

(Draft—not for publication or citation)

Invoking in Public¹

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”

Flannery O’Connor

John Rollefson

The call came a couple of months ago from our County Supervisor’s office inquiring would I be willing to “do the invocation” for the LA County Board meeting on Tuesday, April 18th. A quick glance at my appointment book confirmed that the date was the Tuesday after Easter when I would still be in recovery mode from Holy Week and Easter, but since yet again my congregation had failed to book me on a cruise to Ensenada for a little r & r, I told the voice on the phone I’d be delighted to accept the invitation. She said she’d get back to me with the details.

Weeks passed, and from time to time as I came across the date in my calendar, I’d wonder briefly about just what I should do for the occasion. Finally in mid-Lent I heard from the Supervisor’s aide again, confirming the date and assuring me that a letter would be arriving shortly filling me in on the details of when and where to show up.

In Good Friday’s mail, two-thirds of the way through my furious preparation for and leadership in the six services I was leading between Palm Sunday and Easter, arrived a letter on gold-embossed stationery containing all of the details I needed. Attached was a second, hitherto unmentioned, sheet entitled (in bold print) “**Guidelines for Invocations before Meetings of the Board of Supervisors.**”

Beginning with a thank you for my interest in giving the opening invocation, the “Guidelines” went on to advise how under constitutional law “the government cannot prefer or promote a particular faith or belief over others, nor can it disparage any faith or belief.” I nodded my head in full agreement. Since the County cannot be viewed as being affiliated with any specific religious denomination, speakers were asked to “respect this neutrality” by observing “certain guidelines for invocations.”

Then followed this paragraph which apparently—though to my mind in something less than clear language—intended to articulate said “Guidelines”:

In preparing your invocation, please keep in mind that you may not call upon or invoke names specific to a particular doctrine or denomination. For example, the California Court of Appeal in a case challenging use of a prayer at a Burbank

¹ A slightly shortened version in the October, 2006 edition of *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, pp. 12-14.

City Council meeting invoking the name “Jesus Christ,” recently upheld a trial court judgment enjoining the City Council from “knowingly and intentionally allowing sectarian prayers at City Council meetings” and ordering the City to “advise anyone conducting a prayer as part of the City Council meeting that sectarian prayers are not permitted.” However, it is not necessary to strip invocations of all religious or spiritual characteristics. Thus, invocations may be made in the form of a prayer and be inspirational in content, so long as these requirements are observed.

“Huh?” I wondered, more confused than enlightened by said “guidelines.” But the final sentence sounded a more ominous and even intimidating note: “Your voluntary participation indicates that you will abide by the guidelines.”

Now, I’m no rookie pastor. I’ve said prayers before in public, pluralistic settings, and I like to think I was sensitive to these occasions and their contexts: in interfaith worship settings, blessing a tree for a public Arbor Day commemoration, pronouncing an invocation at a public university’s commencement ceremony, etc. But, to the best of my memory, never had I been asked to pray for an official government meeting, a practice that I’m dubious about as a civil libertarian concerned with the gradual erosion of the constitutional separation of church and state while at the same time a strong advocate of faith’s relevance to politics and public policy. Even before the County

Board’s “Guidelines” arrived, I had begun wondering whether a prayer was the right or appropriate thing for me to speak. Well-schooled in the excesses, as well as the inanities, of the piety that parades under the banner of American civil religion, I decided that my own integrity as a pastor who is also an American citizen was urging me to explore what might be a new kind of invocation that intended both to “abide by the Guidelines” and be faithful to my own calling as a Christian.

Tuesday the 18th dawned warm and sunny, and I found my way to the Executive Office of the Board of Supervisors in good time. Assigned to me as my guide was a charming Latina who told me she had worked for the County for nearly 25 years. Apparently baby-sitting the visiting invocers each Tuesday morning was one of her routine duties, one I couldn’t help but think might not have been the best use of her time and our money as taxpayers. LA County, our politicians love to boast, is the most populous county in the U.S. with a population of over 10 million people (including 90,000 homeless), making it more populous than 80% of the states of the Union. As we waited for a quorum of the Board to arrive (it was County “Bring Your Children to Work Day” and an unusual number of kids were present), I noticed how the Hearing Room was filling with folks lobbying for various causes including the County’s pet spaying ordinance. I also noticed entering the Hearing Room an entourage surrounding two bearded men in black-hooded robes whom I took to be Orthodox priests. They were present, it turned out, in support of an official commemoration of the Armenian Holocaust which was on the day’s agenda. Once the quorum was reached, I was asked to step to the microphone to begin the meeting with my invocation, the first order of the day. This is what I was moved to say by way of “invocation”:

Thank you for inviting me to give an opening invocation for today’s meeting. Even before receiving the other day your “**Guidelines for Invocations**,” I’d decided that as a Christian who is also an American citizen who strongly values the rights and protections articulated in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that a prayer would not serve us well.

Jesus himself once warned of the dangers of praying in public. Please know that I've already prayed for you and the business that you Board members have to conduct on behalf of all of us citizens of LA County and that my congregation regularly prays for its elected leaders, that you might be given the wisdom and courage to pursue justice, peace and the welfare of those you as leaders are elected to serve. Furthermore, I don't believe that I or any other religious leader has the power to "invoke" God in the sense of calling God's attention to what we're on about. Rather, I believe that God is the One who calls us into the vocation of our everyday lives where we are each and all "called" to perform God's work in the contexts of our very specific responsibilities.

Looking out on the assembled throng, including the Supervisors and their staff, I could tell that at least I had their attention as some probably began to worry just what this guy at the microphone was about to say next. I continued:

You know that just two days ago we Christians of the Western tradition (an ad lib acknowledgement of my Orthodox brethren) celebrated Easter, the day that God raised Jesus from the grave where he had been laid following his execution by the political authorities of his day. Next Sunday in our churches many of us will hear this particular text that I think has relevance to the work you are all called to do as well as all of us who call ourselves Christians. This text from the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles gives us a strong hint as to what it means to live in the light of the resurrection: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

"This is a text, as some of you know," I went on, that became the inspiration of Karl Marx's (now I could feel the fidgeting of the crowd) famous "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need," a text that we can admit neither free market nor socialist societies have found it easy to embody nor for that matter the church itself. It remains for us the challenge of seeking the welfare of the city rather than merely ourselves and "our own" as the prophet Jeremiah urged.

"So, instead of a prayer," now finally getting down to business, I concluded, "I'd like to read as inspiration for your important work today a bit of a prophetic poem written by the poet/farmer Wendell Berry. It's entitled 'Manifesto' and articulates well, I think, what many of us think comes much closer to articulating genuine Christian values than what some today are claiming as such:

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands....
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest....
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns....
Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

As soon as the generals and politicians
can predict the motions of the mind,
Lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

"Thanks. It's been good to be with you," I concluded. And finally giving the Board the prayer they'd invited me for I ended, "Blessings on your work!" Following which we all turned to face the stars and stripes, put our hands over our hearts and were led in the Pledge of Allegiance by my fellow invitee, a retired vet, who got us through "one nation, under God" alright but then stumbled over "indivisible" on our way to "with liberty and justice for all."

Brief bios of my fellow invitee and me were read by our respective Board members, before each of us was presented with a fancy, multicolored "Certificate of Appreciation" to which was affixed the official gold seal of LA County. My Supervisor, whom I had never met previously, after mispronouncing my name, judged my performance "a unique and memorable invocation" before shaking my hand and muttering under his breath that he also belonged to some of the "progressive" affiliations I had listed in my bio. He gave me his card and wished me well. As I made my escape from the Hearing Room, a guy in a gray suit (probably a fellow-traveler) grasped my hand and beamed his approval.

Driving back home to my noon-time appointment (a regular pick-up basketball game at the nearby city recreation center just up Veteran Boulevard), I couldn't help but ponder both the possible impact and appropriateness of my "invocation." Had I performed the service I was invited to provide? Had I supplied the "inspiration" the Board desired? Had I abided by the "Guidelines" to which my "voluntary participation" had committed me? Had I been true to my own responsibilities as a citizen and to First Amendment protections? Had I been true to my own faith commitments as a Christian called to be a pastor? Had I been a witness (a "martyr" in Greek) to the Good News of Jesus Christ? And finally, had I lived up to my own exhortation to the County Board to "practice resurrection?"

Just as I was dropping off to sleep two nights later I suddenly remembered that a tape of the County Board meeting was scheduled to be broadcast that same evening on public access television. Rushing downstairs I turned on the TV to find the Board session being opened by a rather ruffled-looking, balding guy who took something less than four minutes not to say the opening invocation that the crowd seemed to be expecting. But for all my admitted lack of objectivity, I was satisfied with if not exactly gratified by what I heard and saw. I was, I thought, practicing resurrection in my own way by following the poet's advice to "be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction." After all, the Gospel is an "odd" truth that makes us free, even free from conventional "invoking."

An Afterword Reflecting on ‘Invoking’ During the Obama Inaugural

When you are praying, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when-ever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who is in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name (Mt 6:5-9).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer more than seventy years ago reflecting on these words of Jesus regarding prayer in the context of life under the Third Reich observed that “Prayer does not aim at any direct effect on the world; it is addressed to God alone, and is therefore the perfect example of undemonstrative action.” (The Cost of Discipleship [New York: 1963],p. 181). But, he readily admits that there is always a danger of prayer seeking “self-display” which well “may happen in public prayer which sometimes” (although puzzlingly he adds in a parenthesis ‘though not often nowadays’) “degenerates into an empty noise.” Jesus, interestingly, includes ostentatious “hypocrites” (literally, “play-actors” or “those who wear masks”) within his own faith as well as “Gentiles” enamored of their own eloquence as object lessons in false praying. Alien to the complexities of church-state relations in our day although all too familiar with realities of everyday life lived as an occupied people under imperial rule, we cannot be sure what Jesus would have done had he been asked to pray by the Roman Governor or for that matter Herod Antipas at some official governmental function. But his words regarding prayer as a special temptation for self-display certainly ring true in our day, only multiplied by the promise of a world-wide tv audience numbering in the billions attending to the words one is praying.

Just as I, for all my serious misgivings, found it difficult to simply turn down as a matter of principle the opportunity to provide an invocation for the LA County Board of Supervisors due to a complicated set of motives that certainly included those mentioned by Jesus, so too those asked to pray at events surrounding the inauguration of President Barack Obama present interesting case studies in what prayer to God for such prominent public and indeed government-related events might include.

The Rev. Rick Warren, southern California evangelical mega-church pastor, best-selling author and host of a well-publicized TV question-and-answer session with both major presidential candidates in attendance, was asked by President-elect Obama to give the invocation at his inauguration, a role played by Billy Graham at several preceding inaugurations of presidents of both parties. Warren’s invocation (the texts of both Rev. Warren’s and Rev. Lowery’s prayers may be found by “googling” their names on the internet) to my personal analysis as a critic of Warren’s theology and politics, proved in most respects far less objectionable than I had feared it might be and struck me as an honest effort of a conservative evangelical Baptist to pray in a manner that invoked the God of his tradition as the God who comprehends all of creation and history (which, he said is “your story”) and even went so far, in a bow to Judaism, to invoke the words of the Shema (“Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one”). He went on to explicitly remind God and his billions of other hearers of the historic nature of the occasion of this “peaceful transfer of power” to “our first African American president”

and went on to use this as a reason for gratitude to live in a land “where the son of an African immigrant can rise to the highest level of our leadership.” This led immediately to his rhetorically effective reference to Dr. King (whose national holiday had been celebrated just the previous day) and the Letter to the Hebrews: “And we know today that Dr. King and a great cloud of witnesses are shouting in heaven.”

His prayer next turned to petition, asking God to grant “our new president” “wisdom...with humility,” “courage...with integrity” and “compassion...with generosity” as well as to protect him and his family—an important and poignant concern for us Americans who have seen too many of our leaders taken from us by gun violence over the years including Dr. King. Next followed a plea to God to help us Americans remember that it is not “race or religion or blood” that unites us but “our commitment to freedom and justice for all” what might be understood to mean a tacit disavowal of the common religious right’s contention that the United States is a “Christian” nation. Next follows a petition for forgiveness including, very significantly, our national failure to “treat our fellow human beings and all the Earth with the respect they deserve,” a nod toward an environmental consciousness that Warren has been helping some of his fellow evangelicals to embrace.

Perhaps most controversial was the final paragraph of the prayer that I expect many of us were waiting for to see whether Warren would invoke the name of Jesus, a fraught matter that we Christians in America often differ over when asked to pray in pluralistic and interfaith contexts. Warren intriguingly began: “I humbly ask this in the name of the one who changed my life”—a deeply personal and heartfelt beginning—that then instead of mentioning simply “Jesus” first (cleverly, I thought) reached beyond his own language tradition to use the Hebrew name “Yeshua,” the Arabic name “Isa,” the Spanish pronunciation of “Jesus” and only then “Jesus” in its normal English pronunciation. This, in effect, served to my mind, to put the name of the one in whose name Warren prayed in its larger “catholic” with a small “c” multi-cultural context. But the reference to “Jesus” in its several versions only served to introduce Warren’s final gambit which was to close with the words of the Lord’s Prayer which, of course, Jesus “taught us to pray.” Who is the “us” Warren had in mind is the question. To close with the most common and well known prayer in the Christian tradition struck many as exclusivist, while on the other hand some noted how universalistic Jesus’ prayer to his Abba actually is in content and is certainly in keeping with the faith of his own people, the Jews.

All in all, I was impressed with the simplicity, the content, and the strategic efforts at inclusiveness of Warren’s prayer while doing so as what seemed like an authentically personal expression of his own faith tradition.

As a bookend to Rev. Warren’s invocation, the President-elect had asked the Rev. Joseph Lowery, celebrated lion of the civil rights movement and long-time African American activist pastor (of the same generation and prophetic preaching style, it should be noted, as Obama’s former Chicago pastor and long-time mentor the Rev. Jeremiah Wright) to deliver the inaugural benediction. Lowery began on just the right note, I thought, by invoking the words of the hymn that many of us had sung in our churches the previous Sunday when we commemorated Dr. M.L. King, Jr. “Life Every Voice and

Sing” whose third verse begins, “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou, who has brought us thus far along the way....” These words solved the knotty question of how to begin in addressing God by invoking the words of the black community itself which views this hymn as a kind of “Black National Anthem,” an anthem that all Americans are invited to sing. Lowery went on in best black epigrammatic preacherly fashion to remind God how Barack Obama “has come to this high office at a low moment” amid our national and indeed global fiscal crisis, but invoking another folk hymn of his people and using a not quite proper American colloquialism, went on to confess to God that “we know you got the whole world in your hands.”

Rev. Lowery’s benediction was certainly more transparent to the prophetic tradition of black preaching in America than Warren asking God to “deliver us from the exploitation of the poor, of the least of these, and from favoritism toward the rich,” as well as confessing how we Americans collectively “have sown the seeds of greed...even as we reap the whirlwind of social and economic disruption” for which we seek forgiveness. Invoking again Dr. King’s rhetoric in his conclusion (“As we leave this mountain top”) Rev. Lowery prayed that God would help all Americans to take the spirit of this special day back “to our homes, our workplaces, our churches, our temples, our mosques, or wherever we seek your will.” This explicit interfaith appeal (almost in parallel to Warren’s invoking of the Lord’s Prayer as his conclusion), led into Lowery’s asking God’s help, in paraphrase of the Hebrew prophets, that we might “work for that day when nations shall not lift up sword against nation, when tanks will be beaten into tractors, when every man and every woman shall sit under his or her own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid, when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Most memorable of all, however, were Lowery’s closing words in which he invoked the memory, in the words of the old hymn, “of all the saints who from their labors rest,” (cf. Warren’s “cloud of witnesses”) whom he asked God “to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get in back, when brown can stick around...when yellow will be mellow...when the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace with right.” This little piece of civil rights doggerel from the sixties some have found a racial trivialization better left unsaid. As the only line in all the proceedings (save Chief Justice Roberts’ muffing of the inaugural oath) that merited a genuine laugh amid the unrelieved seriousness of the day, I found it a welcome relief and a light-hearted way of bringing back into view the largely unspoken racial sub-text of the whole occasion. Finally, Rev. Lowery gained all our assent by inviting, in the best black preacherly fashion, in closing, “That all those who do justice and love mercy say Amen.” To which billions responded, I expect, “Amen!”

While other prayers, like Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson’s “A Prayer for Our Next President, Barack Obama” delivered at the Opening Inaugural Event the day previous held at the Lincoln Memorial or prayers prayed during the National Prayer Service held at the National Cathedral the day following the Inauguration might merit our reflection on this matter of invoking in public, for me it was once again the words of a poet that I found speaking most clearly and profoundly of God in the midst of this public occasion—not a direct invocation fraught with all its first amendment complexities, but an indirect speaking of the truth of the God who needs no “invoking” into our public life

but is always attending to it and indeed is deeply enmeshed within it. The words of Elizabeth Alexander commissioned for the occasion, entitled “Praise Song for the Day,” sounded to my ears just the right kind of understated God-dimension to the occasion that honored our nation’s first amendment separation of church and state while providing an appropriately inclusive subtext from the best of our tradition of American civil religion.

The title itself, “Praise Song For the Day,” which also provides the first line of the poem, identifies both the content and style of her offering, a kind of elegiac hymn much in the mode of the earlier mentioned African American poem/hymn “Life Every Voice and Sing.” Though here the poet casts her gaze widely over the American people in all our diversity going about our daily business, “our” and “we” signaling that the “voice” of the poem is not an objective third person voice speaking from outside of the American experience but that of the first person plural which includes the speaker and all Americans. I find the poem articulating a strongly “incarnational” perspective “from below” that takes care to sing praise from the underside of the American experience as for example where the poet writes:

Say it plain, that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,
picked the cotton and the lettuce,
built brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

But what I find the most affecting and effective invoking of the God-dimension of our life together appears near the poem’s end as the poet gently evokes the multi-cultural and multi-faith dimensions of the “praise song for struggle” that marks our efforts to achieve what the President-Elect invoking his predecessor Abraham Lincoln is known for calling our American quest “for a more perfect union”:

Some live by “Love thy neighbor as thy self.”
Others by first do no harm, or take no more than you need.

These are obviously biblical references interlaced with an allusion to the ancient Greek “Hippocratic Oath” that still guides the medical profession. But then follows the poem’s central question posed to all of us—echoing our newly inaugurated president’s repeated plea that he cannot carry out his mandate to restore hope to America without the active participation and sacrifice of us citizens:

What if the mightiest word is love,
love beyond marital, filial, national.
Love that casts a widening pool of light.
Love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

These are more than rhetorical questions in which the answer is assumed in the question. These are the yet unanswered questions that are left hanging in the air, the echo of our “praise song for the day” as we stand, as the poet says in ending,

On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp—
Praise song for walking forward in that light.²

² Excerpts from Praise Song for the Day: A Poem for Barack Obama’s Inauguration [Graywolf Press: 2009].
