey the hoped-for spirit of a rite. This book instead offers transferable principles to guide the making of rites with a fitting “feel” or spirit. Supporting the practice of spiritual care through rites of transition and healing is of crucial importance in the contemporary challenges of the life of the church. The rhythm of principle and story intends to engage the mind and heart of spiritual ritual practice.

One story in particular will unfold chapter by chapter. It is about Joanie, who faced a devastating divorce. Her painful situation involved *both* transition *and* suffering. The primary actors in this ritual situation have given permission for me to recount their story (although their names have been changed). Joanie is the one who requested the rite.

This story is not a “case study,” but an illustrative ritual that really happened. It is not an idealized ritual. It is, in fact, different from the ideal in some ways because there was no official presider, there was little

time to prepare and some elements one might usually plan (such as an ending) did not occur. However, I have selected this ritual for two reasons. First, although it does not include all of the principles expounded here, it exemplifies many of them very well. Second, it demonstrates real-life circumstances and challenges that any ritual leader may have to face. For example, in my experience, it is not uncommon for someone to realize at the eleventh hour that one is set to participate in a rite for which one does not know what to do, which was the case with Joanie. I have had many last-minute telephone calls seeking ritual coaching (for example, “My father’s funeral will be in two days; I have the place, the flowers, the reception planned, and the ritual leader booked—we just don’t know what to do”). As in other urgent situations, one must offer one’s best in the moment. Further, there are times when persons want to ritualize an occasion and they do not seek the guidance of a professional. They muster what resources they have and “just do it.”

Ritual, after all, is a human language, and anyone may attempt to “speak” it and conduct one. Without guidance, however, sometimes a ritual misses an opportunity or falls short or can even be harmful. However, one reason for offering what I have learned about ritual making is so that people will have more resources, readily available and further in advance, in order to be more prepared for such circumstances.

In Joanie’s case, my role was as an out-of-town friend who was invited to assist over the telephone with suggestions, questions, care, and prayer. Let’s tune in.

## Joanie’s Story

*The telephone rang. It was my friend Joanie calling from across the country. But it turns out she wasn’t calling just to chat. She had news—sad news.*

*“The divorce is finally, really going to happen, Sue. And Frank’s coming with the truck next Saturday to take half the furniture.”*

*My mind reeled. Divorce! I knew this had been a difficult marriage for years. I knew how many workshops, therapists, counseling sessions, and prayer vigils Joanie had attended, and I had some idea of the tears she had shed, the strategies she had tried, the struggles she had endured. I did not know Frank’s struggles so much, but I knew he had them. Yet each time they’d had a crisis, they somehow had always come through it. But something had happened; a decision had been made. The marriage struggles were ending. Now there would be divorce and a different set of struggles.*

*My heart longed to support her. But all I could utter was, "Oh, Joanie! Oh, I'm so sorry to hear this news. You've worked so hard and so long for this marriage."*

*"I'm sorry, too," she replied in a subdued tone. "But after all this, if I'm honest with myself, I have to acknowledge that it really is over. Something else has surfaced, Sue, and what we have now is not a marriage. I've been so afraid to let it go. Who in the world would I be as a single woman? But now, I'm finally beginning to claim the possibility of an identity as myself, apart from all the links and dependencies of marriage."*

*This was a huge step for Joanie. I was struck at the level of self-knowledge she had gained and her ability, in the midst of the pain and loss and failure of this marriage in which she had invested so much, to see the bigger picture. How emotionally and spiritually mature she had become, and was becoming, in this crucible of relationship and heartache! She had wanted this marriage to work so very, very much. But one person cannot make a marriage.*

*"He's moving on. He has an apartment already. I guess that's why he wants to take his things, and some of our things. It's sad, and it's really difficult. But there's one good thing here that I want to talk with you about. Remember how I've asked over the years for us to ritualize some of our transitions?"*

*I knew very well. Joanie and Frank were from a liturgical tradition, so that the language of ritual was one in which they were both fluent. Yet, for whatever reason, Frank had not agreed to ritualize any of the various steps and turns they had taken over the years, nor would he celebrate renewed attempts to stay together in new commitments through many trials.*

*"This time, he said yes! So next Saturday, before we divide up the house and he takes his belongings, we'll be able to ritualize the end of our household, and—I guess—the end of our marriage."*

*Even as I realized how emotionally draining it would be to ritualize the death of their fragile and hard-kept marriage, I felt a certain relief that the ritual could take place. In the back of my mind, I had been trying to imagine—to empathize with—what Joanie would feel waking up on Sunday in "their" house with all its memories, only to find it half-empty, pain visible everywhere. A ritualization, however laborious in the near-term, might make it possible to contain the disorientation and to place the pain in a larger life-giving context, giving her new grounding and energy afterward. I wanted to affirm her wisdom in asking for a rite and to reassure her. But all I could think of were truisms about how a ritual would mark the death of this marriage, and that as hard and painful and sad as that would be, it would also be the one way to enable new life—two new lives. Yet this was not a time for pedantic truisms. This was a time for care and empathy.*

*But then a thought struck me—hadn't she said next week? All the other rites I had done took longer to prepare. I considered how I might suggest taking two or three weeks to get ready for such an important and emotional event. "Did you say he was coming next Saturday? Do you think . . . ?"*

*"Yes," she interrupted, with energy. "Next Saturday. So I've asked two couples from church who have been very close to the two of us to be with us in this." Ab. So Joanie was fortunate to have a whole week to prepare, and she had already been at work.*

*"So I've got the time, and I've got the people. I'm just not sure what we're supposed to do. That's why I'm calling you, Sue. What shall we do?"*

## The Problem of Resistance

When someone is in the hospital, no one needs to be convinced that the church family must visit. In the hospital room, the visitor might hold hands, pray, read Scripture, lay hands on the person in prayer or blessing, sing, listen, or anoint with healing oil. All these actions are signs of the love and care of the sick person's sisters and brothers in the faith. They *do* love. They are actions that express love by bringing God's comforting word, a loving touch, a trusted and receptive presence. These persons, books, hands, oil, and prayers are outward signs of God's love through the church, and are therefore understood as sacramental in the broad sense. While the visitor may be the only person in the room with the hospitalized person, the whole church is there represented in that visitor.

Joanie, however, was not in the hospital. She was hurting, vulnerable, and facing a huge life change. But because she was not part of a recognized healing system, it would not occur to many (perhaps most) in the churches that she, too, needed outward and visible signs of God's loving care and spiritual guidance in her vulnerability. Joanie's ritual, which would be held in her house, would be an appropriate series of actions parallel to what would be offered to someone in the hospital. Some ecclesial rites are not offered in the church house, not offered on Sunday morning, not even offered by the pastor.

Rites can be personal and ecclesial, which means that while they are private and confidential, they are done on behalf of the whole *ecclesia*, the family of faith, the body of Christ. Rites of confession or reconciliation are examples. It isn't the priest or pastor who forgives: it is God who forgives,

and the priest or pastor pronounces in faith God's forgiveness on behalf of the whole church. God's spiritual graces often come through the church, by its lay and clerical ministers.

In many cases, a person's need does not involve hospitalization and thus is not so readily recognized. Like Joanie, persons may be in spiritual anguish, but perhaps no one will imagine offering a sacramental ritual response if it is not a common situation. But because of the need for outward and visible signs of God's presence and the community's love, the imagination of church folks must be expanded for them to recognize and assess the spiritual need for a rite. Spiritual growth and healing can happen anywhere, even outside the confessional or hospital room.

It is important that a ritual caregiver have a broad imagination to recognize when a person is vulnerable and would be helped by an ecclesial ritual action, either a rite that already exists or a rite that may never have been done before. To imagine various kinds of ritual need, it may be helpful to review Gilbert Ostdiek's four categories of situations needing ritualization,<sup>11</sup> the first two of which are loosely transitions, and the other two loosely healing moments (although any particular situation may be either or both). First, Ostdiek says ritual may be needed in "moments of significant transition" when "people are wrestling with issues of continuity and change" (42), like Joanie. Second, a rite may be needed in threshold moments when "a significant experience unfolds over a period of time" and the person can be helped by ritualizing the steps or stages (44): a child's first day of school or Ostdiek's example of a soon-to-be-married couple each ritualizing leaving their parents' homes before celebrating the wedding. Beyond such transitions, Ostdiek also names a third situation: when "there is a significant need to express or discern the meaning of our lives," because meaning seems to be disintegrating or because one is moving to embrace a new identity or vocation (43), such as facing a debilitating or long-term illness or when one's almost-grown child feels estranged and leaves home, cutting off contact. And fourth, rituals can help "in situations which call for personal commitment and group support," when risks and possibilities require a "safe place" (44) to face chosen or unchosen change. Ostdiek's categories reveal specific situations of vulnerability involving risk or change when ritualizing could make a life-giving difference. A competent ritual maker who cultivates ritual imagination may be able to hear such a ritual need, and then discern what kind of rite might best respond.

So why aren't healing or transitional rituals offered very often? Sometimes a competent pastor will decide that offering to help create a ritual is not the most appropriate response. For example, while the person's vulnerability and need for ritual action may be recognized, there may not be a skilled ritual maker available to lead planning, without which there may be an appropriate fear of doing a ritual in a way that is more harmful than helpful. Or a skilled ritual maker may recognize that the person's situation calls for lament or celebration, perhaps with family or friends, but is not appropriate for an ecclesial worshipful ritual. Christian ecclesial rites create holy space for ultimate stakes: God's relationship to the community of faith in death and resurrection.

But more often, the option of offering a caring ritual does not arise at all. There are several reasons for this.

- Conducting a ritual might not occur to the pastor because there isn't one listed in one's denominational worship book, so it must not be authorized and therefore shouldn't be done, or the pastor doesn't know what to do.
- Organizing rites that first have to be invented takes lots of time. A busy pastor's mind may avoid an idea that would seem to put her or him on overload.
- In some cases there just may not be enough interest or compassion to expend the energy needed for a ritual. The focal persons are surviving, yet the motivation to see them *thrive* may be lacking.
- Because some situations, like divorce, represent a broken covenant, especially a covenant avowed in church before the Lord, an ecclesial rite might be misconstrued as celebrating or condoning that which falls in the realm of sin.
- Even if the pastor is not concerned about ritualizing sin, such a ritual creates witnesses to failure and brokenness, which is hard to see in others, and can hit too close to home for those who have experienced similar situations.

There are two additional resistances to offering a caring liturgy, which we will discuss here. One is "unrecognized vulnerability." Sometimes, pastors do not empathize with the person's spiritual pain that renders them *unable* to act. Pastors may resist the idea that persons are so vulnerable or have reached such a sticking point that they cannot pass

beyond it without help. But persons can need a rescue. They need someone else to take initiative. When those around them do not recognize the gravity of the blockage, nor initiate help, empathy is needed to see how ritual empowerment could help the vulnerable. The second resistance is the “dilemma reason,” to which we now turn.

## Resistance as a Dilemma between Theology and Experience

Sometimes rituals are not offered because the pastor can feel caught between the doctrinal practices of the church on the one hand, and the empathic desire to care for a hurting parishioner on the other hand. There is always a tension between the churches’ theology of sin, humanity, sacrament, the church, and so forth, and the immediate pastoral need in a specific situation. Many pastors have been torn, heart from mind, intuition from reason, pastoral instinct from theological norm, wondering, “If I support a hurting parishioner, will I be compromising moral standards the church upholds?” The tension in this ambiguity has been so great as to press pastors to make an infelicitous choice: one or the other. Here is an example:

*Dennis came to his pastor the week before deployment to a war zone and asked to be baptized. “I thought you were baptized, Dennis.”*

*“Well, I was, Pastor Blaine—but I was a baby back then. Now I’m going to be in harm’s way, and—well, I just want to be sure I know that I belong to Christ and that he is watching over me. I want to feel the water and hear the words, so my body will never forget.”*

*Blaine was tempted. It’s an incarnational religion, after all—in the flesh. But he knew from seminary that rebaptism is a no-no, and doing so would split the local clergy group.*

*“Dennis, I hear you. But God’s promises are sure, and God never lets go of his own. Do you really want to make God prove his love? And if you get isolated later, overseas, what will stop you from asking for baptism again? We just don’t rebaptize.”*

*Dennis’s face was shocked. “But I want to be close to God! And you are my pastor. I’m sure the military chaplain would do it—but my family is here. You wouldn’t deny me, would you?”*

Naming the edges of the tension can help map the terrain in between. Anthropologists Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff provide a helpful description of the two sides to this dilemma. Theological understanding (of how God works, for example), Moore and Myerhoff call “doctrinal efficacy” (or, *theological effectiveness*): here, the doctrinal claims of God’s power and effectiveness in worship and Christian ritual that are affirmed in Scripture, tradition, and reason. In contrast, the actual subjective ritual experience of persons, they call “operational efficacy.” Such empirical results or experienced changes in persons that occur through or resulting from Christian rituals will be called here *experienced effectiveness*, referring to what the person experiences from worship or ritual.<sup>12</sup>

Assessing the soldier and his pastor’s dilemma by affirming both understands that each is imagining a different but equally important effect that would come from a rite. Dennis is seeking *experienced effectiveness*. The pastor wants this for Dennis; but he also recognizes the power and need for *theological effectiveness* by virtue of the church’s understanding of how God works. Dennis is not trying to challenge this belief, for he affirms the church’s meaning. Rather, without having a word for it, Dennis is crying out for effectiveness he can feel—experience—inside himself. Myerhoff writes:

What Moore calls the *doctrinal efficacy* [*theological effectiveness*] of religious ritual is provided by the explanations a religion itself gives of how and why ritual works. The explanation is within the religious system and is part of its internal logic. The religion postulates by what causal means a ritual, if properly performed, should bring about the desired results. A religious ritual refers to the unseen cosmic order, works through it and operates on it directly through the performance. . . . Doctrinal efficacy is a matter of postulation. As the intrinsic explanation, it need merely be affirmed.<sup>13</sup>

The theological effectiveness of baptism, for example, has been articulated in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the ecumenical statement on baptism affirmed, with tremendous effort, by some three hundred Christian churches worldwide.<sup>14</sup> Dennis’s pastor knows this, and knows the depth of meaning held in common: God is the actor in baptism, the giver of the gift.<sup>15</sup> By water and the Holy Spirit, in the name of the Trinity, and by the intentional work of the church through its designated pastors, the one baptized is washed new, freed from sin and united to Christ in his death and resurrection.<sup>16</sup> Baptism is irrevocable. God’s powerful, loving

action makes the baptizand part of Christ's body, forever. The initiate freely responds to God by receiving baptism.

Baptism is effective. Whether or not the newly baptized person feels different does not change the fact of our belief in God's power through the sacrament (or ordinance): the person *is* now different, bonded with Christ in his death and resurrection. This firm faith is *theological effectiveness*.

The effectiveness of theology is not the same as the effectiveness of experience, however, as Dennis wants his pastor to see. Not everyone remembers her or his baptism. Not everyone is old enough to have felt the water, to have labored and prepared so as to leave their fears and resentments in the depths, to have come out to the joyous song of the congregation's Alleluia! Not everyone has an embodied memory as a reference point to recall, in the bad times, that they in fact belong to God. While baptism is true and powerful whether or not one is conscious of it, still, without the embodied memory as reference, it can be harder to pull up the power of one's baptism in times of need. And sometimes, this lack of memory is a source of pain. In contrast, then, according to Moore,

outcome or consequence . . . is attributed to *operational efficacy* [experienced effectiveness]. Results, successes, failures, are part of the operational effects of a ritual. These are the empirical questions in analysis. For example, healing ceremonies may or may not make a patient feel better. Political ceremonies may or may not succeed in rearranging images, may succeed or fail in attaching positive or negative balances to certain ideas or persons. Rites may vary greatly in successfully convincing their participants and communicating their messages. Such questions about communicative, social/psychological effects are [experienced, or] operational.<sup>17</sup>

Experienced effectiveness, then, has to do less with what rituals say than with what they do. In contrast with the official theological meaning, operational effectiveness has to do with the *experience of the worshiper*,<sup>18</sup> with the *meaning experienced*.

Experienced and theological meanings and effects are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they also don't necessarily occur at the same time. If Dennis had been baptized as an adult with all the conversionary preparation, his embodied experience with all its memories would have happened at the time of his baptism. Having been baptized as an infant, however, the sacrament's theological effectiveness took hold, and

no doubt the Spirit's work continues to operate in his life. But his own embodied memory from such a young age is not available to him.

What's the answer to this dilemma? Pastor Blaine felt constrained to choose between theological truth and experienced truth, between the church's fount of understanding and Dennis's pastoral need. In this case, Blaine succumbed to choosing and opted to rebaptize him. The pastor chose to mediate a rite for Dennis's experience at the expense of theological effectiveness, the faith of the church. Therefore, he solved one real problem by creating another one.

Yet the dilemma would be solved if the pastor spoke the language of ritual with sufficient imaginative fluency to offer Dennis an embodied experience of God's presence and love, on Sunday with his faith family, without re-baptizing him. The third way, a creative liturgy, allows recognition of ritual need, the holding of theological integrity, and the creativity to assess and embrace the most fitting solution: a Christian ritual.

What the pastor did not realize is that there is a step between hearing the request and responding. This in-between step is *assessing the appropriate ritual* that could offer the best ritual care in this particular situation: for ritual, as Bell points out, is specific to the person and the situation. This requires understanding what a ritual would need to effect, how it fits or doesn't fit within denominational theologies of worship and order, and who would need to be involved to assure that a rite doesn't open floodgates no one present is able to manage. Any assessment of what kind of ritual is needed must consider both the focal person's heart-cry for stability and support for a changed reality, and the church's theological understanding of what rituals and sacramental rites do, what they're for. Competent assessment of ritual need considers a ritual's effectiveness both experientially, in the worshiper's need and experience, and theologically, in the denomination's belief and offering of what a ritual means.

In this case, both the pastor and Dennis are "right." Baptism is not repeatable. The pastor is right to assert this. Yet Dennis is also right that his life has come to a terrible transition, a time of danger, where an acknowledgment of and recommitment to his relationship with God is clearly called for. So how does one handle two "rights" that seem mutually exclusive?

Some would say, "This is a clear conflict between theological and pastoral needs—and since the pastoral always trumps the theological, the pastor should do it anyway." Others would say, "This is a clear conflict

between the theological, which is what the whole church believes, and the pastoral, which is the need of one person. You can't have every individual undoing what the church spends tremendous energy trying to work out. Dennis should give it up."

However, there is a third way of assessing this situation that does not pit good theology against good pastoring—because, in truth, *both* are important and *both* must be upheld. The pastor's very tension may press him to choose one or the other; but in the economy of God's abundance, "choosing between" is not necessary in this situation. It is possible, ritually, to solve the dilemma and honor both perspectives through the third way of *offering a creative ritual*.

Theological efficacy is essential. It counts. For Dennis to leave for battle with the idea, however small, lurking around the edges of his mind, that the effectiveness of God's action, love, and power is only effective *if he feels it* is a pastorally dangerous risk. God is faithful. Once baptized, one's state has changed: one *is* a child of God, one *belongs* to Christ, and nothing in heaven or on earth can change that powerful and liberating reality. Experiential efficacy counts, as well. Christianity is incarnational: God came to earth in the flesh as human, in Christ Jesus. Through the incarnation, all flesh is redeemed; the body is the means by which salvation occurs; the "flesh is the hinge of salvation," as Tertullian puts it. The soldier needed an embodied experience of God's love for him and claim on his life; and, feeling vulnerable, he had come to the church with a pastoral ritual need. The pastor was obligated to meet him in this need the best way possible: with powerful enough symbols to create an embodied memory that could sustain the soldier through impending death-dealing times.

In this case, there already exists a rite that would beautifully offer Dennis what he needed within the existing repertoire of most denominations: a Renewal of Baptismal Vows specifically oriented toward Dennis's new self-giving in military service. In this case, baptismal renewal, which is a rite in books of prayer and worship, could have been adapted and offered as a powerful renewal experience for Dennis with God in Christ by the Spirit, before going off to war.

But sometimes, a pastor chooses the third way without an available rite. Consider Deborah's process in an equally poignant dilemma:

*Over the years, Pastor Deborah's congregation had made a point of reaching out to homeless people in their community. The parish was gratified that many homeless*

neighbors came to worship and participated in the church's outreach ministries, finding a warm welcome and a caring community. One day a homeless couple came to the pastor's office. With bright smiles on their faces, they exclaimed, "Pastor, we want to get married!"

Deborah's heart sank. She knew this man and this woman, and she loved them both. She knew that they were survivors, as well as a source of comfort and support for each other, which was more than some of the others had in similar circumstances. She also knew about their drug addictions, their mixture of truth telling and dissembling, and their emotional immaturity. She knew about their instances of infidelity, especially during times of separation due to incarceration—not to mention their lack of problem-solving skills. All of this caused Deborah great concern.

Given the intention of Christian marriage to be a mature commitment to help each other deepen spiritually through Christ in the Holy Spirit, and the expectation of faithfulness "til death us do part," Deborah recognized that neither of them was in a position to enter into such a vow. Consequently, Deborah found herself in a conflict between her desire, on the one hand, to be experientially effective by responding to their desire to be drawn deeper into the church family, giving them a sign of the church's love that they could experience together and a day they would always remember; and her desire, on the other hand, to be theologically effective by upholding the church's understanding of Christian marriage.

She also wanted to avoid "setting the couple up" for failure and more emotional trauma. She suspected that the psychological tests the church used for premarital counseling sessions would reveal that they were incompatible with each other, and she did not think they were emotionally stable or mature enough to hear or understand and to accept this information, let alone grow from it as intended by the church in using the test. At the same time, Deborah was compelled to be an ethical role model for her congregation, upholding the faithfulness, mutual support, and self-giving love that she preached about for every married and engaged couple in the church. Integrity in Deborah's words and actions was essential for upholding with her people the beliefs they together espoused, and to continue in the role as a trusted pastor and moral leader among them.

Things came to a head one day when the would-be bride came glowing into her office and joyously announced, "I know what I'm going to wear on my wedding day!" At that moment, it became very clear to Deborah that this woman wanted what every bride wants: the chance to be "queen for a day," to have a memory of joy and specialness that no one could ever take away. She yearned for the soul-filling chance to be beautiful, honored, and feted in her church, filled with love and

*surrounded by love, standing before the altar to be married to her beloved. Being a bride is an archetypal, universal, and utterly human spiritual longing; and this impoverished homeless woman wanted and expected nothing less.*

*The tension was terrible for Deborah, and it only got worse when she spoke to her colleagues about the situation. "Wouldn't you rather see them get married in the church, where they can not only experience the grace of God but also the love of their church family?" they prodded. She had managed to refrain from retorting, "Don't you think they've already experienced the grace of God and the love of their church family? Otherwise, they would have drifted away a long time ago, instead of coming confidently to me seeking to be married in our midst."*

*Having a grand homeless wedding might actually get her photograph in the denominational newspaper! It would be fun for the congregation; and since Deborah was a people pleaser, it would certainly please her to help this couple experience the happiness of their dream fulfilled. However, she also wanted to honor the integrity of Christian marriage as she and her church and the rest of the congregation believed it to be. Would it be cheating or would it be wise to suggest they go to the justice of the peace for a civil ceremony and then have a party for them at the church afterwards?*

What is the pastoral as well as the ethical thing to do in this situation? Deborah could lose her orders (or license) if she conducted such a wedding in the name of her denomination (not to mention the state) when she believed it would not last and when she felt it would be more of a burden than a help to the couple. To witness before God vows that she was convinced they could not keep would be an ethical violation, a kind of blasphemy. Besides, if she did marry them—or even encourage them to be civilly married—and their marriage ended up falling apart, how pastoral would that feel to them? Deborah began to notice an acute pain in her neck, and she began to lose sleep over the decision she had to make.

Deborah might have found some freedom if she had had the terms to describe her dilemma between experienced and theological effectiveness. As it was, without names for her tension, she felt torn between her desire to fulfill the couple's expressed request, and her desire to honor the ordinances of the church of which she had been made steward at her ordination. Doing what they asked, or doing nothing—neither approach seemed the right way. In the end, her ritual assessment was that marriage was not the most fitting ecclesial rite for this couple. Yet she did want to offer the care of the community for them.

## Ritual Creativity: Solving Dilemmas through the Third Way

What would it take, then, to move to the third way through ritual creativity? The first step is assessing the person's underlying spiritual need beneath their request, in this case, for marriage. The answer is not simple nor can it be shallow. The answer cannot be to do a "pretend wedding." The answer requires truth telling, honesty, ritual competence, and creativity. In assessing spiritual ritual need, it is important not to be limited by what people ask for nor by what the pastor immediately imagines. Assessing spiritual ritual need requires prayer and being open to the Spirit. It requires deep listening.

What is their real heart hunger? This couple may not want a lot of responsibility. Perhaps knowing that their lifestyle is marginal, they long for a way to know they are part of the human community, embraced by their church family. Perhaps they yearn for an outward and visible sign of God's lovingkindness toward them. It could be that they want "normal" lives, and a wedding would be a sign for them of normalcy.

Or maybe they are enduring a particularly heavy time, and they really desire the lightness of celebration, of gifts, of a day to remember, of a photo album to hold as witness that they have a family who loves them and a meaning that embraces them. Or perhaps they want a greater stake in the family of faith. Maybe they are drawn by the desire to know they belong. Perhaps they want to belong to each other in a very real way, and to receive God's blessing. Maybe they want help and support for their lives with each other. It could be that they would like other church members to come to where *they* hang out, beyond the church house.

If Deborah offers discerning questions, and listens out of the silence informed by the Spirit, she may be able to find what loving rite will fill their soul. Such listening is a gift because sometimes the deep tectonic movements in our own souls are hidden from us. Not only that, but God has already been working in the couple's midst. What are the signs of the Lord's presence already at work in their lives? How might they respond to the gifts God has already placed within and before them? How does their desire work within the mission of the people of God to love and serve? What is a next step in their spiritual growth in Christ? Are there those who would sponsor or mentor them or serve as spiritual guides?

As acknowledged earlier, creative rituals are part of the baptismal process of growth toward spiritual maturity. Deborah may consider

what would lead to spiritual fulfillment for each person, and then imagine a rite that would express and engender that fulfillment (the first principle). This will be accomplished by following five additional principles: (1) form a planning committee; (2) identify a defining metaphor; (3) plan the rite with ritual honesty (pain and grace, lament and hope); (4) engage the couple in whatever process, even if laborious, would help their passage or healing, so that the rite will manifest giving and receiving, offering and sacrifice; and (5) make the connection between the person's life and Christ's death and resurrection. When the nature of the rite is known, anticipating its celebration can create strong motivation for the formative growth process.

While listening to this couple share their hearts, Deborah would have her theologies ready in mind. God is a God of blessing, of abundance and thanksgiving, of covenant. God calls us to be in covenantal relationship with each other and expects ethical, self-giving care for neighbors and strangers. God is incarnational. God is beauty, truth, and goodness. God calls us to use our gifts for others, such that we ourselves will find joy and fulfillment. God is one and calls us to unity. And God is a God of radical particularity. God cares about these persons' stories and their celebration in the church family.

This heart-listening for their experiential longing stands beside theological effectiveness. Beyond the scope of this chapter, but certainly in the background, is the theological context of Deborah's dilemma, intensified by another set of concerns the churches face around the rite of marriage. Longings for covenant in monogamous union that vary from marriage rites abound. The desire of same-sex couples to receive both civil and ecclesial privileges and blessings is similar. So is the request of elderly couples who are widowed and have found each other as companions in later years, but do not want confusion in their respective children's inheritance. Early in the Eastern church, nonmarried persons sought similar blessing as well as social and legal recognition for alternative households through a rite called *adelphopoiesis* ("making brothers").<sup>19</sup> Deborah's challenge is the challenge of the church: the particularity of ritual need stretches ecclesial systems, yet theological continuity is needed. Creative ritualizing, then, is not only a gift to the couple; it is a gift to the churches.

Ethically, if the pastor is not in a position to do this process or is not ready to offer either marriage or something else, then the pastor is obligated to refer the couple to a pastor and/or a denomination who can help

them. Integrating theological and experienced effectiveness may mean holding the line on any given rite, but it also means finding a way to care for the focal persons' real longing when it is of ultimate concern, even if you cannot ritually care for them yourself.

Creative rituals provide a middle way between theological infelicity and pastoral denial. They eliminate the dilemma between existing rite (if any) and no rite. Creative rites enable the baptized to experience the love of the family of faith and growth in the Spirit. Dominance or ignorance of "church rules" will not accomplish this experience. One needs to honor theology while starting with compassionate sensitivity for a person's ritual need arising out of their vulnerability. Indeed, to offer creative rites requires heart-seeking recognition of the other's soul wound.

### **Resistance as Unrecognized Vulnerability and the Need for Empathy**

Besides solving dilemmas, creative rites can also be the solution when persons are living in vulnerabilities unrecognized by themselves and others. Most people don't know to ask for a rite when they need one. Others may ask for a rite without knowing why, like Joanie.

It is perhaps rare that someone in Joanie's situation would be wise enough to realize how important, helpful, and healing it would be to ritualize the dividing of household belongings and the ending of a marriage. Most of us probably wouldn't be able to recognize our need for a rite. I have found it more common for persons to recognize someone else's need for a rite, than to recognize one's own. Endings and beginnings are vulnerable times, memorable times. Look at the drama surrounding the beginning of a marriage—and fittingly so, since a new family is created; their relationships change with their friends, neighbors, and strangers; new responsibilities are claimed; there may be children to raise. But what about the ending of a marriage? Here a family is uprooted; identities are confused; social patterns are gone to seed. This marriage is ending. Ritually marking that end would help friends and neighbors adjust to the changes, would help the husband and the wife accept the wrenching upheaval, and would help the children, extended family, and church family realize and cope themselves while supporting and sustaining the divorcing couple. Ending is needed: lament, and also hope; cross, and also resurrection. God is always at work, blessing and redeeming.

The process of planning a Christian ritual begins with one who has the eyes to see that a ritual is needed. If the vulnerable person's spirit, and/or the person's growth and ministry, could be helped by ritual action, then it is important to look not only for existing rites, but also for a creative third way that holds the person's need for experienced effectiveness in unity with the church's hard-won theological effectiveness. Even prior to the deep listening that will lead to an assessment of whether and what kind of caring ritual may be called for, therefore, the pastoral listener needs to be tuned in to—to be able to empathize with—the spiritual place of vulnerability of the other. It is out of empathic caring that one knows to pay attention to what kind of care would be helpful. There are all kinds of needs persons may have, including healing rituals.

### *Spiritual Empathy*

The primary skill for recognizing and assessing pastoral ritual need is spiritual empathy: compassion and intuitive empathy for the focal person, engaged in dialogue with knowledgeable others.<sup>20</sup> In situations where there is not already a standard rite available, the starting point for competent ritual assessment and creative rite making is compassion, empathy, and deep listening for vulnerability in the feelings and state of the focal person. Ritual assessment is a spiritual practice with a pastoral practical application.

Prayerful discernment in conversation with a trustworthy other can enable a response if someone asks for a ritual, and can also enable a ritual offering if someone cannot recognize a ritual need or know to ask. Spiritual compassion for the affective vulnerability of the focal person from his or her own perspective is a crucial starting point for creative ritual.

This does not deny the importance of other types of starting points. A planning community for a ritual would need people who can attend to the *physical starting point* (“Where are we going to hold this ritual? The church isn't available, and rain is predicted”), *clarity of intent or purpose* (“She and the people important to her need to know how their relationships will be sustained through the move; and it's important that she get a jump-start in building new friendships and a new sense of purpose or work or ministry in the new place”), and *practical* “how to do it” details (“I can't find a ritual for moving out of town in any of my resource books”). As necessary and important as these other starting points are,

however, they are not the whole story, and they are not the centerpiece of the rite. A healing ritual that will tend to a person's inner affective spiritual state requires someone who can and will tune in empathically to hear the seemingly conflicting thoughts and feelings operating at once from that person's perspective of his or her own experience.

Empathy takes time. Listening deeply takes energy. Crafting a rite that weaves all the threads into a beautiful whole is an art form that takes focus. Rites can really heal—but rite makers are called upon to give themselves to the process. This is a different process than planning Sunday worship. While liturgy requires theological and symbolic knowledge, and pastoral and practical sensitivity, weekly worship would be unsustainable if pastors had to give the kind of energy Deborah gave to the couple every single week. Spiritual empathy is needed for every liturgy, but it is not the starting point for planning congregational worship.

Pastors can do good worship every week because the typical starting place for regular worship on the Lord's Day is a standard pattern. In liturgical traditions, this is called the *ordo*—the order of worship authorized along with the readings appointed. The liturgical planner then plans the variables: music, sermon, prayers, and circumstances in the world or parishioners' lives. In less liturgical or nonliturgical traditions, one may still start with the usual order of worship even if not officially authorized. Many of my students pull up the congregation's standard worship template on their computer and begin the process of changing readings, call to worship, music, and developing a unifying focus for the Lord's Day services. This usually leads to good worship. It's a practical beginning, and it is sustainable, every week. This is the lifeblood of the people of God, the inhale of their life breath.<sup>21</sup> The pattern is its strength; pastor and people can relax, knowing what's coming.

Starting with the pattern doesn't mean leaders aren't thinking about or caring for their people. Of course they are. Even so, cultivating spiritual empathy could add depth to a worship leader's presiding style and could enable personal celebrations in the Sunday assembly. For example, nearly all the occasional rites that are celebrated by congregations are centered on persons especially lifted before God and embraced in worship. Historically, of the seven sacraments asserted by Peter Lombard and continuing in the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>22</sup> six have focal persons who

are the center of the rite and on whose behalf it is enacted: baptism, private confession (the penitent), confirmation, marriage (bride and groom), anointing the sick, and ordination. Plateau rites of initiation in the early church's catechumenal process had catechumens and candidates as focal persons. Congregations today know how to have a "John Thomas Sunday" or to honor mothers or to send the teens away on a mission trip or to celebrate the Boy Scouts. Weddings, funerals, and house blessings are also personal ecclesial rites.

So even when standard rites exist, this spiritual empathic skill of taking the focal person's affective perspective in all its vulnerability is crucial in adapting given rites to particular circumstances. As Bell demonstrates, rituals are situational and strategic, needing particular strategies to help this person through this life crisis. Without such empathy fed by prayer, the spiritual mark can easily be missed.

And then, when there is no standard rite to start with, practical or physical tasks can overlook the core concern: the spirit that needs to be embodied in a rite. *The first principle for transitional or healing ritual<sup>23</sup> in the baptismal process, especially when there is no rite in the book, is to start with the person.* The person is one who belongs to the Creator, who is baptized into Christ, who is a sibling in the Spirit, and is the one for whom you have promised to care. The starting point for rituals in the baptismal process is care for the affective, spiritually vulnerable experience of the focal person on behalf of whom the ritualization will be designed. The healing or transition needed by the focal persons, so that they can continue ever more fully in baptismal living, is both the purpose for and the spirit of the rite to which the ritual leader gives her- or himself.

One of the benefits to the churches of supporting persons to cultivate ritual fluency and competence is that the focal persons, as well as ritual planners and witnesses, take on a deeper sense of connection between the ecclesial community and holy Christian living. When liturgies are focused around particular persons and their situations, the persons themselves can become windows into God's intentions, icons of Christ's grace, epiphanies of the Spirit's love and operation. God was incarnate in a particular human being, and Christ's work was with particular human beings: that rabbi's daughter, this tax collector in the tree, that centurion. Rituals for specific occasions in individual persons' lives are a means of grace received through the churches' worship at the regular weekly service and beyond.

### *Ethical Limitations in Spiritual Empathy*

There are at least three caveats to hold in mind in being guided by empathy to hear a person's ritual need. First, *the ritual planner must resist any tendency to project her own pain, experience, need, or desire onto the focal person.* This is a real risk, because another's pain can reveal to us our own vulnerability, and our empathy can (inadvertently) draw us back to our own needs and situation.

Second, *a ritual maker must resist any temptation to take as "fact" judgments focal persons may make about themselves or that their family may make about them.* Rather, the ritual maker acknowledges a focal person's self-judgment or reputation as a perspective to be celebrated or healed out of the loving forgiveness through which God sees persons. Indeed, a ritual maker must be careful never to take on a judgment about a person, even if it seems to be a judgment accepted by "everyone." If unable to "see" a focal person from the loving perspective of God's wider vision of creation and redemption, a ritual maker must decline to lead a rite for that focal person. This is part of the spirituality of rite making. Creative ritual is freeing partly because God's wider redemptive truth can be revealed through the ritual's recontextualization of meaning, its mediation of God's love and forgiveness, and its invitation to participate in God's ongoing redemption of the person into life and freedom.

Third, *it would be essential that people leading the planning for a rite of passage or healing for another be able and willing to give themselves over to care for the focal person without one's own needs getting in the way.* Not everyone has a gift of empathy, and for some its necessary cultivation comes harder than for others. Further, as James Fowler points out in his faith-development stages, not everyone has the ability to take the perspective of another, to step out of one's own life-needs and "feel with"—either sympathize or empathize—the pain of another.<sup>24</sup> Megory Anderson's lovely book *Sacred Dying: Creating Rituals for Embracing the End of Life* expresses just how important, yet how difficult, this distance and perspective is:

*Sacred Dying's* most important role is taking the attention from those survivors who are going through grief and loss and placing it onto the person who is at the point of death. The focus here is on the dying experience itself, as the last of life's great transitions. . . . Mourning and grief come for the survivors, regardless. I do not try to diminish the agony of anyone watching a loved one die; it is often the hardest thing we have to face.

[Even so, my] hope is that, in spite of our [own] fears and sadness, we can offer our loved one an opportunity to experience death as it should be, with honor, respect, and sacredness.<sup>25</sup>

Anderson challenges the battle metaphor so often used with the dying: “I’m going to defeat this!” She quotes Penelope Wilcock who appreciates the desire to fight, but writes,

Our [most common] response to the helplessness of others is to take rescuing action, to be the cavalry coming over the hill (and it follows that our response to our own helplessness is shame). . . . This approach breaks down in the spiritual care of dying people and their loved ones. . . . It is they, not we, who are the protagonists in this last act of life. The work of the dying is theirs, not ours. Ours is to travel alongside, as companions on their journey.<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes a rescue is not what’s needed, even though it can seem easier to try to “fix the problem” than to be present to another’s pain. The result of this perception for the dying and others in vulnerable transitions is that rarely is someone helping the dying person from the person’s own perspective. As Anderson points out, “Dying persons usually have very little say in what is going on around them. They become mostly objects to be dealt with. ‘What are we going to do now?’ family members ask. ‘I certainly can’t take him home with me; I have a family to take care of’ . . .”<sup>27</sup>

What Anderson asserts for rituals at the end of life is true for all life passages (which death is), and all healing rites (which death also can be): that the “sacred dying experience is *for the person dying*—all rituals and observances are for him or her. . . . Loved ones must try to respect the experience of dying, and even if they need to sacrifice their own feelings for the time being, they must try to focus 100 percent on the person who is dying.”<sup>28</sup> This is a spiritual practice.