A little give and take: how words shape our worship worlds

A Memorable Moment

A few weeks ago, my four year old opened a brand new 2 liter bottle of Pepsi. With a large grin and an enormous twinkle in his eye, he took a rather large swig of those first fresh and sweet bubbles. Immediately, his eyes began to grow wide and watery. After shaking his head and attempting to clear his throat, he responded in a rather gravelly voice, “whoa Dad, that was spicy!”

Words create worlds.

The statement by my son not only gave me a glimpse into the experience of my son, but caused me to re-imagine something about the experience he described. I was not about to explain to my son that there is a better word for his experience than “spicy”, I knew what he meant. Nor was I ready to explain away that what he was really experiencing was depressurized carbon dioxide coming in contact with the unexpecting cells in his mouth and throat. Both alternatives would have ruined the moment. Both options lacked imagination.

The truth is, I smiled at his descriptive choice of words. He was describing reality with one word in terms and images that were lively and effervescent.

If I were to offer him any sort of corrective, I was more apt to tell him that what he was experiencing was an Exodus of sorts. Millions of little bubbles that were once held captive had been freed. Now they were celebrating with singing and dancing in his mouth and throat. At the age of four, it would not have been hard for him to imagine himself as a Moses-type ushering captives into the promised land of his stomach. In fact, with such an image in play, he might have just freed all the captives.

Words and images create worlds.

How we describe realities matter, and, the words and images we use matter much. Our language not only describes a given reality, but in some ways, also designs it. Word and image choices not only say something about the world, but also point others in the direction the world could go.

Words make and shape space for things to happen. Words can open up cathedrals of space that invite awe and wonder. Words can also be narrow and pointed; some words – depending on their deployment strategy – can even sting with laser-guided precision. In sum, words can be used for healing and for harm; as such, they cut both ways.

Worship is a “world”

Worship words work this way too. Given that worship is about the space and time in which God and community meet, much is at stake. For many years, Reformed Worship was described as a “dialogue”. This designation however, was often more about the pattern by which worship “voices” were structured. God speaks, the people respond, God responds, and the people speak their needs, thanksgivings, and praise. This antiphonal pattern can be helpful in worship design, but all by itself, it can be a little flat and wooden if this is all worship
Communication with one another and with God often has more spontaneity and interruption than such planned speech patterns.

More recently, worship has been described as an “encounter”. Undoubtedly, this word and the accompanying images have its limitations too. What this word does have however, is some of the emotional freight that corporate worship involves an opportune moment. When God and community meet together it is not just to have a two-way chat, it is an event that is world-changing.

Corporate Worship is a portal that brings together God’s world and the world of the worshippers. Just as a computer screen has icons that when “double-clicked” a whole new reality opens up in front of you, so it is with worship; the difference is, worshippers are ushered into God’s reality and invited to see the world as God sees it. Corporate worship is - and can be - a “thin place” in which the membrane between God’s realm and our own can be more mutually accessible.

In a world that continues to want faster service, quicker communication and abbreviated sentences, the Preacher’s role of “Text-Messaging” happens not in short form, but in complete word, image, and story. This “storying” has the ability to impression our imaginations in such a way that we see the world differently. When it does, the word takes on the flesh and blood of our lives and God’s newness has the power to remake our lives.

**More give, less take**

In a recent gathering of peers and future colleagues, I became aware of a word in the Church’s liturgical vocabulary that needs some redemption. The seemingly innocent word is “take”.

Like many of our words, this one has been sneaking past the goalie of my soul for some time. I first noticed it in the communion liturgy; we say it monthly: “Take, eat, remember and believe.” At weddings, husbands “take” wives (and sometimes wives take husbands). At funerals, we sometimes refer to the Departed as “taken from us.” Sometimes pastors will talk about a part of the worship in which we need to “take some time” to do something; almost as if that action were a necessary “evil” in an already taxed schedule.

I wonder what kind of “world” or “reality” might lie behind those casual expressions that most of us have used? What is it that we believe, or don’t believe, or stopped believing about the Supper, Marriage vows, how the dead depart, and the meaning of time in worship?

How does the world we have inhabited all week suddenly change when we stop our parishioners from taking communion and instead, ask them to receive it as free gift? What if, for example, we did not allow them to pluck the bread, but instead asked them to open their palm and have it placed there by another? What does that action say about how salvation comes to us? What might it say about what the Church has to offer the world that seeks to continue to take, seize, and acquire?

Suppose spouses at weddings no longer uttered those words, “I take you…”, but instead, found a way to say, “Wanting to be like Christ, I now give myself to you….” Just as Christ offers himself in self-giving love, so the act and image of “giving” oneself replaces the world of “taking”.

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Sometimes in our speech, we don’t do the taking but God does. In some ways, this is quite remarkable. “God took her home”, “The Lord gives and takes away”, “He was taken from us.” Undoubtedly, there are scriptural referents here for God taking in the case of Enoch, Elijah and Job. In our current usage however, the idea of God doing the taking - particularly at death - may not be helpful for those experiencing loss, especially if the grieving maintain a wide orbit from the Church. Think of what worlds and realities might change when pastors offer the words, “God doesn’t take lives, God receives them.” To utilize funeral services to give someone back to God certainly has a different “feel” to it than to speak of death as taking us, or the feeble attempts we make to lighten death by saying, “you can’t take it with you.” Christ takes the sting out of death by helping us receive everlasting life.

In regard to time, Preachers and worship planners often find themselves under increasing constraints to maintain firm boundaries. Church programming, nursery volunteers, and worshippers’ diminished attention spans often contribute to worship leaders feeling a need to “take time” for something that is unusual or additional in the liturgy. Speaking of time in a way that is not constrained to a need to “take” it or “seize” it might be challenging. The worship leader might find themselves in a place of needing to speak of time as an opportunity. If, for example, we regard time in short supply, that scarcity might become the focal point. If instead, the worship leader can speak about the addition as an occasion, a moment, or an opportunity, the community can receive something new. The change in vocabulary signals that something that could be regarded as intrusive may contain a quality of giftedness. Perhaps if preachers did this kind of thing more often, members of the congregation might be helped to focus on what is being offered (and who’s offering it) than on what they choose to “take away.”

Words can remake worlds

What would happen to our lives if each time we asked God to undo and then remake the world that we have made for ourselves? What would happen to culture and creation? Whether we realize it or not, our worship words describe a world. Adding more “give” language to our speech confronts, challenges, and potentially remakes a world that presumes “taking” as the primary operating system of our world.

More give and less take in our worship words and actions may be a subtle beginning to shifting and transforming imaginations in a way that better describes God’s reality. The world which the preacher announces, namely God’s realm, is a stark alternative to the world that assumes that meaning is found in earning, obtaining, and acquiring.

Such a world assumes that the best things are for the taking, having, possessing, and purchasing. God’s world - a world made accessible in corporate worship - invites others to see another kind of life that is only accessible when it is received as a gift. Such a gift is given and shared for the life of the world. Worship leaders cannot “take” this world for granted, but must look for it, ask for it, and receive it as a gift themselves. Such a gift can change the world of the worship leader and can make it possible for the Word to take on the flesh of communities that would rather live by “give” than “take.”