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THE TREE OF LIFE, FROM YGGDRASIL TO HOLY WEEK

My warmest greetings to all of you members of Leitourgia. I am thrilled that you have undertaken to organize your own Nordic version of an academy for liturgy. Here experts in many fields collaborate to understand and improve Christian worship. A century ago, it was only church historians who spoke their minds about liturgy, but now historians join together with theologians, musicians, artists, architects, writers, psychologists, sociologists, and regular parish clergy to examine and renew the multi-faceted phenomenon we call liturgy. I hope that your association within Leitourgia will become as significant for each of you as my association in the North American Academy of Liturgy has been for me, where each year, at the beginning of January, I connect with my colleagues of many Christian denominations to inspire another year of work in worship renewal.

From words to images

My field of expertise is language. Since childhood I have cared about individual words and full texts. Throughout my academic studies I have poured over those words that have power, in society and in the church, through history and in my contemporary context, so that when I craft words for Christian worship, I am as aware as possible of how words give life. I admired the power of especially metaphor to take root and grow in the individual consciousness and within the community. As a Lutheran, I was reared to honour the words of the Bible as being imbued with the very Spirit of God, and I know that words are like the very seeds of life, ready to sprout roots in the imagination and to grow into leaves and fruits for the nourishment of the world. Thanks to being a Lutheran, I know the need for continual translation of those words, the necessity to say the old words in new words, so that the new generation can have access to that holiness that through speech humans share with one another.

I can give you an example from my childhood. During the 1950s, the worship book of my Lutheran church included some of the Psalter psalms, and I recall being mystified by Psalm 22:21 in which God saves me from the unicorn. I knew, from all my reading of myths and legends, that unicorns are wondrous beasts that grant wishes: so why would I want to be saved from them? A newer more accurate translation cleared up my confusion over the metaphor: Psalm 22:21 now reads, "From the horns of wild bulls you have rescued me." Words: good words, unicorn; bad words, wild bulls. The words take root in our minds and grow, and from the branches grow gorgeous flowers or prickly thorns. Liturgists must learn the differences between the unicorns and the wild bulls, so that we choose the best words when speaking of Christ. Over the last thirty years, the words that have grown most richly in my imagination are the biblical words about the tree of life. I noticed, in teaching Genesis 1-3 to college students, that the precise reason given in the biblical text for why the man and woman are kicked out of the Garden of Eden is not because they have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but so that they will no longer be able to eat from the tree of life. And I noticed that in the final chapter of the Bible, that tree of life is finally present for us all, its fruits for the taking, and its leaves for the healing of the nations. But the Lutheranism in which I was reared, descendent from the no-nonsense German immigrants who were so busy praying for

forgiveness of their sins that they had no time to paint on the church walls the stunning images that you Scandinavians are accustomed to, this Lutheranism showed me no tree of life. In front of the nave was a statue of St. Paul preaching the word, yes: a depiction of the tree of life, no, no, no.

And so I have searched the world over for the tree of life: in the texts and the iconography and the ritual practices of the world's religions, in literature of the ages, in the art that fills museums. I was glad to discover that other branches of the Christian church than the one that had sheltered me did paint the tree of life on their walls, and I found in sermons of the Fathers and in classic hymnody that tree alive and well. Some of you in this room have been guests in my home and you will remember some of the hundred tree of life images on our walls. It seems to me that this tree, given to Christians in the Bible and celebrated in much of our tradition, is a welcome image for us in our time, since we share it with most of the other world religions. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, tribal peoples and neo-pagans entering our churches will recognize the tree, for their traditions also meditate on this archetypal image. Indeed, I think that Carl Jung was correct in guessing that somehow in the very hardwiring of the human imagination is such an image, available to even totally nonreligious persons who wander into our churches. Shall we now enjoy a world tour of the Tree of Life?

Everywhere the tree of life

We must begin with your own Norse legends. The Yggdrasil is the world tree that holds together all the levels of the universe. The norms of Past, Present, and Future water it daily, for yggdrasil spans not only space, but also time. On its height is the noble eagle, and gnawing away on its roots is the demonic dragon, for Yggdrasil binds together life and death. The high god Odin hanged himself on it, and so he gained knowledge through the sacrifice of his own suffering. After his suffering he is called All-Father, a note here to those Christians who imagine that Christians calling our God "Father" is somehow distinctive and unique. I like the fact that the tree of life precedes the patriarchy of All-Father, and I know that you Scandinavians continue the ancient ritual of dancing around the midsummer tree at the time of the summer solstice, to celebrate the end of winter and the return of flowers and fruits.

So now for a world tour, in alphabetical order:

The Buddha sat under the bodhi tree and finally achieved enlightenment, and so for Buddhists the bodhi tree symbolizes the possibility of enlightenment for us all.

In traditional Chinese storytelling, the peach tree grants immortality to mortals.

The Gyaba people of Cameroon use the sore tree in purification and reconciliation rituals, since it symbolizes the life of a healthy community.

At Hanukkah, Jews light eight candles on a menorah to remember the miraculous flames that lighted the temple. Many of these candelabras are designed to resemble a tree. The Hindu story says that when the god Krishna appeared on earth, he was first seen in a kadamba tree, so now the kadamba tree is a symbol of the god himself.

The American Native tribe called the Hopi have a kachina called the Morning Singer runs through the village at dawn carrying a branch from the spruce tree, a symbol of the life of the new day and of the community's hope for rain.

According to the central American Huichol legend of the Gathering of Souls, after death our souls go to the tree of life, which exchanges all the sexual organs we have been connected with for pomegranates that benefit the living.

In Islam, the prayer rug with its abstract tree symbolizes the paradise that we enter when we kneel on the rug during prayer.

The Jewish mystics of medieval Europe described the emanations of Almighty God as an upside-down tree, its roots in heaven, and the earth as its branches. Thus humans were actually connected to the divine, an idea that Orthodox Jews questioned.

The Kuna people of the islands near Panama tell of the paluwala tree of life. A creation tree, it flourished at the beginning of time, and all the animals emerged from its branches. At festivals, the Kwakiutl First Nations people of British Columbia wear blanket capes on which buttons are sewn in elaborate designs. Many button blankets use the cedar tree as the primary symbol, since traditionally the cedar provided the northwest coastal people many of the necessities of life.

The North American Lakota tribe has revived the summer Sun Dance ritual, during which the people celebrate around a cottonwood tree that symbolizes the center of the universe: "All our hopes and griefs are placed on the tree," said one dancer. Some men hang from the tree by leather thongs and their suffering cleanses the community.

The Mayans depicted a tree of life growing out of the reclining body of the dead king, because the life of the people is rooted in the reign of the monarch.

That odd sect called Shakers never depicted the cross of Christ, because they believed that their communes were somehow already in the kingdom of heaven. Instead, they drew the tree of life that was sent to them in a vision from Mother Ann.

According to Shinto beliefs, the divine kami arrive on the back of a deer in a sakaki tree, which at Shinto shrines is revered as a symbol of the ancestors' blessings.

Tibetan Buddhists sit before thangka as an aid to their meditation. One such thangka pictures a tree with the Buddha in the center surrounded by all the beloved bodhisattvas.

Wiccans participate in a tree of life ritual, in which imagining ourselves as trees, we realize our rootedness in the earth.

Of course there is more, but let us move to our own tradition as Christians. One Orthodox icon depicts the tree of Jesse, with the ancestors of Jesus sitting on the branches and Mary on the trunk. Some Christians have a ritual of constructing a fabric genealogical Jesse tree, on which are placed reminders of the most important ancestors of Jesus. In the gospel of Mark, when Jesus talked about the mustard plant, he used a traditional description of the tree of life, in which "the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." But the mustard bush is a scrubby annual. This passage in Mark makes sense only if we know the poems in Ezekiel 17 and 31, in which the ancient near eastern metaphor of the people, the nation, as a great tree of life, becomes home to all the birds of the air. God appears to Moses in a small tree, that is burning and not burning. The poems in Isaiah that we read in Advent hope for God to send life into the world, as if a new tree will sprout from old tired roots. In Psalms 1 and 92, the good tree is like the life of the righteous ones, who are nourished by the very life of God. And in the gospels, Nathaniel is sitting under a tree, and Zacchaeus hiding up in a tree, when each meets God: perhaps it is the tree of life that each man has found.

You Scandinavians have this tree in your churches. I know a few of them: There is the resurrection window in the cathedral in Visby, where the face of the risen Christ is hidden by an endless tree. There is the tree altar sculpture in the cathedral in Växjö. There is a tree

votive candelabra in Växjö and in the cathedral in Uppsala. I remember seeing the tree of life in the chapel here in Sigtuna, and I am deeply moved that one of the prints of Par Andersson's work is in our home in Philadelphia. There is the village church in Lohja, Finland, an over-the-top tree of life sanctuary, in which the branches from the Jesse tree, painted in the 14th century over the main doorway, grow down each pillar so that all of us in the nave are connected to the tree of Christ. But where was that stunning red tree-of-life carpet on which stood the altar?

The tree of life in liturgical texts

Perhaps you all know the medieval legend of the True Cross, in which after Adam's death, Seth is to be led by an angel to plant a seed from the tree of life in Adam's mouth, and thus from Adam's grave sprouted a marvellous tree, about which are told many miracle tales, but finally it was cut down, and, you guessed it, its wood was used to construct the cross on which Christ died. And so in texts and iconography, the Christian tradition has called the cross its tree of life, like in the Norse legends the suffering of the god bringing forth life for the world. I like especially the anonymous homily from the second century, of which this is only a short excerpt: "This cross is the tree of my eternal salvation nourishing and delighting me. I take root in its roots, I am extended in its branches. . . This cross is my nourishment when I am hungry, my fountain when I am thirsty, my covering when I am stripped, for my leaves are no longer fig leaves but the breath of life. This is the ladder of Jacob, the way of angels. This is my tree, wide as the firmament, which extends from earth to the heavens. It is the pillar of the universe, the support of the whole world," and the homily continues in this fashion.

Alive in many contemporary hymnals is the word of the poet we call Fortunatus, who was brought by Queen and Abbess Radegund to her convent in Poitiers, France, to write hymns, and when the convent received what was honoured as a fragment of the true cross, he wrote the hymns called in English "Sing, my Tongue," and "The Royal Banners Forward Go," with stanzas like this:

Faithful cross, true sign of triumph,
be for all the noblest tree;
none in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit your equal be;
symbol of the world's redemption,
For your burden makes us free.

This hymn is sung by many contemporary American Lutherans during Holy Week, either on Passion Sunday or Good Friday.

When the committees in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America set out to prepare the worship materials that are now in our worship resource *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, many liturgists agreed to craft the words of our prayers so as to include more images. As many of you know, the liturgical prayers of much of the Western churches developed out of the rhetoric of the Roman court: in succinct and unadorned language, they stated the problem to the Emperor of all, and asked humbly for redress. But, unlike the prayers of the Eastern churches, Western prayers did not fill their texts with images, not even biblical ones. Extra words tended to state doctrine, not describe those depictions of life and death that have always enriched the religious imagination. In our new ELW, in what used to be called collects, and we call prayers of the day, we have included some images, to help the prayer grow in the minds and hearts of the faithful. And the tree of life shows up here and there. The proper preface for Holy Week reads, "You gather your people around the tree

of the cross, transforming death into life." The prayer of the day for the gospel John 15:9-17 includes the sentence, "You promise us food from your tree of life." The prayer of the day for the gospel of the mustard bush begins, "O God, you are the tree of life offering shelter to all the world." In a eucharistic prayer of lament, which, yes, I wrote, there is this final plea: "You show us a vision of a tree of life with fruits for all and leaves that heal the nations. Grant us such life. . . ."The prayer means to make clear that in a time of lament, all we have is a vision of such a tree, not the tree itself, except as the cross of Christ. For Christianity is, after all, not a sweet and mushy religion.

So I praise your Scandinavian churches for the richness of the imagery you portray on your walls. The idea that some contemporary sacramental churches have interiors that resemble

Quaker meeting houses has always baffled me: of course sacramental churches will celebrate the stuff of creation through which God is revealed and by which we receive divine blessing. As we adorn our worship spaces with an archetypal tree of life, I urge that the tree be a Christian tree. If it is a crucifix, then with a foliated cross we add the fruits and flowers of life to the corpus of Christ. And if we paint a luxuriant tree, all evergreen with twelve fruits on its branches, then Christ will stand there part of the trunk. Our imagery is open to all, but distinctive of our beliefs. And I suggest, as you revise your worship materials, that these images come also into your prayers, that we call God not only the almighty king, but also radiant light, shield, leader, guide, shepherd, rock, defender, wisdom, teacher, fountain, city, and yes, father, and yes, mother. It has been my experience that these images in our prayers strike the hearts of congregation members. More than with only doctrinal language, such image-filled prayers engage the minds of catechized Christians and neo-pagans alike, and can thus help us to speak of God's mercy to a post-Christian world.

In memory of Karl-Gunnar

I thank you all for your invitation to me and for your attention to my English address. It is most gracious of you to welcome an alien and embrace her! I will be glad now to answer any questions you may have. But first let me share with you another set of tree-of-life words. It was Karl-Gunnar Ellverson who asked me to speak here at Leitourgia about the tree of life and the possibility that it can connect with that archetypal tree in the world's religions and the human imagination. In his memory, let me conclude by reading for you my favourite of the many hymns that include reference to the tree. I have said to my family that I want this hymn sung at my funeral, and when you read the words, you will see why: