

Hopeful Complications for our Dialogue

Brendon Neilson

Abstract: The current discussion regarding Eucharistic theology was sparked because of the public safety limitations upon gathering caused by Covid-19. At the same time this year has been full of tragedy related to systemic and structural racism, and the increasing recognition of how this manifests. This paper seeks to make the connection between these seemingly different conversations and proposes how we might complicate our discussion for a faithful way forward.

This year has been for me an example of how our vocation as the body of Christ takes place within the specific context of the physical, social and political realities that we are called to incarnate that body within.

Theology is a lived discipline. I believe that the questions of *how* theology is embodied in the lives of people and communities are weightier than questioning those convictions and practices in and of themselves.¹ It is not that investigating those convictions is unimportant, on the contrary, it is vital. Those conversations, however, must always be attuned to the world we are embodied within – to the physical and social contexts we inhabit.

In January the Anglican Journal warned in the headline that we could be “Gone by 2040”. While the issue also had many stories of good and hopeful contexts throughout the ACC, the trends and social factors are impossible to ignore.

In February I spent some time at the BC Legislature with the indigenous youth who were occupying the steps in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs. Later in February I was in Alert Bay for the induction of a new incumbent at the parish of Christ Church Alert Bay a small parish just down the road from one of the largest Anglican Indian Residential Schools. The school building was demolished a few

¹ In this understanding of theology, I find myself aligned with James Wm McClendon Jr. An “isolated left wing southern baptist” who spent most of this career teaching Episcopal priests at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. He names theology as the “discovery, understanding or interpretation and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.” McClendon treats ethics as the primary or first task of theology in that it is lived first, before it is critically engaged at a cognitive level. See, *Ethics: Systematic Theology Vol 1*. Revised, Abingdon Press, 2002.

years ago, and while there I made sure to walk the space set apart to remember the sins of our fathers and how we must not continue in the way that our nation and our church operated in the past.

March brought the increasing awareness that COVID-19 was going to change just about everything. We stopped gathering and travelling, and we retreated into our homes to protect one another from this novel invisible danger. We have necessarily had to rethink many things that have been standard habits and practices in our lives and communities for the sake of the health of our neighbours.

It wasn't long before the discussion around shifting most of our worship services to some version of an online experience, and the questions began regarding the eucharist in this time. I watched, listened, and read with curiosity as the think pieces and columns flowed in from various perspectives highlighting the common appreciation for this central part of our worship, and coming to a variety of proposals for how we respond to this current moment.

As the weeks went on, however, my endurance for the conversation was wearing. Not because the answers were clearer, but because a persistent flaw with theological debate was once again becoming apparent. What was weighing on me I think, was seeing how debate can skew priorities for the sake of rhetoric. So, while the conversations were honing our convictions and potential response to what we were facing within the church it seemed to be isolated from what else was going on in society.

May brought acute reminders of the ongoing racism in our world with the viral video of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, the disproportionate risk of racialized communities to COVID-19,² and the video showing Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck while he strained for air. These murders sparked hundreds of protests and solidarity actions across the world, the voices of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and the realities of systemic racism have become inseparable from this pandemic season.

Here in Canada, there have been solidarity actions by many local BLM organizations and allies across the country. And as Desmond Cole has argued in his pertinent book *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black*

² According to the American CDC, Indigenous and Black people were 5 times more likely to experience hospitalization due to Covid-19, and Hispanic people were 4 times more likely than were white people. See, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html> (Accessed July 17, 2020). Canada does not require race based medical data, which seems to me to be a very Canadian kind of problem in itself, see, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/city-committee-race-data-covid19-1.5604442> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

Resistance and Power, the stories of Black and Indigenous people in Canada are inextricably linked.³ The struggle against white supremacy in our nation-state, and the many forms of violence that are sustained and supported by the status quo has been preying upon Indigenous and Black communities throughout our past and present. The shooting of Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi by police in New Brunswick (on June 4, and June 12) displayed very clearly that the Canadian context is not immune to the sin of systemic racism, and that Black and Indigenous people are disproportionately the victims of it.

So, while we in the church are thinking through how to navigate the theological and safety considerations of if and how to celebrate the Eucharist in the midst of a pandemic, we must acknowledge that this discussion cannot happen in a vacuum. Our ecclesial lives must remain connected to our participation in the world that is groaning. And, if we are to follow the way of Christ, that brings us into ever greater encounter with that groaning.

One of my theological convictions that has been strengthened in the last number of years is that faithful theology and praxis draws us to a deeper engagement with the world around us—it does not isolate or withdraw us from it. The radical immanence of God in Jesus demonstrates the movement in and toward the world for the sake of the other. This (kenotic) movement is one layer of many that we participate in when we receive the bread and wine in the Eucharist.

Our impulse is to have our discussion of Eucharistic practice with limited complications of context. Considering things in and of themselves, however, often implicitly denies relational implications. Dwayne Donald who is a Papaschase Cree scholar at the University of Alberta, names colonialism as “an extended process of denying relationships”.⁴ He says that in our society we are “wrapped up in a legacy of relational denial that comes in many different forms.” This broad understanding of colonization is helpful for us in that it recognizes the insidious and pervasive, though hidden, ways we automatically go about doing what we do, including asking and answering theological questions.

Covid-19 has highlighted many things, but among them is the interconnected, enmeshed, relational reality of all existence. Having a conversation about something as central to our worship as the Eucharist, without highlighting the ways that it is interconnected with everything else happening in 2020 seems to me to be a step in the wrong direction. If we are committed to the work of decolonization and reconciliation, including

³ Desmond Cole, *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power*, Doubleday, 2020. Cole makes this connection throughout the book but see particularly the chapter “the unsettling (July)”.

⁴ Dwayne Donald “Homo Economicus and Forgetful Curriculum: Remembering other ways to be a human being” January 28, 2020. YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/VM1J3evcEyQ>

the repudiation of the doctrine of discovery and other parts of our story connected to white supremacy and exploitation, we need to start with those things that we hold most dear, including their relation to how we dialogue, how we do theology, and how we understand and practice the Lord's Supper. What we are learning now, (perhaps remembering) is the connection and interrelatedness of things (including how they change) will be vital for our futures in what is increasingly a series of crisis one after another.

We must, therefore, highlight the tension that exists between the altar (and the feast of abundance that takes place there) and the flags that hang above in many of our buildings.⁵ If we appeal to the same tradition to shape the logic and justification for how to respond in our eucharistic practice that is not uncomfortable doing so beneath flags that represented and carried out some of the worst colonial violence in the history of the world, we dismiss what is being revealed in the struggle against systemic racism. To state that otherwise, *our appeal to tradition in this discussion of our eucharistic theology and practice should only be done if we are simultaneously doing the work of untangling the inherent and inherited white supremacy within it.*⁶

It seems to me that what we are tasked with doing, (and indeed what every generation is tasked with) is the creative work that is inherent within theology, which is, to name it bluntly, doubt. Doubt is the crucible of context. Faithful doubting asks those uncomfortable questions of the convictions of the community and how they ought to be best understood and lived given what we now face, and if they serve our current collective vocation. And in light of what these questions reveal, to revise our communal convictions and practices (and the necessary institutional infrastructure) to serve our vocation of being church.

Both of these tasks (discerning and determining faithful response to our Eucharistic theology and practice in the midst of pandemic and beyond; and, untangling the good and faithful parts of our tradition from the white supremacy) can fall under the often overlooked but powerful practice of binding and loosing.⁷ In Matthew 18:18 Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and

⁵ I refer here to the Union Jack and other regimental flags that highlight the British imperial project that the Anglican Church of Canada was a partner in and an explicit beneficiary of.

⁶ Tradition obviously plays a major role in shaping our thinking and practice of the Eucharist. We are coming to a point, however, where appeals to tradition are becoming less compelling due to some of what was simultaneously justified from with that traditional ways of thinking and being. In our case the colonial project of Canada. James Cone has written a compelling case for theologians to call out the white supremacy within the field. See, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy", *Black Theology*, 2:2, 139-152, 2004.

⁷ A fulsome justification of this approach to binding and loosing would take much longer than this space allows. Rudy Baergen does a fine job of applying binding and loosing to the equal marriage discussion including much of the background exegetical work for how I am suggesting we might use it here. See, "'Binding and Loosing' in Matthew 18:18 and the Mennonite Church Canada 2016 Decision on Sexuality" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2018). Accessed June 30, 2020.

whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”⁸ The immediate context of this passage is addressing communal conflict, and how to ensure that reconciliation and forgiveness are central to the way. This passage and its parallel in John 20:23 speak to a principle of communal discernment, and the authorization to do so with the weight of heaven.⁹ Certainly, as the immediate context implies, the analysis of personal and communal sin and determining what counts, and how to deal with it, is a vital component of binding and loosing.¹⁰

When we take a step back, however, we can see this emerging as an call to take part in a methodological move that God is making in Christ. A vital part of the ministry of Jesus was to take the tradition he inherited and press it through a process of binding and loosing to fulfill the liberating work of God in the context he found. The sermon on the Mount is perhaps the greatest example of this binding and loosing method on display. In it there is a repeated move to shift the action from the outer to the inner realm. To move the law from the outside with its social and legal implications, into the heart, with its spiritual and social implications.¹¹ To bind and loose is an invitation by God to participate in God’s work that with the Spirit at work in us, we should be confident to do.¹²

The call to bind and loose, is a call to participate in the way of Christ. Not on the level of the law wherein we rewrite the social and canonical expectations of ourselves (though it may involve that) but, a call to participate in the deep engagement with the world as we find it. To take our tradition and press it with doubt; to find the ways it can best be used to bring about the reconciliation and the liberation that we know is available through Christ in faith. Binding and loosing is an invitation for us to be the body of Christ in a way that will be good news for our neighbours, and will place us in solidarity with the oppressed—and in our context, in solidarity with the Black and Indigenous victims of systemic and structural racism.

We are called in and through the Eucharist to live in a way that is kenotic, that is self-emptying for the sake of the other in the time and place that we find ourselves.¹³ Considering this we know that our binding and

⁸ Jesus uses this same phrase in response to Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:19.

⁹ John 20:23: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

¹⁰ An historical example here is how the church has dealt with divorce over time. There has gradually been a loosening of the significance and implications for a person being divorced.

¹¹ This was in line with the prophetic tradition that Jesus was participating in as well. Jeremiah 31:33 comes to mind here.

¹² Interestingly this call that directly precedes the oft cited passage in the discussion of online versions of the Eucharist that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matt. 18:20)

¹³ Philippians 2:5-11 and the emptying (kenosis) passage in verse 7 is what is referred to here. Michael Gorman’s work is one of the influences behind my understanding of Kenosis. See especially *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*, Eerdmans, 2009.

our loosing will involve letting go some of how we did things in the past, as well as affirming some new generative ways.

In her book *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, Sallie McFague describes Kenosis as “the recognition that restraint, openness, humility, respect for otherness, and even sacrifice (diminishment and death) are part of life *if* one assumes that individual well-being takes place within political and cosmic well-being.”¹⁴

McFague reminds us here that our story is not only our own, that our wellbeing is bound up with the wellbeing of our neighbours, (both our human neighbours, and more fundamentally our non-human neighbours). It is the kenotic movement away from selfishness, that is cultivated in and sustained through the insatiable desire for more (wealth, growth, GDP, ROI, KPI...), that we celebrate when we are fed at the table of the one who we remember. Our formation at the table prepares us for embodying a kenotic way in our lives.

For us, binding and loosing in our current context includes decolonizing. It is a call to bring together content (eucharistic theology) and method (kenosis): it is transformative. It costs us our comfort (at least!) and calls for ongoing reparation for being an institution, and people who are beneficiaries of the systemic racism that exists in our country and communities.

I want to suggest two humble proposals for decolonizing our discussion as we seek to bind and loose given the combination of theological and social realities we face.

1) In his book *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, Vine Deloria Jr. argues that one reason why western Christianity has been an awkward fit here in the Americas is the western emphasis on *time* compared to the reverence of *place* in indigenous traditions.¹⁵ The emphasis on time as being the normative principle, along with the universalizing tendencies that come with that approach, rather than place with its particular set of relational interconnections, creates such a vastly different set of possibilities for how the divine is understood and encountered.

¹⁴ Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*. Fortress Press 2013.

¹⁵ See Chapter 4 “Thinking in Time and Space” in *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 30th Anniversary Edition. Fulcrum Publishing, 2003.

The question that emerges for me in regard to our discussions on the Eucharist is what is the normative significance of place as we seek to contextually work out our salvation and celebrate the Lords Supper? Obviously contextual considerations need to be simultaneously held in tension with the catholicity present in the eucharist, but could difference rather than uniformity be an appropriate and faithful response to the possibilities of being digitally sacramental or relationally encountering our communities in ways that were not possible a generation ago?

When we start to decolonize our discussion, we begin to consider more than a single (universal) answer to a situation that arises in drastically different places and contexts.

For example, there could be different and contextually relevant criteria that is used to make a decision in different dioceses; criteria that highlights the narratives of what is uniquely theirs to consider and struggle with.

2) One feature of Sallie McFague's understanding of kenosis is that it insists upon becoming less anthropocentric. To understand the kenotic movement that we are called to embody we see that we are much more dependent upon the microbes in the soil for our continued existence and sustenance than they are for us.¹⁶ Further, if we understand our personal and collective narratives to be wrapped up in the cosmic narrative of God and world, and that in the Eucharist we remember that all creation and not just humans have been reconciled to God in Christ, then we can begin to celebrate (in restraining/diminishing our own significance at the table) that what happens in the Eucharist is done for the sake of the world, and not just for those (humans) who are able to be there physically and partake of the elements in a physical way. To be clear, I am not advocating for including our other than human neighbours in our (human) communal eucharistic practices. What I am saying is that at the mystical realities that are present therein, have significance beyond the physically present human participants, that thinking in that direction should not be excluded in the conversation.

When we start to decolonize our discussion, we remember that we (humans) are not the most important part of our earthly ecosystem and that our faith does indeed have something to say about that.

An example, of thinking in this direction would be Catherine Keller who proposes a renewed apophatic appreciation of our shared breath with the rest of the created creatures could open up a less

¹⁶ My friend Mike Kozlowski who is a vegetable farmer in Red Deer, Alberta, (Steel Pony Farms) prophetically reminded me of this in a pre-covid visit.

anthropocentric appreciation for how we might embody and steward those things that have been uniquely imparted to us (complex language, symbol, sacrament) for the sustainable good of all beings.¹⁷ If our discussions and implications of our decisions do not account for the ways we are connected to and responsible for the material wellbeing of our neighbours, we have somehow missed the significance of our creaturely crisis.

Theology is surely a lived discipline. It takes place within a physical, social, and political context where it finds its way into our lives and relationships. The world we exist in now is full of complexity and interconnection. I have tried to convey, that we are being invited to lean into the ways that our faith is connected to the ongoing and present struggle to liberate us all from the yolk of oppression, and to do that work in and through the theological questions emerging from being eucharistic in the time of pandemic. Thankfully it is not for me to say how any diocese or congregation will respond, my hope however, is that we complicate our discussion through the ways (inconvenient though it may be) it is connected to the racism that has once again been revealed in our midst. The call for us to bind and loose offers a way to not only navigate this journey, but to faithfully decolonize in the process, and that is hopeful.

Dr. Brendon Neilson is the vision animator for the diocese of British Columbia. Brendon works to facilitate the implementation of the diocesan vision. This includes supporting implementation teams and parishes to embody the vision and work on collective efforts to live the vision together. Brendon has a PhD in theology focusing on the biographical method of James Wm McClendon Jr.

¹⁷ See Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*. Columbia University Press, 2018. The section I am referring to above is in pages 166-169. She points to Stephen Moore who is involved in this growing edge for theological inquiry see his edited collection, *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, Fordam University Press, 2014. As an example of work in this area.