

Getting Ready reflection: February 2009

Jesus Justice Jazz

This theological background piece for the ELCA Youth Gathering was written by [Dr. Evelyn Parker](#) at Perkins School of Theology and is also available on the Gathering's [Web site](#).

Jesus Justice Jazz

God's limitless and priceless love will meet youth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as it returns to New Orleans in July 2009 to celebrate and participate in the acts of God's love with the people of New Orleans. This city is a context where God's boundless love has been poured out in the past, the present, and will continue to be poured out in years to come. God's love was with those who lost their sisters, brothers, wives, husbands, and children to the raging waters of Hurricane Katrina. God's love was there when the water snaked through the city's canals and knocked down the concrete walls of the levies daring to overcome any and everything in its path. The infinite love of God was also there when thousands of people walked through flood waters to shelter on higher ground. Today God's love continues to manifest in the work and spirit of the citizens of New Orleans and strangers from many lands who come to help rebuild the city. The ELCA Youth Gathering and the people of New Orleans invite young people to join in this effort and to "serve in the manner of Christ" in the Big Easy.

The Gathering holds promise

ELCA Youth will enter into God's presence in New Orleans to receive the witness of others and practice their faith through worship, prayer, play, service, and learning. The Gathering holds promise in responding to several questions related to the social mission of the church. How can young people, through their experiences in New Orleans, step into their baptismal vocation as Christians and see themselves within God's narrative of love and justice? What will empower them to leave New Orleans more committed to shaping their congregations into compassionate communities of faith? How will youth discover the joy of holistic living where heart and head are joined together with life-giving Christian practices? How will they discover anew that God in Christ loves all humankind and all of creation unconditionally and shows that love each day through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit? [The Gathering's theme](#) -- ***Jesus Justice Jazz*** -- is the catalyst for answers to these and other questions.

Called to compassionate justice

Jesus' life of service, care, and compassion for those who were poor, sick, and politically oppressed gives us confidence that we who are baptized into Jesus Christ our Savior and role model are called to ministries of compassionate justice in the example of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John, Chapter 8, records an incident where the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery before Jesus. Jesus realized that their intent was to test him more than obtain justice against a nameless adulterous woman. Jesus' nonverbal act of writing on the ground was a refusal to engage their question: "Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" Jesus practiced a method of refusal and disengagement common to his culture. As such, his non-response was an act of resistance to this gender injustice. The persistent questioning of the scribes and Pharisees only provoked Jesus to speak a convicting truth: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Then Jesus continued writing on the ground. Seeing that Jesus was dismissive of their questioning they went away one by one. When the woman was left alone, standing before Jesus, he stood up and invited her to speak: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." ([John 8:10b-11](#))[1]

Jesus offers us an example of compassionate justice that he practiced with the sick, the homeless, the downtrodden, and all those on the margins of society. His very essence is righteous caring. He was the model servant throughout his ministry. In Jesus Christ we have the assurance that we can live out our calling "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with God ([Micah 6:8b](#)). In Jesus we have the incarnate reality of God's love and justice

poured out around the globe and particularly in New Orleans. Indeed, it will be Jesus who works through ELCA youth as they seek to serve and form mutual relationships with the people of New Orleans. Jesus' life of service, care, and compassion for those who were poor, sick, and politically oppressed gives us confidence that we who are baptized Christians are called to ministries of compassionate justice. We are empowered to serve with justice and love through the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, whom Jesus sent to be with us as we strive to be like him.

Energized by the Spirit

The Holy Spirit energizes our life of service in the manner of Christ. "The gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for discipleship in daily life."^[2] The Spirit of God invites us to re-enter the water of baptism everyday because we are called to "proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace"^[3] in New Orleans, at home, and throughout the world. With Jesus, our exemplar of cruciform leadership, we will learn an essential meaning of being baptized into the body of Christ living out justice in God's world. The Holy Spirit re-members us with a living God who reminds us that we're important to the divine plan of God's love and justice in the world. As such we realize that we belong to God's family even when we feel lost and worthless.

Living the creative spirit of jazz

Jazz music symbolizes the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and specifically in New Orleans. This art form characterized by improvisation, polyrhythmic melodies, syncopation, and call-and-response was born in African American communities during the early 20th century. New Orleans Jazz has a unique sound that reflects the culture of its people. It is the shortcut to the soul of the people with all their joy and pain, their laughter and tears. Whether played in marching bands, dance bands, or funeral-processions, New Orleans Jazz is both sacred and sacramental, and "its performance is generally circumscribed by an aura of religiosity."^[4] Just as New Orleans Jazz musicians improvise new music and enliven old songs in response to the feeling and needs of the moment, ELCA youth will return to their homes, schools and congregations with new skills and practices to call upon as they serve, worship, pray, play, reflect, and bear witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The creative and extemporaneous nature of the Spirit, like jazz, is transformative and empowering to those who trust that God offers life abundant for all who serve in the liberative manner of Christ.

Living and serving with the mind of Christ

Led by its youth, the servant community of the ELCA will learn to listen to the Spirit of Christ as they enter New Orleans compassionate about serving as Christ served. It is entering without intent to fix or make better, but to be made open to new ideas about our environment, our experiences, and our lens for living biblically. "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." ([Philippians 2:4-5](#)) Our baptismal vocation gives us courage to enter New Orleans with all its challenges. We will know that we are grounded in our baptismal worth in order to move outside ourselves and do God's work with our hands. Such courage helps us when we return to our communities with new experiences, practices, awareness, and deepened biblical insight. Together we will seek to live and serve with this mind of Christ!

[1] Understanding the cultural practice of refusal and disengagement is discussed by Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. IX (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995). Pages 627-629.

[2] Department for Studies of the Commission for Church in Society, "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective." (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991) Pg 4.

[3] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Augsburg Fortress, 2006. Pg 236.

[4] Jon Michael Spencer, "Jazz, an Introduction," in *Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap, A Special Issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 6, no. 1 Spring 1992) Pg 143.