HOLY COMMUNION - A SEAT AT THE TABLE: CREATING SACRED BLACK LITURGY TOWARDS A HEALING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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The Prayer of Humble Access by Thomas Cramer is well-loved by the church. This prayer is included in the Holy Communion Liturgy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, entitled The Prayer of Humiliation. The prayer calls for humility gathering at the Lord's Table to partake of the sacraments. But one sentence of this prayer rattles my consciousness as a Black clergy-woman serving in the Black Protestant Church: "We are not so much worthy to gather the crumbs from beneath your table."

The purpose of this paper is to critique if the Black Protestant Church is using a language centered around Holy Communion that can bring healing and reconciliation between the Black community and the Black church, which might hold an embedded white supremacist theology, that does not empower the community it serves. This is not to suggest that the Prayer of Humble Access is racist in language but to discern that the Black Protestant Church is conscious of words that can be disempowering and oppressive to marginalized communities experiencing trauma through racism, and other forms of oppression. This paper serves to invite the Black community back to the Lord's Table.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem and My Social Location

I am an itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, pastoring a small congregation, the Historic Bethlehem AME, in the Langhorne Boroughs of Pennsylvania. Bethlehem AME is the first and oldest Black church established in Bucks County, PA. Langhorne Borough is predominately white, with a 4% Black population. My congregation has roughly twenty-two members, ranging from the ages of 22 to 90, who are mostly family members. As with many mainline denominational churches in the United States, it is a congregation concerned about declining membership, especially among young black families and adults. At one time, Langhorne Borough had a flourishing black population. Present members remember and tell stories with adoration and joy about when the church was filled with children, and the choir loft burst with music. In the United States, two-thirds of Black Americans identify as Protestant, but nearly half of Black adults (47%) say that the Black church is less influential than it was fifty years ago.[1] This staggering statistic from the Pew Research Center begs the following questions: What has changed? What lessons or sense of community has been missed, forgotten, or rejected by younger generations? And what events or cultural shifts have caused the Black Church to be dismissed by the children and grandchildren of her founders?

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[1] Besheer Mohammad, Kianna Cox, Jeff Diamant and Claire Gecewicz. 2021 "Faith Among Black Americans" In *Pew Research Center* (2021): 8-9, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/

I believe the Black church must begin to create a liturgy that promotes healing and that is resistant to the "whiteness" embedded within American Christianity, which has negatively impacted the sense of community that the Black church once offered. In my project, I explore how Eurocentric liturgy shaped and continues to shape the sacraments of the Black Protestant Church, as well as how whiteness shows up in the structures of the liturgies that the Black Church still uses, specifically the AME Church in the practice of Holy Communion and Lord's Supper. In this project, I hope to offer the Black Protestant Church a lens through which to view our own stories, and a way of creating liturgies that evoke a collective memory and a sense of wholeness that will transform and empower the community, helping us to (re)discover that Blackness is sacred.

The Origins of the Black Protestant Church

The relevancy of Black mainline protestant churches grew out of the need to worship freely away from the racism they experienced within the white-dominated spaces from which they came. In his autobiography, Bishop Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, described the Sunday when "coloured people" walked out of St. George's Church, a white Methodist Episcopal church, because they were not allowed to sit or kneel in the area they were accustomed to. In 1787, racial tensions began to arise in the congregation of St. George because Black membership had increased, resulting in white anxiety and resentment.[2] Allen wrote, "Notwithstanding, we

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[2] Ann C. Lammers, "The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church: Theology and Black Consciousness in a New Alliance." *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51, no. 2 (1984): 164. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42974721.

had subscribed largely towards finishing St. George's Church, in building the gallery and lay new floors, and just as the house was made comfortable, we were turned out from enjoying the comforts of worshiping therein. We then hired a store room and held worship by ourselves."[3] This led to the African Methodist Episcopal Church as the first independent Black denomination in the United States. The AME Church was created not because of theological differences but because of racial issues, and from this initial shift, other Black protestant mainline churches were also established. The Black protestant mainline churches became centers for justice and created sacred spaces where black folks were empowered. The institution of the Black Protestant Church has served as a place of refuge for the Black community.[4] The Black church emerged from the "invisible institution," birthed out of necessity for enslaved persons to hold an authentic worship of God.[5] This secret worship life of the enslaved in the "invisible institution" was the foundation of the subsequent establishment of Black congregations, denominations, schools, political movements, and organizations for the pursuit of justice and equality.[6] The Black Church's subversive resilience helped black folk through Reconstruction and Jim Crow, and some Black churches also ushered in the call of the Civil Rights Movement, resulting in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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[3] Richard Allen, 1880. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. 138 Kindle Edition

[4] Three mainline Black Protestant denominations are the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist AME Zion, which use similar liturgy for Holy Communion. Other mainline Black Protestant denominations are National Baptist Convention of America, Inc., Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International, Progressive Baptist Convention, National Baptist Convention, U.S. A. and the Church of God in Christ.

[5] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship, Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness* (Orbis Books, 2021), 16.

[6] Melva Costen, *African American Christian Worship: 2nd Edition*. (Abington Press, 2007), 25.

During these pivotal times, liturgy and justice were connected and evident in the work of the people on behalf of the people. Henry Louis Gates Jr, in his book, *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*, describes the legacies of the Black Church, where Black Christianity inspired social change. Creating a system that harbored the protection of people denied any presence in America; the Black church defined the people as worthy. In addition to his written work, Gates also interviewed a number of African Americans whose lives have been influenced by the Black Church. One such person, Oprah Winfrey, declares that the (Black) church "gave people a sense of value, belonging, and worthiness. I don't know how we could have survived as a people without it."[7] Black America, once again experiencing a time of political upheaval and backlash to long-existing civil rights policies, needs the Black Church to survive. My love is for the Black church and African Methodism, and the belief that to continue its legacy and help future Black generations survive, the church must re-member and reintroduce new stories by creating liturgies that speak to the wholeness and liberation of Black people. Whereas the AME church was created out of racial issues, not theological differences, new theological thoughts can speak to a new generation of the Black church.

The Importance of Communion: "The Lord's Supper"

William B. McClain, the author of *Come Sunday, The Liturgy of Zion*, wrote that Sundays were the most important day in the North American black community.[8] It is the day when blacks could gather as a community without the woes and cares of the world,

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[7] Louis Henry Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song An American History* (Penguin Books, 2021), 13.
[8] William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Abington Press, 1990), 27.

they would have to return to the following week. On the first Sunday of each month, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in which I have been an active member all my life, congregants participate in the Holy Communion or what our elders of the church preferred to call the Lord's Supper. This worship service is a sacred and high liturgical moment in the church, displayed by white cloth drapes on the pulpit, altar rails, and a communion table. In my rural southern hometown, Dalzell, South Carolina, some elderly congregants considered participating in Holy Communion mandatory. Black Christian folks believed that the "blood of Jesus" gave them the power and strength to survive the daily realities of racism of white supremacy. Coming to the table meant that you had supped with the Lord and the community. If one had not attended worship service anytime during the month, one should at least be present on the first Sunday to participate in the Lord's Supper, which gave their bodies the strength to move among "whiteness." This ritual was essential to my southern black community. Families in the community gather at the table on First Sundays and bring their children who also received the holy sacraments.

As a child, I was fascinated as I observed the women in the church responsible for preparing the elements for the communion table and ensuring enough grape juice and white wafers to serve all who came to the table. The women who held this assignment in the AME church are called "stewardesses" and are still part of my tradition today, even

though it appears to be a practice quickly fading due to declining membership.[9] I often related the women's enthusiasm for this function of the church to the women in the Gospel of Luke who prepared spices to anoint the body of Jesus.[10] I believe that men in the church also served as stewardesses, but women were more prevalent in this role. On communion Sunday, the women were dressed in all white, shoes, stockings, and gloves, symbolizing purity and cleanliness. Some have understood the white as symbolic of the Creator. This position was an honor for these women, who took their role as stewardesses very seriously. I loved watching the stewardesses' energy and the joy they shared in their service to the church. The ritual of Communion commenced as follows: The pastor or ordained clergy started by reading liturgy from the Holy Communion worship service found in the AME Book of Worship, which includes the Prayer of Humiliation derived from the Prayer of Humble Access originated in the Book of Common Prayers, which reads:

> O Merciful Saviour, we do not come to your holy table trusting in our own grace and mercy, but in the greatness of your mercy. We are not worth so much as to gather crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, Gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood that our sinful souls and bodies may be made clean by his death and washed through his blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him and he is us. Amen.[11]

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[9] Angela Cowser "African-American Pan - Methodist Baptist & Pentecostal Women Preachers" In *Hating Girls, An Intersectional Survey of Misogyny,* ed. Debra Meyers and Mary Sue Barnett (Brill, 2022), 207. In black women's efforts to advocate for female preachers, Black denominations sought a compromise that would elevate the status of women but not upset what would have become traditional gender roles in the black churches. In 1868, the AME General Conference created the first official position specifically for women in the church: the office of stewardess, a non-ordainable office for women.

[10] Luke 23:54-56 NRSV

[11] Roderick D. Belin, *The Book of Worship of The African Methodist Episcopal Church* (The A.M.E. Sunday School Union: Nashville, TN, 1984), 36.

The phrase, "We are not so much worthy to gather the crumbs beneath your table," can be troubling to those who have experienced unworthiness as a result of systemic racism and white supremacy. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, in her article, "Not Worthy So Much as to Gather Up the Crumbs Under Thy Table: Reflection on the Sources and History of the Prayer of Humble Access," states that this prayer can cause strong reactions among those who pray it. Kittredge declares that this prayer is loved by many and "strongly" disliked by others.[12] She further presents that this prayer can assert an unworthiness when the biblical texts in which the prayer was formed are not made aware. The source of the prayer is formed by the biblical texts in Mark, where Jesus encounters a gentile woman of Syrophoenician origin,[13] and in the parallel Gospel of Matthew, where the woman is described as a Canaanite. Briggs writes that she hears the "courage of the woman of Syrophoenician origin transmuted by the prayer into

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[12] Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Not Worthy So as to Gather Up the Crumbs Under Thy Table: Reflection on the Sources and History of the Prayer of Humble Access" *Sewanee Theological Review* 50, no. 1 (2006), 80.

[13] Hisako Kinukawa, *Voices from the Margin Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, concerning "The Syrophoenician Woman: Mark 7:24-30." This foreign woman is described as a gentile, an outsider, and a pagan by upbringing. She is the "other". Even more so this woman as unclean by birth, a foreigner, a female, and untouchable, for she is the mother of a daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit. She takes a risk even when going to Jesus to make this humble request to heal her daughter. The story presents the woman as bowing down at the feet of Jesus, which might show one's inferior position in the social relationship to the patriarchal society, but it is an action that is only accepted by men. During this time, women were not expected to come out from the roles they played within their homes, and make a plea in a public setting was a bold statement by a woman. Jesus rejects first the woman's plea: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27). Kinukawa expresses most scholars have investigated the meaning and implication of the words, "first" and "dogs" indicating both words function to support the Jewish superiority and define gentiles as second-class citizens and the word "first" softens Jesus response to the woman suggesting the existence of a possible second. There is evidence that Jewish writers described Gentiles as dogs. The word applied to unclean persons such as gentiles and Sodomites (Deut. 23:18; Rev. 22:15). In a white supremacist culture, black and brown people, and queer folks, are the "other" and have been called derogatory names. Using the language of "unworthy" generated from this text extends to an inferiority, and this unfortunately becomes a part of the liturgical language some Black Protestant churches inherits.

unworthiness."[14] Although the prayer is to provide a sense of humility from the congregants as they approach the table, the prayer can also have a negative connotation. Kittredge recognizes the conflict between the assertion of unworthiness and the implied deep penitence, but she agreed with the liturgical scholar Leonel L. Mitchell that the prayer does "meet the devotional needs of countless communicants by focusing their spiritual dispositions at the moment they are coming forward to receive communion."[15]

Marcus G. Halley, an Anglican priest, shares how the Prayer of Humble Access first appeared to him around his self-esteem and identity as black, queer person. Halley had some issues when he heard the repeated refrains of unworthiness and insufficiency against the sense of his self-worth. But after speaking to a peer who asked if he might be inverting the emphasis of the prayer and pointing to the grace which the prayer holds, Halley then changed how he saw worthiness and grace in his life.[16] I agree that this prayer can be humbling to communicants who come to receive communion, and I can see the element of grace that the prayer may hold, but I am called to note that this prayer does not consider the spiritual essence of brutalized Black bodies.

In agreement with Hisako Kinkawa, "The Syrophoencian Woman: Mark 7:24-30," gives an imagery and brings this woman's story to life when she writes, "A woman who is oppressed and held to be worthless, living in a patriarchal society and caring for her suffering daughter, is driven into a impossible situation and cannot find any

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[14] Briggs, "Not Worthy So as to Gather Up the Crumbs Under Thy Table: Reflection on the Sources and History of the Prayer of Humble Access," 81.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Marcus G. Halley, "What Poetry Might Teach Us About Prayer" *Sewanee Theological Review* 61:1 (2016), 274.

other solution than to forget tradition, neglect social custom, and rush ahead recklessly to Jesus."[17] This is the story of a marginalized person victimized by an oppressive society become that which displays a humble appeal yet is not even worthy of gathering the crumbs from the Lord's table. Furthering agreeing with Kinkawa, the Syrophoencian woman is self-committed in her trust, therefore, I come to the conclusion that she is also committed to her worth, and apparently, Jesus too, is committed to her worth. Therefore, "we are not worthy to gather the crumbs from your table," does not suggest humility. The Syrophoenician woman bows in humility to who Jesus is (a reputed healer), not to who she is not (a Jewish woman with social advantages).

According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, the Prayer of Humble Access, an Anglican prayer, was composed for the new Order of Communion of 1548. Some Anglican liturgies removed the phrase, and where they may retain it, its use is often made optional. In John Wesley's edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*, various Methodist organizations still use the liturgical ties to his edition. As of the twenty-first century, Wesley's Urtext (original or earlier version) is seen in the official Communion liturgy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.[18] It is noted that in the 1894 A.M.E. Review, Solomon Porter Hood expressed the matter of adoption of the Methodist liturgy stating:

> We have now the ordination, the substance of the communion, marriage, baptism, and burial services; and on what ground could anyone object if a General Conference should decide that a regular form of prayer, or certain liturgical forms,

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[17] Kinkawa, "The Syrophoenician Woman: Mark 7:24-30," 147.

[18] Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "John Wesley and The Methodists," I*n The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 13.

> should be put in practice from the same book, when it permits and sanctions and takes as part of its constitutional form those already in use?[19]

It is likely that during the time and context in which this adoption of Wesley's Methodist liturgy occurred, there may have been deep discussions. Still, there could not have been any deconstruction of the liturgy as to how it would present itself to the oppressed population to which the church serves. Therefore, is it safe to take a look at this now? This phrase, "we are not worthy to gather the crumbs beneath your table," Black folks carry on their knees every first Sunday in a country where Black women are underserved, underpaid, and undervalued by society. Why would the Black Protestant church lift these words among a people oppressed by the very liturgy formulated for white European culture that considered black people unworthy to kneel at an altar and pray? The phrase becomes more challenging to read and hear when reflecting on the disparities in healthcare given to black and brown communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, police brutality has significantly impacted the lives of Black Americans since the time of slavery, and since the flashpoint of George Floyd's death in 2020, has become a national conversation.

With this recent historical context in mind, how does this portion of liturgy speak to the "Black Lives Matter" movement? I wonder if the women dressed in white attempted each first Sunday to imagine their worth. With these questions and thoughts in mind, I assert that liturgies and rituals, formed from a Eurocentric Christian framework used in present Black Protestant religious practices of the church's sacraments, cannot

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[19] Julian Smith Peasant, Jr., *The Arts of the African Methodist Episcopal Church as Viewed in the Architecture, Music, and Liturgy of the Nineteenth Century* (Ohio University, 1992), 212.

bring healing, justice, and liberation for black brutalized bodies into wholeness. My thesis is that liturgies and rituals conceived as Black sacred liturgy centered around the church's sacraments will help foster the returned relevancy of the Black church to the Black community. I contend that this can be accomplished by creating sacramental liturgies that: 1.) uplift the sacredness of "blackness" by re-membering and reclaiming ancestors' stories and faith towards liberation and healing, 2.) being intentional about what becomes repetitive to the ears and hearts of the community, 3.) healing generational trauma, and 4.) using rituals of resistance from the Africa Diaspora.

The Black Protestant Church grew out of slavery and a need to worship freely, yet there is still a display of white influence that stifles the creativity of new liturgy that could be transformative and empowering. What could a sacred liturgy for the Black Protestant Church look like, and does its creation matter? To my mind, as a person invested in the Black Church and who believes in its value as a space for community-based care and healing, it matters a great deal.

The word "liturgy" means the people's work. Lisa Allen in, *A Womanist Theology of Worship, Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness*, writes that liturgy is "action."[20] Liturgy is defined as a Greek word, *leitourgia,* composed from the words for work (*ergon*) and people *(laos*); therefore, liturgy is a work performed by the people for the benefit of others.[21] Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Authentic Liturgy*, uses the work of J.A. Jungmann, a Catholic liturgical scholar, to describe liturgy this way: "Liturgy is not

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[20] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness* (Orbis Books, 2021), 4.

[21] James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship Third Edition Revised and Expanded* (Abington Press, 2000), 27.

simply ceremonial - the ceremonies are simply the outward signs of a more profound action. Nor is liturgy merely a set of rules and regulations or an established procedure - rather, it is itself the act." [22]

Liturgy is visible; it shapes and gives voice; therefore, the language used in Protestant Black liturgy must not give voice to the white denominational structures that once denied black people their freedom. When I read liturgies that are embedded within my denomination, I often have the thought that what I am reading is from the theology of old white men or, as Christina Cleveland puts it in, *God is a Black Woman*, the "whitemalegod" who believes he has all authoritative power to create and interpret scripture on behalf of all people.[23] A community repeating liturgy that was not explicitly designed for or by the black community is intentionally controlling, both individually and collectively. What and whose memories are shared when the Prayer of Humble Access or other parts of the liturgy handed down by the oppressors are repeated? And can these memories be damaging or traumatizing to modern black audiences? Without knowing the stories of marginalized folks, what is the larger church missing out on that could deepen their understanding of the divine and the experiences of the oppressed?

In my observation of the Black Protestant Church, there is a rapid decline in membership. Some churches want to attribute this to having the wrong style of music. I disagree that music is the problem. I agree with Dr. Lisa Allen that a decline of membership in the Black Protestant Church, which is proud of its historical roots, is still

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[22] Nicholas Wolterstoff, "Justice As A Condition of Authentic Liturgy," in *Theology Today* 48, no.1 (1991), 7. https://doi.org/10.1177/00405736910480010.
[23] Christina Cleveland, *God Is A Black Woman* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2022), 167.

caused by theologies and doctrines formed by Calvinist or Anglican theologies, not creating theological beliefs and doctrinal standards in context and conversation with their Blackness, can be a contributing factor to its decline.[24]

To understand the term "blackness," Andrea C. Abrams studies blackness in the context of an Afrocentric church in her book, *God and Blackness, Race, Gender and Identity in a Middle-Class Afrocentric Church*, in which she offers that blackness can be complex. She describes blackness as not just one thing but a cluster of "ideas, practices, values, histories, and sociopolitical dynamics, and yet she says that blackness is also one thing; it is an essential cornerstone of racial ideology that provides a shared sense of identity that an individual might employ who they are and who they are to become."[25] With the church revisiting and re-examining the liturgical practices that were adopted from white denominations, we can begin to explore if the ecclesiology of the church is providing and creating a theological framework that speaks to the sustainability of the Black church, as well as benefiting and nurturing to provide a shared sense of identity.

The practices and rituals in the Black Church (AME) consist of the community gathering outlined in the call to worship, the invocation, sermon, and singing. This can be quite a spirit-filled worship experience. It is in the spaces of the liberating preaching and heavenly music that one can find oneself lifted from the oppressive struggles of daily life that attempt to deny one's existence and humanity, and it is noted that the Black Church provides this hope. Therefore, a reason to now liberate the practices centered around Holy

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[24] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness* (Orbis Books, 2021), 157.

[25] Andrea C. Abrams, *God and Blackness, Race, Gender and Identity in a Middle Class Afrocentric Church* (New York University Press, 2014), 9.

Communion. Gathering around the table of remembrance, using pietistic traditions and language can be uninviting and unwelcoming. African Americans and other people of color, in a society that often deems them to be less than others, should not hear, as they humble themselves to be so unworthy to gather crumbs from the master's table. With the intentional thought of recreating sacred liturgy on behalf of the people, let us picture scenarios that might and perhaps have taken place on communion Sundays.

On First Sundays, one woman may relive the trauma of rape, blaming her body, praying and humbling herself that she might be found worthy every time the Prayer of Humble Access or Prayer of Humiliation is presented at the Table. A young man may find it difficult to gather at the table because he is gay and wonders if his coming to the communion table would cause a stir among those who feel he is unworthy to partake in the Lord's Supper. Sitting in her favorite church pew, the mother of the church ambles to the communion table, presenting herself before God, unable to kneel because of her acute arthritis, but determined to share in Jesus' blood and body, but still concerned that she is not able to offer tithes from her social security check, as she asks the Lord if she is still not worthy to gather at the table? The faithful member who hands out food to the poor, may also refuse to take the wafer and the grape juice because her life still reflects a painful past, and when she is asked if she is ready to join the table, she responds, "I don't feel that I can." And other congregants, in their minds on that first Sunday of the month, replay the trauma-impacted by society, some humbling themselves or not humbling themselves because of fear in a white-dominant religious practice that keeps the question of worth so ever-present before them. Of course, one cannot imagine the stories that sit

and kneel together around the remembrance table, and that is the point here, that in the remembrance of Jesus' suffering, Black folks identify with that suffering. But, in spite of this suffering, it is at the table where healing and liberation can occur.

There is a need to heal (cultural) generational trauma that affects Black communities. The creation of Black Liturgy, which is sacred, can be a significant change agent that can contribute to this much-needed healing. This is evident in the support for Black Liturgy in noting the social media phenomenon @BlackLiturgies, created by Cole Arthur Riley in 2020, which attracted thousands of followers at the height of the COVID pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protest. In an article for the Sojourner's Magazine, the author, Jeania Ree V. Moore, writes about Riley's work in "Work of the People*"* and mentions that Riley, who is an Episcopalian, realized that the words of Thomas Cranmer, author of the 16th-century Book of Common Prayer, were not speaking to her Blackness, and therefore needed to provide liturgical expressions of healing to herself and community.[26] Riley author of *This Here Flesh, Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us*," which furthers healing of community through the liturgy of storytelling. The liturgy permits Black folk to be vulnerable and to be seen. Riley shares family stories, painful memories, but also stories of resistance. Whereas the sacred words of the Humble of Prayer Access, "we are not worthy to gather the crumbs," Riley expresses a sacred word that empowers and heals, writing, "Make no mistake, if you are not free, it is not justice. I do not celebrate crumbs when I know of the bread that has been promised to

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[26] Jeania Ree V. Moore "Work of the People" in *Sojourner's Magazine*. December 2021. 24

me." [27] Riley's explicit assertion of worthiness is evocative of the Syrophenician and Canaanite woman in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, who despite their lower social status vis-á-vis the broader Israelite population, voice their right to freedom. The major difference between these two sacred expressions is that one denotes an oppressive tone, the latter a liberative one.

Trauma and Liturgy

Dirk G. Lange, the author of *Trauma Theory and Liturgy: A Disruption of Ritual*, speaks of two words committed to liturgy: repetition and remembrance. Lange brings to the attention that these two words, although liturgy is not simply about remembering or repetitive action, he notes are "buzz" words in fields such as post-structuralist thought and in the area of trauma theory. Lange suggests that theologians should not ignore the impact of trauma theory on contemporary philosophical thinking or literary works.[28]

Black Americans are not immune to trauma. Ron Eyerman explored cultural trauma through the formation of African American identity, starting with the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement, expressing that the trauma in question was slavery, not as an institution or as an experience, but as a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity formation of a people.[29] According to Jan Assmann, in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization, Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination,* memory is fashioned during the process of socialization. Despite the fact that it is always

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[27] Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh, Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us* (Convergent Books Random House, 2022), 123.
[28] Dirk G. Lange, "Trauma, Theory, and Liturgy: A Disruption of Ritual," *Liturgical Ministry* 17. No. 3 (2008), 127.
[29] Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). 1

the individual who has memory, it is created collectively. [30] Collective memories can be good and bad, and those collective memories that disturb the psyche can create collective trauma. Is the Black Protestant church holding on to collective memories and traumas that might damage her soul, keeping her connected to the Eurocentric denomination from which she came but can also disconnect her from the black community?

Jefferey C. Alexander, in his book, *Social Theory of Trauma*, shares that the assaults of violence on the African American community can be considered a cultural trauma, whereby personal trauma of individuals becomes a trauma collective group.[31] Alexander uses the work of Kai Erickson's, *Everything In Its' Path* to describe what is collective trauma. Erickson writes:

> By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. "We" no longer linked cells in a larger communal body.[32]

I find this statement relatable to where the Black Protestant church is today. The effectiveness and identity of the Black Church appear to be lost in the community. This in no way means that the Black Church can no longer be relevant or that the Black Church is, as some critics believe, dead. Instead, it is to acknowledge, strictly from a participant/

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[30] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization, Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination,* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). 22.

[31] Jefferey C. Alexander, "Social Theory of Trauma" *Acts sociologia* 56, no.1 (2013) 6. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699312461O3

[32] Kai Erickson, *Everything in its Path Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*, (Simon & Schuster, 1976), 153-4.

observer view as a pastor in a Black Protestant church, that collective and cultural trauma is reflective in the Black church and requires collective healing. When Donald Trump was elected the 45th President of the United States, the tension experienced in the Black community was a disparaging woe, not just because of the person elected, but because the dangerous ideologies of white supremacy and Christian Nationalism were on full display. The Black community remembers Trump as the person who took out a full-page newspaper advertisement calling for the death penalty on five black and brown boys accused of raping a white woman in Central Park, Manhattan. The young boys, known as the Central Park Five, spent a number of years incarcerated before being exonerated.[33] The community remembers Trump spreading lies across the airways that the first Black president, Barak Obama, was not born in the United States. The Sunday after the 2016 election, I imagined that every Black church in America created a space where Black parishioners could breathe through the disappointment of knowing that white supremacy, which is an endemic to American culture and society, had been emboldened by the outwardly racist rhetoric of Trump. Unfortunately, the Sunday after the 2016 presidential election appeared to be the status quo. There was a sense of normalcy in a local AME Church I attended during this time. The call to worship remained the same, the benediction remained the same, and the tension and fear in the Black community were not named nor honored. And yet, this moment called for a change from the status quo. This moment called for a liturgy that recognized the collective trauma experienced by the

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[33] Oliver Laughland, "Donald Trump and the Central Park Five: The Racially Charged Rise of a Demagogue" *The Guardian* (2016) https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/17/central-park-five-donald-trump-jogger-rape-case-new-york

community and a liturgy that offered collective healing to the community. Can the black church, specifically the AME church, begin decolonizing and deconstructing the liturgy used in the sacraments that promote healing and restoration?

Jean Derricotte-Murphy presents a womanist auto-ethnographic thought in "Rituals of Restorative Resistance: Healing Cultural Trauma and Cultural Amnesia through Cultural Anamnesis and Collective Memory." Derricotte-Murphy's essay creatively examines a way of healing cultural trauma and cultural amnesia by using rituals of restorative resistance, combining the sacrifices of Jesus and enslaved African ancestors in a eucharist ritual where she revises the meaning of the liturgy that is often used from 1st Corinthians 11:24, "Do this in remembrance of Me" to "Re-member Me," associating the trauma of the crucifixion with the trauma of slavery.

Again, cultural trauma happens when community members have been greatly harmed by traumatic events, causing suffering to their collective memory and forever defining their consciousness surrounding their identity and worth.[34] Cultural trauma can lead to cultural amnesia, which occurs when the painful memories of traumatic events within the community are too painful to remember and are soon forgotten, intentionally and unintentionally. Therefore, creating a liturgy around the sacraments, specifically the Eucharist, which calls us to remember, can be healing and empowering to the AME Church and African Americans as a whole.

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[34] Jean Derricotte-Murphy, "Rituals of Restorative Resistance. Healing Cultural Traumas and Cultural Amnesia Through Cultural Anamesis and Collective Memory," *Black Women and Religious Culture* Vol. 1 (2020), 18. DOI: 10.53407//bwrc2.1.2021.100.07.

Derricotte-Murphy takes Western traditional liturgy from her urban black Baptist roots as a minister and combines it with Afrocentric symbols to decolonize and deconstruct what she described as negative Western characterizations over black and brown bodies.[35] The author introduces the theory of anthropological poverty. Anthropological poverty was introduced by the Cameroonian Jesuit priest Engelbert Mveng, who defined it as the effects of European colonialism in Africa resulting in almost total losses of African culture, artistic expression, ritual practices, values, and religious beliefs throughout the continent and African Diaspora, leading to a state of indigence and misery.[36] Derricotte-Murphy takes this theory further, expressing that not only did European colonialism lead to anthropological poverty, but Europe became recognized as the main source of culture, therefore resulting in historic and present-day cultural trauma and cultural amnesia within the African American community.[37] She argues that retrieving what was lost, such as ritual practices and spirituality, requires an effort to retrieve collective memory and collective anamnesis, allowing a painful past to be remembered but also developing new rituals that provide opportunities that bring about the collective African American psyche. An example that reflects the painful past and reminds us of how the church shares in that collective memory in the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to re-member, embrace, and include the words of the late Rev. Dr. Clementa Pinckney, murdered by a white supremacist, in the Holy Communion

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 20.

Litany, *"Our calling is not just within the walls of the congregation, but the life and community in which our congregations resides."*[38]

For Black Americans, it has been too often that the scars we receive go unnoticed, are pushed aside, or are easily erased by a white supremacist culture that is resistant to acknowledging or taking accountability for our pain and suffering. In some Black protestant churches, there is the rush to get through the pain instead of sitting with it, not allowing for healing, but first, getting to the praise and glory. In a rush to get through horrendous events caused by the afflictions of white supremacy, or to unburden those in power of their white guilt, Black bodies are not even worthy to sit and breathe in their pain. However, the altar call, a religious practice, and tradition in some Black denominations, is a powerful expression of the community who gathers around each other, praying over troubled burdens and leaving those burdens at the altar. Yet those burdens are not always , nor should they be, left at the altar. At the altar lay individual unspoken stories but also unspoken stories of the community. The burden of Black folks at the altar includes the broken pieces of Black bodies. We gather at the Lord's Table to remember Christ's broken body and blood and are humbled by participating in this most sacred moment.[39] But here, also at the Communion table, are the holy broken bodies of our ancestors and community members. Here at the Communion table are where the

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[38] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in eulogy for the honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney." The White House Office of the Press Secretary, June 16, 2015.

[39] James Cone relates the cross to a lynching tree , wrote, "Both Jesus and blacks were "strange fruit." Theologically speaking, Jesus was the "first lynchee" who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America - Jesus and other subject people suffered punishment under the Roman Empire as blacks suffered in the United States. He was tortured and humiliated like blacks." *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* (Orbis Books, 2011). 158.

unspoken stories of black afflictions can be shared, and the community can begin to heal from cultural, racial, and intergenerational trauma.

In *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed: Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches*, the authors asked, "How can we re-member the Body of Christ if we deny the wounds of the Body itself?"[40] Communion is a communal act of us re-membering our stories and re-membering the Body of Christ through the sharing of the bread and wine. Holy Communion allows the community to gather at the table in unity before God's presence and others' presence. It is a communal act that brings us together, and it is this communal act that makes it sacred.

Re-imagining the practice of Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper in the Black Protestant church, and specifically, the AME Church, leads us to tell a new generation of the stories of anticipation and deliverance created by ancestors, like Richard Allen, the founder and first bishop of the AME Church, and Jarena Lee, the first woman licensed to preach in the AME Church, and so many more. Bringing those memories to the table and infusing them with the Gospel of Jesus engages the congregation in resisting the evil and oppression in our community, thereby living out the liturgy and practice of Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper as a work on behalf of the people. Creating this modern work would also align with the ideals of the early Jesus' movement, which was fighting against the evil and oppression of his day, the Roman occupation of Israel in the first century CE, and the Jewish Temple leadership that was in

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[40] Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W Mount Shoot, *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed, Race, Memory and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches* (Cascade Books, 2015). 14.

collusion with Rome. If we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and align ourselves with his mission, then we must be critical of the oppressive regimes of our own time. Liturgy can be a tool for acknowledging and challenging the status quo in service of healing the individual and collective trauma(s) of our community.

Who is Missing from the Lord's Table?

Brad R. Braxton, in his essay, "Baptism and Holy Communion: Affirming That Black Lives Matter," asks the question, "As African American Christian practice, baptism, and Holy Communion, what contemporary issues must be engaged so that these rituals can speak afresh to the present?"[41] The question helps to open a dialogue between churchgoers and those who find the Black church to no longer be relevant. The AME church, the Black church, born out of the right to be free, which led the struggle for liberation, is the absolute place where contemporary issues that impact the lives of our black and brown communities can and should be raised. Contemporary issues of poverty and violence, the Black church's homophobic view of gay and trans people, and the disintegration of public schools are only a few issues that the church has failed to address. And because of this silence in the face of oppression and marginalization, those impacted by these issues, young families, children, teens, and queer folk, are absent from Holy Communion. I observe the absence of young families with children attending Holy Communion in my local congregation. The first Sundays were important to the Black community and now appear irrelevant. Unfortunately, Holy Communion services are done more out of form and fashion than out of an invitation to the community. So not

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[41] Brad Braxton, "Baptism and Holy Communion: Affirming That Black Lives Matter" in *T&T Handbook of African Theology.* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2019), 205.

only do we see a decline in church membership, but there is also a decline in sharing Black stories of resistance and overcoming.

After asking the question, Braxton, a Black pastor, observed during a Sunday worship scheduled for Holy Communion that marginalized persons were not at or invited to the table, as he calls it, "to the feast." Instead, Holy Communion had become more about the event. In making his argument that Holy Communion can affirm that black lives matter, Braxton looks to the politics in the Corinthian Epistles, noting that the Corinthian church included Jews and Gentiles, social elites, and economically vulnerable persons who were enslaved or recently emancipated. Expounding on 1st Corinthians 11:27-29, in support of his argument, Braxton expressed that pietistic interpretations of this text have created Christian traditions that are fixated on identities or behaviors that constitute taking Holy Communion in an "unworthy manner."[42] Braxton realized that the Black middle-class and elite congregations had become accustomed to tradition, and there was no class diversity at the table. When the Black church allows Eurocentric theology to become embedded or to replace her tradition of communal liberation, we become very close to the nature of white supremacy and forget about what the Black church fought against. Braxton invites his congregation to see that they have not worked hard enough to invite economically marginalized people to the feast. With Black Theology, we believe that Jesus is with the marginalized and the oppressed; unfortunately, the language of unworthiness is used against those who considered socially

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[42] 1st Corinthians 11:27-29 NRSV

unfit to partake in the meal at the Communion table; unmarried mothers, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and the poor.[43]

David Anderson Hooker, in his monograph "Grandma's Supper is the Lord's Supper," writes about how enslaved persons were stripped from their religious traditions and cultures. Euro-Western Christianity was introduced, and African religious practices were forbidden. During Holy Communion, Hooker describes that enslaved persons participated with other enslaved persons in plantation systems in a regional celebration. After celebrating Holy Communion, there was a small period where the enslaved Africans were allowed to socialize with each other. This was most likely the only time enslaved folks were able to connect with family members who were placed on different plantations and the only time they were able to connect with their loved ones from whom they were separated.[44] Holy Communion for the enslaved was a communion that invited them to remember and then subsequently stripped their remembrance away, returning them to the status quo of enslavement. Maybe this is why Holy Communion in the Black Church meant so much more than just the denominational practice. Hooker argued that a family dinner is a way to observe Holy Communion for African Americans. This argument is sound but may exclude others from the table. The idea of a family dinner with stories shared among the elderly and the young honors a tradition quite like the

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[43] Cait Caffrey, "Black Theology" in Salem Press Encyclopedia. "Black theology is a religious perspective that recontextualizes the teachings of Christianity to account for the experiences of African Americans. Black theology emerged among African American religious leaders in the years leading up to the American Civil War. It became a doctrine of liberation, emphasizing God's love for the disadvantaged and Christianity's message of deliverance and freedom." https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=08e76379-d51b-3faf-a3be-271cb6b22c23. Acesso em: 26 abr. 2025.

[44] David Anderson Hooker, "Grandma's Supper is the Lord's Supper," In *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ's Table*, ed. Thomas W. Porter (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 101.

Passover Seder. Hooker quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer, suggesting, "The table fellowship in which we celebrate God's act of redemption and salvation should be our everyday meal experience and just not necessarily set apart from our ordinary existence."[45] The family atmosphere would bring a festive tone and even reclaim an oral tradition. The concern from the argument is whether the Eucharist would get separated from the church. He asserted that the Eucharist is the meal of the church, and a sacrament of the church offers an individualistic notion of the church as the only source of healing and wholeness. While a European worldview informs an individualistic Christianity that promotes individualistic conversion as the method of attaining salvation, Africans, along with most indigenous folks' worldview, understand that our existence occurs only in the community, stemming from the South African philosophy, Ubuntu - "I am because you and because you are therefore I am." I do agree that this philosophy is most significant. Yet I disagree with the author that if the church is the only source of healing and wholeness, this does not mean that African American families are incapable of providing spaces of love and care in their homes. The mere fact is that many homes of African American families do and can provide healing and wholeness because of a liberating gospel that has been preached in the Black church, and what helped equip the Black community with systems of connection and family-ties in spite of the ravages that the slave trade wrought on families. Those same meals from grandmothers were the meals that fed the church in times of crisis, and those same grandmothers, prepared the Lord's Supper for their community. Maybe this is why the Lord's Supper was such an important observance for

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[45] Ibid.

African Americans in the early and late sixties, in the place I grew up, in tension surrounding the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and school segregation in the South. The Lord's Table is where the voices of descendants of the enslaved sang of their determination, as Dodson and Gilkes write, "to sit at the welcome table" and exhorting one another to "break bread" and "drink wine together on our knees," point to food as an important mythopoetic element in the process of community formation."[46] The family came to the table, along with their neighbors, school principals, and teachers who taught their children. The idea of breaking bread around a table filled with homemade specialties in the presence of home would be delightful, but it still would exclude the entire community from the table.

According to Hooker, the theology of sacrament that is relevant to the African American fellowship is that it points to the collective nature of struggle and provides members in the community to embrace the past and present memories, which reminds them of past and future deliverance. Telling stories of the faithful ancestors in the struggle to gain rights for African Americans reminds everyone that the table to the feast is open to all, but it also gives the expectation that those gathered at the table are also committed to the continued work of deliverance and anticipation, the continued work of God's realm into full manifestation for the present age.[47] A continuation of God's work towards a just

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[46] Jualynne E. Dobson, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. ""There's Nothing Like Church Food" Food and the US Afro-Christian Tradition: Re-Membering Community and Feeding the Embodied S/spirit (s)." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 3 (1995): 520.

[47] David Anderson Hooker, "Grandma's Supper is the Lord's Supper," In *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ's Table*, ed. Thomas W. Porter (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 101.

world where all God's creation is love, where all of God's creation is treated with dignity and seen as worthy and a vital part of our world. This speaks to why creating a sacred Black liturgy that brings everyone to the table is critical to this time and age. In this time and age, white nationalism and white Christian nationalism are on the rise and, unfortunately, the most important institution in the Black community, the Black church, finds itself with empty pews. This is why we lift up a liturgy that brings her children back to the table. This is why it is critical that a sacred Black liturgy acknowledges worth in "blackness" and does not diminish that light. African and indigenous world views do not distinguish between sacred and profane or secular space. All space is sacred if it is claimed to be so. Our Black institutions are sacred; the songs we sing, the preaching moment, the practice of Holy Communion, and Baptism are all sacred, and so should the intentionality in interpreting the theology we use to create healing and wholeness at the table.

Black Methodist Voices

Why start with the liturgy of Holy Communion? Holy Communion is a solemn and intimate setting; again, First Sundays, or Communion Sundays, are more essential to be in church attendance than any other Sunday. Although many Black Churches still use communion liturgy that has rarely been changed for decades, Holy Communion/Lord's Supper remains a binding communal ritual and tradition that is passed down to church members generationally. [48]

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[48] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness* (Orbis Books, 2021), 169.

Communion tables and trays, the white tablecloths, and all of the beautiful items associated with this practice are usually items that family members have donated to their local churches, and there is a sense of pride as family members kneel around the altar, knowing that their ancestors provided the means by which they can receive the sacrament. Holy Communion was more about sharing and including all in God's grace. Maybe this is why I was so mesmerized by the women who prepared the communion table when I was growing up because they were more focused on loving their community and their God. They seemed to tune out the words "not worthy to gather the crumbs" because their context would not allow them to question what they heard. But now is the right time to question and seek answers, are we, the Black Protestant Church (AME), creating liturgical theology that liberates and uplifts Black bodies at the table representing the broken body? Can the AME denomination create a new liturgy for Holy Communion, established by Black Christians, and can we say that it is sacred? Can we also say that liturgy created by Black Christians for Holy Communion is a part of Wesleyan Methodism because Wesleyan Methodism is also who we are, and our voices and creativity also matter in these Methodist spaces? In my local congregation, we have embraced changes in new ways in how we conduct the regular worship Sundays, but on Communion Sundays, we gravitate to the status quo. Although the Prayer of Humble Access is not required to be read during Holy Communion, it is still in black and white print before us, and I am pretty sure if it is altered or excluded from the reading in some AME churches, it will be declared blasphemous by some members.

The Prayer of Humble Access, written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1548 to be included in the Book of Common Prayer, was written in and for the context of that time. Reformation was taking place under the reign of Edward VI of England, this allowed Cranmer to create a theology that was amendable to the Reformation. The Holy Mass, which was usually read in Latin, is now read by priests in a vernacular that the people could understand, and the Prayer of Humble Access stands as an illustration of Cranmer's biblical liturgical style[49]. My critique is not to disregard this prayer or for the Anglican Church from which it originates, or John Wesley's love for it in the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, nor is it assumed that this prayer was created to bring any concern or harm to oppressed bodies intentionally, but the context in which the Black Protestant church exists today must evaluate what we are relaying to vulnerable members in our congregation who continue to face racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, and other ills in the United States of America when they hear, "we are not worthy to gather the crumbs." The worth and presence of black bodies and souls is still questioned in this decade, from questioning the birthright of the first Black president of the United States, Barack Obama, in 2009, to questioning if a young black man, Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed in 2020 for simply jogging through a neighborhood when two white men decided they had the authority to question his human being, has the right to exist in white-dominated spaces. Black bodies sold on auction blocks were stripped naked for public viewing and branded as commodities, only deemed valuable by

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[49] Gordon Jeans, "Cranmer and Common Prayer" T*he Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey,* edited by Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 21-24.

the slaveholders who worked those enslaved individuals unmercifully and saw them as animals. Black bodies that asserted personhood or questioned the status quo were slaughtered and killed for seeking freedom. Black bodies were mutilated and hung from trees, while the whites made these atrocious events town celebrations. Black bodies were sprayed with firehoses and beaten with nightsticks seeking their rights to democracy, and black bodies were assassinated: Medgar Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Malcolm X, and Fred Hampton, just to name a few. So, when gathered at the Communion Table, that which we deemed holy remembers of Chris's broken body, is also an opportunity to remember black bodies, both broken and unbroken, as sacred and holy.

Creating a Black sacred liturgy towards a healing community in the praxis of Holy Communion and fusing justice links us to Jesus' mandate in the Gospel of Luke, "Do this in remembrance of me."[50] We gather at the table to remember the cross, the resurrection, and Jesus' love and power over evil and hatred. We also remember the cross as that which symbolizes suffering and anguish.[51] The Black broken bodies in congregations of Black Protestant churches, who gather at the communion table on First Sundays to receive the holy sacrament, show up in their brokenness and seek to embody Christ. In these Black broken bodies, they identify with the suffering of Jesus, and with humility, they kneel in adoration, and yet Black bodies are violated and defamed even at the communion table, not recognized nor honored. "Do this in remembrance of me" helps to bring attention to the marginalized at the table, to know that they are there as they also

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[50] Luke 22:19 (NRSV)
[51] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom Body, Race, and Being.* (Fortress Press, 2010), 124.

are representations of the body of Christ. "Do this in remembrance of me," seeing Jesus as divine and human helps us to see others as divine and human. "Do this in remembrance of me" reminds the congregation of how Jesus brought healing and wholeness to an oppressed world and, therefore, this intimate practice where we are kneeling, standing, or sitting together at the Lord's table can provide healing and wholeness to a broken community.

M. Shawn Copeland, in "Eucharist, Racism, and Black Bodies," when demonstrating the connection of the cross and the lynching tree, writes,

> to place maimed lynched bodies beside the maimed body of Jesus of Nazareth is the condition for a theological anthropology that reinforces the sacramentality of the body, contests objectification of the body, and honors the body as the self-manifestation and self-expression of the free human subject. Slavery, lynching, and their extension in white racist supremacy aimed to de-create black bodies and desecrate black humanity. [52]

What would it look like for the Black Protestant church that rose from the chokehold of white supremacy to remember from whence it came and why, and with that same fortitude, reimagine the praxis around the Lord's table, with her own interpretation of sacred theological black liturgy, that intentionally sees the broken body and create the space for the community to heal?

There are multiple reasons for the decline in church membership, but it is my belief one reason is that the Black Protestant church stopped being a community, becoming irrelevant to the times that she finds herself in and closing her mind to a new generation who also seek to be whole and free. The Black Protestant (AME) church must seek solutions to bring the community and her children back to the table. Conferences

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[52] Ibid., 124.

full of knick-knacks and frivolous worship programs will not be enough. The music and the preaching will not be enough. But a table set with intentionality to speak and remember stories and to hear new ones, creates spaces of relief and safety. A sacred communion table, even if there is sweet Kool-Aid and cornbread as Jesus' blood and body. A sacred communion table that is inclusive and sees the worth of the Black body that is sacred and divine.

My plan for this project is to create a liturgy specifically around the Holy Communion/Lord's Supper that speaks to the context of our time, and re-membering stories of struggle and deliverance. This project will incorporate holy scripture and holy writings of the ancestors, such as Richard Allen and Jarena Lee. This liturgy will also include a space for the presence of children who are missing from the table and will provide space for their voice to participate in the liturgy. This project will also include space to ask the congregation, "What does Holy Communion/Lord Supper mean to you?" This congregation is an elderly population, but I will seek to include young adults as well.

To suggest altering this most sacred part of the church, I will likely be met with skepticism, resistance, and maybe some rebuke. Questioning how we can create a Black sacred liturgy in a new way of offering Holy Communion may appear to have a disregard for what our present liturgy. It is noted that the Prayer of Humble Access and other sacred portions of the liturgy have been a part of generations for years. Still, it is also noted that a Black liturgy lifted from Exodus and from the pages of our ancestral history matters, and it is, too, sacred and holy. Therefore, it is with this justification and my dedication to

incorporating restoration and healing into the sacred practice of liturgy, that I forge ahead with this creative project.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EMPTY TABLE

In this chapter, I will highlight the findings from my survey of Black Protestant pastors from across the United States and interviews with the congregants of Bethlehem AME Church, located in Langhorne, PA. The study and questions were asked to identify the influence(s) of (white) Western Christian thought on the Black Church, precisely its pattern of exclusion, to which the Black Protestant church has sadly conformed.

Holy Communion Survey

My survey aimed to better understand the age demographics around Holy Communion in the Black Protestant church. This survey was conducted with approximately 53 black protestant pastors in the U.S. The questions included:

- What is the average age of participants in Holy Communion in your congregation?
- What is your congregation's average weekly attendance, regardless of age?

The remaining questions were based on specific age groups that attend Holy Communion services.

- Do you believe that Holy Communion in the Black Church is still passed down as a generational tradition/practice?

This final question is based on information shared by Dr. Allen, who mentions that importance of Holy Communion as a communally binding ritual and tradition that has been communication and passed down to church members generationally. From what I

have experienced in the Black church on Communion Sundays, very few or no children, youth, or young adults participate in Holy Communion. For that reason, I ask:

- Is Holy Communion is still passed down generationally?[1]

This question is raised here because younger black adults are less engaged in Black churches than older generations. Plus, millennials and Gen-Z are less likely to grow up attending a Black church.[2]

Survey Findings

The survey results showed that the average age of those participating in Holy Communion was 55+, with 6.4% of ages 2-12 and 2.6% of ages 18-35 participating in Holy Communion. When asked if there is the belief that Holy Communion is still passed down generationally in Black Protestant churches, 77% of pastors responded, "Yes," and 13% responded, "No." From asking if Holy Communion is still passed down generationally, from the perspective of Black Protestant pastors, there is a widespread generation of participants at the Lord's Table. However, from the data of the age group of participants rendered from the survey, it would appear that the predominant perception is not one based on reality. It is noted that younger generations have stayed away from mainline protestant churches. Still, the reality of the data might not determine this to be so in most local black churches, although over half of the participants believed that Holy

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[1] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness* (Orbis Books, 2021), 189.

[2] Besheer Mohamed, Kiana Cuff, Jeff Diamant and Clair Gecewiz, "Faith and Religion Among Black Americans" in *Pew Research*, report in February 16, 2021 surveyed more than 8600 Black adults, ages 18 and older, across the U.S. The findings included that young Black millennials and members of Generation Z are less likely to have grown up in Black churches. Although 87% of the Silent Generation (born before 1928) say that as children they attended a congregation where all or most people were Black, compared to 64% of Generation Z'ers who say this about their childhood. Black Americans are more religious than the U. S. Public overall. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/

Communion remains a generationally passed down practice. Is this belief borne out in reality? Or is the Black Protestant church refusing to face that we have allowed generations to be missing from the Lord's Table and that this is a critical time for the Black Protestant churches to ask how the church might invite them to partake in this meal of grace? These questions will be addressed in what follows.

The Impacts of Covid-19

"Who is missing from the table?" Holy Communion is a prominent event, but it has become a formality on first Sundays in some Black Protestant churches. When did this sacred practice become less significant? When we stop paying attention, do we miss the opportunity to truly see who is present at the table, and are we missing the opportunity to invite those who are missing from our communities to the table? During the COVID-19 pandemic, people communed in their homes, away from the fellowship of congregational members. Gathering away from fellowship, of course, was necessary and might remain necessary for autoimmune-compromised church members. To address this problem of accessibility during the pandemic, Communion kits were disbursed, dropped off, or picked up from a box outside the local church to keep socially distanced. Some church members received communion kits by mail, or members used water and bread as the elements in their homes to participate in the sacred service. This shift in practice to meet the moment of the pandemic demonstrates that the Church can adapt its practices. Even though the pandemic was a horrible experience, especially for black and brown communities, it pushed us to think outside of the box—I would like to apply this shift in practice to the liturgy of Holy Communion.

Data shows that COVID-19 impacted the African American community at an alarming rate. Black people were being admitted to the hospital and dying in disproportionate numbers. The pandemic shined a light on the health disparities of the African community, such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, obesity, and poverty.[3] During the pandemic, the African American community was struck again with racism in the form of police brutality with the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer. Not only did white supremacy rear its ugly head in the black community, but other ethnic groups, like Asians, were wrongfully blamed for the COVID-19 virus. They, too, felt the impact of white supremacy. To add further insult to injury, the pandemic restrictions also prevented families from holding funerals for their deceased loved ones. In the African American community, the gathering of friends and family when a loved one dies, the celebration of life, is vital to its culture and comes from a strong tradition of African ancestral roots. To this end, Costen writes, "Africans in a new world were intentional in the celebration of life as they dignified death."[4] The inability to touch the face of the deceased or to sing and rejoice over their life prevented black families from sending their loved ones "home" the proper, communal, and ancestral way.

Returning to in-person worship, gathering around the table, and kneeling shoulder to shoulder with each other places us in a most intimate setting. At the Lord's table, we are bonded in unity, broken bodies invited by Jesus, who gives his broken body for us to be whole. And yet, in this sacred moment of gathering and communing, broken bodies

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[3] Owen Dyer, "Covid-19: Black people and other minorities are hardest hit in the U.S." *BMJ* 2020; 369, April 14, 2020, doi: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1483.
[4] Melva Costen, *African American Christian Worship: 2nd Edition*, (Abington Press, 2007), 55.

and broken lives impacted by the pandemic were not recognized nor remembered. Some black communities aiming to be whole after these horrendous catastrophes might be excluded from the Lord's Table or never invited to the Lord's Table because they were viewed as coming to the Lord's Table in an "unworthy manner." This term, inherited from (white) Western Christianity, has deemed some as unworthy, and the continued use of this language has perpetuated a culture of exclusion that is antithetical to the roots of Christianity. Therefore, it is essential to consider who is missing from the table, what bodies are not being recognized, and what bodies have not been invited. When we are aware of the broken bodies at the table, Holy Communion becomes more than a mere ritual, an institution established from a Western Christian point of view, but an intent to see all of the community, those who have been in the church all their lives, children, youth, young adults, straight and queer, and those who are still questioning their faith and or wondering if they are truly worthy enough to sit at the table. The Lord's table is a table of grace; therefore, all are welcome, and all are worthy.

The AME Church, a global church, is filled with a broad diversity across the spectrum. The AME Church includes local churches in the inner cities and rural areas. Some congregations are more highly educated than others, and some have more middle-class people than those in poverty. Some hold inclusive and affirming spaces, while others still waffle with the idea of doing so. Some AME congregations are labeled mega-churches, while others have barely a handful of congregants. Although one will know they are in an AME Church because of the consistency of the worship outline, each local

church still has its unique personality. And must determine how it is worthily discerning the body to which it serves.

I will take time to note here that during the 52nd Quadrennial Session of the 2024 AME General Conference, the hearing of a legislature to ban the language around same-sex marriage, as found in the Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was defeated, and silenced. Dr. Jennifer Leath, PhD, a queer clergy in the AME Church, gave a profound interview concerning the defeated bill. In her interview, she compares the church's stance to the nature of white supremacy, not recognizing siblings who are sexually different and silencing their voices.[5] Are these also excluded from the Lord's Table? How do our queer siblings serve the Lord's Supper to others when they are not included as complete and whole in the community of faith?

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is an account of Paul's correspondence with the church in Corinth, in which he chastises the congregation for the unequal manner in which they celebrate the Lord's Supper.[6] In his letter, Paul laments that some congregation members commemorate the Lord's Supper by overindulging in food and wine, while others who gather at the table have nothing. Through this letter, Paul shines a light on the socioeconomic disparities within Roman culture and how this culture does not align with the burgeoning egalitarian culture of Christianity.

In similitude with Paul's letter, in one of those after-church meetings at my local church, a discussion arose about setting up an outside table to share Holy Communion

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[5] African Methodist Episcopal Church, "TCR Interview with Rev. Dr. Jennifer Leath PhD - YouTube August 27, 2024, 28:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1OS-rTk02M&list=PPSV.
[6] 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (NRSV).

with passersby in the community. One church member thought we should be careful about who we serve communion. After all, we do not know who we are serving, meaning we must carefully discern who should partake in the Lord's Supper because they might not be worthy to receive the broken body of Christ. We might bring damnation on to them and damnation on to ourselves. Boykin Sanders, an African American biblical scholar, writes that the Apostle Paul to the early church in Corinth condemns the congregation because sharing the Lord's supper practiced within Greco-Roman culture showed social stratification (class division). This left the poor hungry while the rich were given to splurge, and this Boykin exclaims from Paul's view as anti-liberation behavior. The community is to be in solidarity in this practice of the Lord's Supper, waiting for each other and sharing with each other while waiting for the Lord's return as a unified group, regardless of social standing.[7] And let me add here, regardless of sexual or gender identity. There is anti-liberation behavior when the church has decided who is worthy to receive this grace.

Tim Kelly delivers a sermon, "The Lord's Table, the Lord's People: 1 Cor. 11:17-34, " later produced as an article in Pepperdine University's *Leaven* on New Year's Day, 2001. In early Christianity, congregations met in homes that were probably homes of the wealthy, as the poor lived in tenements. The wealthy separated their meal either before the poor members arrived or ate private meals without sharing. It was culturally acceptable to separate the first class from the poor, but it was not necessarily a good

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[7] Boykin Sanders, "1 Corinthians" In *True to Our Native Land, An African American New Testament Commentary*, edited by Brian K Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery, (Fortress Press, 2007), 295.

Christian practice. In Roman culture, the inequity of meals was prevalent. There became instead a separation within this early Christian community. Tim Kelly writes that Paul condemns private meals not in their home but the private meals in the assembly, where there is to be sharing of *koinōnia*.[8] In today's assemblies, we have no less done the same. Excluding some from the Lord's Table because we have privatized the Lord's Supper with a closed table. A text to bring people together has been instead used to divide us around the Lord's table. Today's assemblies must ensure that we are not doing the opposite that the Lord's Table is private, and cannot be participated in and enjoyed by all.[9]

Broken Bodies Gathered at the Table of the Broken Christ

The "bidding" and "general confession" of the Holy Communion liturgy draws the entire body to repent of its "sins and wickedness."[10] Those who gather at the table are broken bodies, but the broken bodies often come to the table with an individual brokenness, not one that gathers with a fractured community. The broken bodies gather to see if they are good in the Lord's eye while also looking to see if other broken bodies alongside them are also worthy to be at the table. The broken bodies are invited to look at themselves inwardly and repent, and then they can come to the Lord's Table. These broken bodies at the Lord's Table have come rattled by racism, sexism, misogyny,

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[8] Tim Kelley, "The Lord's Table, the Lord's People: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34," *Leaven*: Vol. 9: sIs 3, Article 9. (2001):151-154, https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol9/iss3/9.

[9] Philip Kariatlis "Affirming Koionia Ecclesiology: An Orthodox Perspective" *Phronema* 27, no. 1 (2012), 53.

[10] Roderick D. Belin, Prepared by the Commission on Worship & Liturgy, The Service of Word and Sacrament in T*he AME Worship Book of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Digital Edition, 2018. Kindle. "You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbor, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in His holy ways, draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling."

poverty, ageism, and ableism. The broken black bodies, specifically, have been told for centuries they are less than and unworthy. The words lifted at the table, "Take eat, this is my body broken for you,"… are declared Jesus' body. Agreeing with Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W. Mount Shoop, "If Christ's presence has to do with bodies, his, of course, and ours as the "Body of Christ," then the bodies at the Table matter."[11] Black bodies at the Lord's Table matter, and as bell hooks expresses, "We must work hard to love our Black bodies in a white supremacist patriarchal culture."[12]

The body is at the core of Communion, Kahlia J. Williams writes,

> We come to the table of communion with our real bodies, eating and drinking of the symbolic body and blood of Jesus, and in this gathering of the body of Christ, we find the space to recognize our interconnectedness with the sufferings of the real world. When we come together at communion, we are all bodies (female and male) who bring different struggles, including racism, abuse, disease, rape, physical disabilities, age and sexuality. We bring these bodies to a "holy meal" that lifts us up as temples of the Holy Spirit. In communion, we come together in Christ, partaking of this meal that makes us one in Christ with all our bodily differences and struggles. [13]

Williams writes in "Liturgical Undoing: Christ, Communion, and Commodified Bodies," concerning the commodification of black female bodies, and through the time of slavery, black women's bodies were objectified and used for economic gain, and this persists even in the present. Williams sees the Holy Communion as a place of setting those bodies free from abuse and bondage, and it is at the Table of Communion where

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[11] Mary Fulkerson McClintock and Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches*. (Cascade Books, 2015), 3.

[12] bell hooks, *Salvation, Black People and Love (*HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 89.

[13] Khalia J. Williams, "Liturgical Undoing: Christ, Communion, and Commodified Bodies," *Review and Expositor*, 2018, Vol. 115(3) 356. sagepub.com/journals-permissions DOI: 10.1177/0034637318790749 journals.sage.pub.com/home/rae

this takes place. In her article, Williams seeks to bring value to the dehumanization of Black women's bodies that have been treated as property, past and present, for economic gain. Williams expresses, "Bodies that have been reduced to values of exchange and treated as property can reclaim their humanity at the table of communion through the grace of God, a part of the body of Christ."[14] Although Williams speaks explicitly on the commodification of Black women's bodies, her work can be used to imagine how a liturgical undoing around Holy Communion can free all marginalized black bodies. Williams points to remembering Christ's body through the realities and abuses of our own bodies, through critical remembering in Communion, and by the grace of God. Through a critical remembering by a connected body, it is possible to undo the chains of bondage, of course not erasing our history but moving towards a future of hope and healing; Williams describes this as where a liturgical undoing occurs. We are compelled in a way to deal with our scars and the interconnectedness that we share, not of shame and guilt, but that which identifies with the broken body of Christ. At the table, the abuse and bondage are undone, and bodies are reclaimed as the creation of the Divine, which Williams says is "a creation that God looks upon and calls good." [15]

Often, it has been looked upon that when receiving Holy Communion, one must be almost perfect. The assurance that one has not harmed one's brother or sister and repented of one's sin before partaking in the meal forces one to examine oneself internally. However, it should also be noted that the church community must also

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[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid.

examine itself and repent from how it perpetuates human suffering. For example, the allowance of patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, and heteronormative views within the Black church has rendered many of its congregants excluded, powerless, and invisible. Those who gathered at the Lord's Table in earlier days were summoned, called, and invited by the community to remember to join the community at the Lord's Table. Even if it were only one Sunday a month, the community would see each other. But this time, as the data suggests, large swaths of the community appear missing from the table.

On first Sundays in Black Methodist churches, I am sure some local congregants can remember stories of when they were children and their parents would bring them to Holy Communion. The stewardess would gather all the children and bring them to the Lord's Table. Holy Communion became a method for teaching inclusion, allowing children to experience this grace and community. A grace extended to them and their friends who knelt at the altar alongside them. Even if one had an altercation on the playground the week before with their friend or sibling kneeling beside them, they received this same grace. Including the children at the Lord's Table fosters the importance of community, which is likely informed by African cosmologies, even if those beautiful stewardesses are unaware. The protestant traditional ritual of Holy Communion in the black church is intertwined with an intergenerational cultural gathering. The meal is sacred, but the children are sacred as well. The ritual is Holy. The children gathering at the table are Holy, which is why it is so vital today that our children learn who they are at the Lord's Table.

Melva Costen writes that there is less information on the involvement of enslaved people in the Lord's Supper. In Costen's research, one reason why the enslaved did not participate in the Lord's Supper is that "they might not have believed that it was a visible sign of mutual love and fellowship as members of the same mystical body," for there was too much evidence that those who taught this concept neither believed it nor practiced it."[16] For the enslaved, they would have to be baptized before partaking in the Lord's Supper, and whites were concerned the baptized enslaved might believe they were equal to whites. Also, Costen's research points out that where the Lord's Supper occurred in interracial worship services, Euro-American members would come to the table to be served first, and African Americans would come to the table with tokens and served last. African Americans sat in the balcony or seats reserved for them in the white churches. They presented their tokens to receive the bread and wine, and once served, they remained seated in the center of the church amid the white slaveholders until the end of the final meditation.[17]

According to Jonathan Powers, who writes concerning a Wesleyan theology of baptism, in the Methodist meetings, tickets and or tokens were distributed before the Lord's Supper to indicate that the people had examined themselves and were sincere about participating in the Lord's Supper; this was to include a reflection of loving their neighbor. Powers indicate that this practice was not about exclusivity but preserving a witness in personal and communal holiness. As an example, Powers shares that the first

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[16] Melva Costen, *African American Christian Worship: 2nd Edition* (Abington Press, 2007), 52.
[17] Ibid.

American Methodist Discipline barred slaveholding members from participating in the Lord's Supper unless they agreed to free their slaves.[18] The history of early American Methodism tells us that members were not only barred from partaking in communion for not freeing their slaves but faced being expelled from the church. The antislavery message preached in the beginning years of American Methodism, which had become the Methodist Episcopal Church during the Christmas Conference of 1784, was not a prophetic message that would be put into practice easily. It was difficult to get its members to abolish slavery entirely, especially within those southern states that declared slavery legal.[19]

Between 1780 and 1785, the number of American Methodists increased. Social and moral demands would not be the priority at this time. The church was still conscious of the wrong in slavery, but the mission of the church, as the leaders expounded, was to "preach the Gospel to every creature," Negro as well as white.[20] Matthews writes that the American Methodist preachers reasoned that if the slave owners kept them from preaching to the slaves, Negroes would never know of God's love for them. Also, the slave owners, by their harsh rules, would shut themselves from salvation and also from influences that would work to free the slaves eventually. "Negroes would never know of God's love for them" versus the message of antislavery is presented as a paradox for

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[18] Jonathan Powers, *New Life In The Risen Christ - A Wesleyan Theology of Baptism Wesleyan and Methodist Explorations* (Cascade Books, 2023), 134.
[19] Donald Matthews, "The Church and Slavery Compromise and Conscience," In *Slavery and Methodism A Chapter in American Morality 1780-1845* (Princeton University Press, 1965), 10.
[20] Ibid., 13.

those who sought to do what was right, to preach against slavery. Still, it also showed the hubris of the white preachers who assumed Negroes did not know God for themselves.

The practice of Love Feast became an important devotion among Methodists in the days of John Wesley. Wesley adopted the practice of love feast when he witnessed the meal in 1738 with the London Methodists. In the love feast, a token meal of cake or bread and water (from a 'loving cup'), participants testify to the experience of God's grace in their own word or those of hymns, to sharpen the quest for conversion and growth in grace.[21] The amazement of that is wondering if any slaveholders ever showed up to the love feast, and if denial to receive the sacrament was even enough to set the enslaved free. If not, then it can be said that the enslaved were not permitted nor invited to the Lord's table, with or without the slaveholders' approval.

(White)Western Christianity interprets scripture in a way that pits one against another. Western Christianity causes reasons to find guilt and disapproval in others. Western Christianity does not permit one to self-affirm but to examine oneself through the eye of self-doubt and fear. The struggle with Western Christianity and the White Christian nationalist view of the Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper creates an exclusive ritual. In an exclusive ritual, the body becomes separated and pulled apart. The Lord's table then becomes a private banquet, where only the most devout Christian is welcomed or where white supremacy dictates what Christian devotion should look like and who is to be included. There is no call to invite others to the table because white

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[21] Paul Bradshaw, *The Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (Westminster John Knox Press: 2002), 291.

Christian evangelism has taught that sin should always be front and center in our minds; therefore, in the context of always staying in the thought of a sinful nature, bodies are unable to see their worth and worth of others around the table with them. Black bodies are not permitted to really "come as you are." Although tokens are no longer distributed before one comes to partake at the Lord's table, invisible tokens are carried internally, questioning each time, "Am I good enough? Are we good enough? Are black bodies now good enough?"

What Does Participating in Holy Communion Mean to You?

During the interview process with congregants at my local church, I was curious to see how members' participation in Holy Communion had shaped their theology, as it had in my own experience. My theology around Holy Communion now gravitates toward building and community and inclusivity into the sacrament. My theology, centered on agape love, leads me to be intentional about the bodies gathered at the Lord's Table so that they may receive the Gospel message of love and the grace and healing that Holy Communion provides. My concern for the liberation of individuals and community outweighed personal piety, which I believed would be central to this congregation's theology. Each participant was asked six questions, which will be discussed below. The first question asked, "What does participating in Holy Communion mean to you?" The responses varied across the membership.

For some members, the meaning of participating in Holy Communion was spiritual and sacred. Participating in Holy Communion meant for some a reminder that

they are saved in their acceptance of Jesus, who has cleansed them from their sins. For others, their meaning of participating in Holy Communion centered around the setting of the Lord's table, adorned in white cloth, where everything has to be starched perfectly, showing no blemishes on the sacred coverings, which for them, signifies purity and represents the image of holiness. For others, it means Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross for them, his death and resurrection. A small group realized they had never considered why they participated in Holy Communion. For this group, they responded that they were required to do it; therefore, coming to the Lord's Table on the first Sunday of the month became like a muscle memory. It was just a tradition and ritual that the church practiced. For some, the communion of connecting with others was why they partake in Holy Communion. For this group, the awareness of experiencing the sacrament within the community was critical. To be present, as one member would describe, "coming to the Lord's Table was a high holy day when the whole congregation would be involved."[22] The responses to the questions captured views on individualism, collectivism, and humanism with regard to this sacrament.

Some in the congregation connected the invitation of Holy Communion to their salvation, understanding that others knelt with them, but the act was a personal one. This is more of an individualist view. Cohen and Hill propose that many American Protestant religious groups are individualistic in the sense that all religious and spiritual experiences are seen as that which is uniquely between the individual and God.[23] Another group

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[22] "Interviewee 7, Date of Interview, 4/8/2024, Interview conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney."

[23] Adam B. Cohen and Peter C. Hill, "Religion as Culture: Religious Individualism and Collectivism Among American Catholics, Jews and Protestants," *Journal of Personality* Vol. 75, no. 4 (2007): 712, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00454.x.

recognized the presence of others at the Lord's Table as those qualified to come as part of the group's religious identity, which is collectivistic, emphasizing social integration, ritual, and tradition. Social connections are valued as an integral element of religious life, and group affiliations are seen as necessary, even defining parts of religious identity.[24] I agree with Cohen and Hill's argument concerning the American Protestant religion as individualistic. I argue that Black Protestant churches in America are more likely to be collectivistic than individualistic, especially the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a church established in protest against racism and created a religious identity centered on Black folks. Although I believe that Black Protestant churches are more collectivistic than individualistic, it can still be noted that this can also be a form of exclusion when the church is not careful to check their privileges and be mindful of opening the table to the entire community.

Finally, a small group of interviewees viewed the Holy Communion as a community gathering connecting to the divine, which led more toward humanism than a religious view. For this group, the importance of the people gathered mattered more than the religious sacramental experience around ritual and tradition. Humanism, which has been defined in so many ways within our society, this one relates to "a commitment to the perspective, interests, and centrality of human persons."[25] This group experienced the interconnection between the divine and those gathered at the Lord's Table. They took delight in joining the sacrament with others at the table and were able to experience

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[24] Ibid., 713.

[25] Andrew Copson, "What is Humanism?" In *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism,* ed. A. Copson and A.C. Grayling, (Wiley Online Library, 2015), 4, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118793305.ch1.

personhood in community with others. Interestingly, within this small congregation, there was diversity in the members' beliefs and practices regarding Holy Communion.

Do you Believe it is Important for Us to Invite Others to the Lord's Table?

A second question asked, "The Holy Communion invites us before Jesus, who offers us his broken body. Do you believe it is important for us to invite others to the Lord's Table?" One of the congregants posed that this was a tough question to answer. The question was difficult to answer because some congregants believed they should first be concerned if the person they invite has a repentant heart. As one of the congregants said, "Being a Christian, a soul-seeking Christian, no one should be at the table that doesn't have a repenting heart."[26] Others also indicated that an invited person should "know" Jesus or want to get to "know" Jesus. The struggle with the question was knowing if the invited person was "saved" or not. In the concept of "saved," the congregants point to the Prayer of Salvation, which means that people must confess their sins, accept Jesus as their savior first, and have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The scripture text that leads to a definition of being "saved" stems from Romans 10:9.[27] One congregant, a young adult, who also struggled with this question wanted to say yes to the thought of inviting someone to the Lord's table but quickly changed his mind that if someone does not know God, they would first need to have an understanding of a Christian background before receiving Holy Communion. Another response was to invite others to the table if

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[26] Interview with a member of Bethlehem AME Church, Langhorne, PA., Interviewee 2, 12/12/23. Interview conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney. ("All interviews were confidential, the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.").

[27] "Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10: 9 NRSV.

they believe they should come, but the congregant was sure to stipulate that one should not come to the table unworthy; they must repent of their sins and be in love and charity with their neighbor. A few congregants thought that the Lord's table should be opened to all, regardless of their belief and where they are in their Christian journey, and that there is a "lot of pretense, which keeps people away, even from the church." [28]

However, most answers were based on "personal salvation," which was significant in determining if one should be invited to the Lord's table. The struggle for the congregants to invite others appeared centered around their worthiness, ensuring that they would be careful in who they bring to the Lord's table because they felt their responsibility was to ensure that those who come to the table come with a repenting heart. There is a fear of jeopardizing their salvation, that somehow, they would be punished and or cause the premature death of someone who might come to the table in an unworthy manner. With this thought of personal salvation leading the decision of who to invite or who not to invite, it is evident that remnants of white Christian evangelism's exclusionary practices show up in the Black Protestant church. Unfortunately, personal spirituality and religious piety do not see humanity first but place a condition on invitation to the Lord's Table. This is at odds with what Jesus demonstrated in the Gospel of Luke. All of his disciples were at the table, the betrayer, Judas, the denier, Peter, and the doubter, Thomas. Jesus dines with them, "Then he took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in

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[28] Interview with a member of Bethlehem AME Church, Langhorne, PA, Interviewee 5, 12/19/2023, Interviewed by Jacqueline Pinkney, ("All interviews were confidential, the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.").

remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."[29]

Themba E. Ngcobo, in "The Holy Communion and African Rituals: An Encounter between African Religion and Christianity," argues that the spiritual world is not necessarily divorced from the physical world in the African lifestyle. African religious rituals connect the spiritual world, that of the ancestors, and the physical world, that of the living. There is no distance between the deceased, which he writes is the living-dead, and the living, in terms of time and space, are shared between the two. Ngcogo compares this to Christian rituals, primarily centered around Holy Communion, and points to the human connections that Christians connect in fellowship as well as to the transcendent. He goes on to write that Africans and Christians can agree that there is a relationship between the individual and the transcendent. Africans' connection to the spiritual is that individual relationships are created between the ancestors and the Creator at birth, and Christians believe God knows individuals even before they were conceived. God knitted them in their mother's womb, based upon Christian biblical scripture.[30] Therefore, Ngcobo's analogy is that God and the ancestors are actively involved in an individual's life up to eternity, as well as the community.[31] Family, neighbors and a village are integral to the individual's life. The individual is also expected to maintain and build on relationships through participating in rituals and fellowship. Yet, Ngcobo points out that

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[29] Luke 22:19-20 NRSV

[30] Psalm 139 & Jeremiah 1:5 NRSV

[31] Themba E. Ngcobo, "The Holy Communion and African Rituals: An Encounter Between African Religion and Christianity," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (2020): 1, African Journals Online (AJOL), https://www.ajol.info/index.php/hts/article/view/212609.

in most Christian denominations, exclusivity is emphasized when celebrating Holy Communion.[32] The reason for this, the author believes, stems from the interpretation of the letter to the early church in Corinth found in 1 Corinthians 11.

The letter to the Corinthian church addresses the misuse of Holy Communion, or we should say, here, the Lord's Supper. The Apostle Paul condemns the church in Corinth for separating the agape[33] meal from the marginalized, using the gathering as a reason to become drunk, and not sharing the meal with the poor. In the letter, Paul criticizes the early church, saying that they are to examine themselves before participating to ensure that their actions reflect Christ. The letter is addressed to the entire church body, not an individual. Ngcobo argues, "During Holy Communion, there is more emphasis on individualistic introspection, which is perhaps more a reflection of Western individualism than the Middle Eastern (Jewish) or African inclusivity."[34] Instead, the church interprets the letter as a moral issue, and with that, the agape meal and Eucharist were separated.

Nigel Scotland writes in *The New Passover, Rethinking the Lord's Supper for Today*, that most of the Christian congregation held their Eucharist within a meal until the close of the second century CE. The reason suggested by Jungmann is that the separation of the meal and Eucharist was because of the increase in the number of converts, and there were too many to eat the meal. Christianity had become the privileged religion of

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Gerasimos Santas, "Plato's Theory of Eros in the Symposium: Abstract." *Noûs* 13, no. 1 (1979), 65. Ancient Greek, three words are used to describe the word "love." "*Eros*" is used in describing the case of romantic or sexual love. "*Phila*" is used in describing the case of familial love and friendship, a brotherly and sisterly love. The word for love from the language in the New Testament was originally written (Koine Greek) is "*Agape*." Agape is the highest form of love and is intentional and self-giving rather than emotional and self-centered. Agape is committed action on behalf of the other. https://doi.org/10.2307/2214796.

[34] Ibid.

the Empire. The consequential conversion of Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, marked the end of the agape meals in the fourth century CE.With this shift in significance, Christians were encouraged to erect large buildings in which to worship because Christians no longer had to worship covertly. Meals were served in public spaces, but some feared that some members got out of hand at the meals, which did not fit Christian standards of decorum. This came about because Roman authorities were concerned that the social gatherings of the Christians could turn into some kind of rebellion against authority. There was a change of focus, with the growing concern between the entertainment and lack of solemnity of the Eucharist.

Scotland further states that the Council of Carthage, in 397 CE, authorizes any bishop or clergy to hold a love feast in a public church building. During the Middle Ages, the eucharist moved away from the meal and soon separated. The burgeoning institution of the Christian (Catholic) church would center itself around issues of morality to control Christians from turning to rebellion and adhering to the authority of the Roman Empire. Congregants who were considered to be immoral were not allowed to take part in the eucharist set by the church during the thirteenth century, they were often not regarded as holy enough to participate. Later, there was the Reformation period between 1517 and 1648, in which Protestants returned to eating and drinking in remembrance of Jesus to the people. But the shared meal did not return due to the majority of Protestant churches following John Calvin's theology, which believed that the Lord's Supper was

sacred and should be separated from the profane.[35] Calvin's view of 1 Corinthians 11 was that Paul rejects the meal, as it was practiced by the church in Corinth, it perpetuated class disparities. Calvin, on the other hand, sees the meal as adding to the profane mixture, which suggests that there is common folk, not holy enough, coming to the table. Scotland argues that Calvin, with other reformers, interpreted the text in a way that separated the "sacred" the Lord's Supper from what he considered to be profane, namely the meal. I agree with Scotland that Paul was not condemning the meal but condemning how the Corinthians participated, of not eating together and their contempt for providing food for the poor.[36]

A question asked during a conversation among pastors was if members were to be baptized before receiving Holy Communion, and/or members were to have received salvation before receiving Holy Communion. Although children are welcomed at the Lord's Table in the AME denomination, the influence of exclusionary, white, evangelical thought is unintentionally present, setting an agenda as to who should be invited or welcomed at the Lord's Table. A pastor shared a story with me of one of the elderly women in his church who would not accept communion because one of the women who were kneeling to receive communion was a prostitute. The prostitute lived in the community, and the community knew her name. The pastor begged the elderly woman to come and join the table. The elderly woman did not. The prostitute was welcome at the Lord's Table in the eyes of the church, but not in the eyes of the elder congregant. This

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[35] Scotland Nigel, *The New Passover: Rethinking the Lord's Supper for Today* (Cascade Books: 2016), 29.
[36] Ibid.

example again demonstrates the variety of theological viewpoints vis-á-vis who is worthy to participate in the Lord''s Supper that we encounter in the modern Black church. Despite the ubiquity of this sacrament in the AME church, not all congregations or congregants agree on how the ritual should be practiced or on who should be allowed to participate.

There are often voices from the pulpit to the congregation to invite someone to church. The voices echo, "Tell them about the love of Jesus!" "Invite someone to church!" How does inviting someone to church not equal inviting them to share in the Lord's Supper? Is this not too sharing the love of Jesus? The exclusivity of Holy Communion sends an oppressive signal that all are not invited, which goes against Jesus' institution of this ritual when he says simply, "Do this in remembrance of me."[37] Black folk, especially in the South, from my experience, strongly believed in attending Holy Communion. Therefore, could it be that the gathering of the Black community at the Lord's Table was not just about the bread and wine or the liturgy itself that they heard around the table but about remembering freedom and connecting with those who like themselves, were subjected to hatred and the threat of being lynched? James H. Cone, who was ordained as an itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, writes, "Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.[38] Just as the

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[37] Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24 NRSV

[38] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* (Orbis Books, 2011), 158. James Cone, in The Cross and the Lynching Tree, identifies Jesus, theologically, as the "first lynchee" who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. From Cones' perspective, Jesus is crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America. Therefore, Cone exclaims that the lynching tree is the cross in America. Cones' theological critique of the cross expresses that Jesus suffering and punishment under the Roman Empire is as blacks suffered in the United States. There is a similarity between the brutality of Rome and cruelty in America.

enslaved would hear the white preacher say for them to be submissive to their master, they refused to internalize that they were not worthy of freedom, creating sacred spaces for the community that embraced their full humanity. They understood Christ identified with the oppressed. Christ identified with the sufferings of those who were forced to live under unjust Jim Crow laws. So, on the first Sundays, sharecroppers took off their dungarees and put on their Sunday suits and dresses to share in a meal. They were invited to remember, reflect, and rejoice around the Lord's Table's beautiful and intimate setting. In this way, the Lord's Supper provided an escape form the profane indignities of daily life, and offered a chance to experience the transcendent in the company of those who intimately understood the struggle of their neighbors, because they too were subjected to the same indignities that awaited them outside the sacred walls of the church. It is this marriage of the sacred and the profane that I am suggesting we return to in this modern era-the sacrament of Holy Communion can be both communal (profane) and can explicitly acknowledge the systemic injustices that Black folks face, while at the same time creating a transcendent (sacred) space in which we can commune with God and with each other regardless of class, occupation, or salvation history, for a time letting go of the woes of this early realm.

The Black Protestant church must return to inviting the marginalized and oppressed to the Table to participate alongside the community as the representation of Christ. Generations are missing, and the *koinonia* (communion) is lost. On special days, like church anniversaries or family and friends day, the Black church often fellowship with a dinner after a worship celebration. The fellowship is usually spirited and lively,

with many prepared food dishes from the Black culture. Friends and family members are invited to join in the celebration regardless of whether they are members of the congregation or even churchgoers. The kitchen committee does detailed planning around the decoration and color scheme, and everyone cannot wait to sit down and feast on the delicious meal. Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper do not hold this sense of excitement. Although Holy Communion Sunday is a sacred moment, it is not met with the same joy to invite others as a fellowship moment would. The practice unintentionally separates friends and family from the sacred, whereas Jesus included his family of disciples, with all of their flaws to the Table.[39] Yet there is a concern if someone is saved or if someone is holy enough to be served the sacred sacrament at the Lord's Table. What would it look like if the tables where we sat with the community were all considered sacred? Do we not invite God's blessing upon the food before we partake?

Do you remember the first time you received Holy Communion? Did a Family Member Bring You to the Lord's Table? How old were you?

When asked about inviting others to the table, one of the seasoned saints immediately responds that her children last attended Holy Communion quite a while ago. For this member, the presence of children at the Table is relevant. She remembers from her youth that Baptist church members in her neighborhood invited the children in the community to the Table. Those receiving communion would show the children how to conduct themselves during Holy Communion and explain why they ate the crackers and drank the juice. There was a joy in her voice as she shared her story as a child,

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[39] Luke 22:7-34, Matthew 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25 NRSV

participating in Holy Communion, along with approximately, from her memory, fifty other children who were from the neighborhoods adjacent to the Baptist church. Then her voice softens, saying, "We are not listening; we are not listening to Jesus today."[40] She ends her conversation by saying, "Our people will not come to communion today."[41] Another parishioner was reminded of her childhood, of all the children in the church coming together at the Table. She says her mother was a stewardess, and when there was leftover grape juice, they would make Kool-Aid. Both members shared how the ritual included and saw them, even in their youth, as part of the community. I was reminded of a church where I served as a minister on staff. The church van picked up children in the neighborhood, nurtured, and cared for them. The children were valuable community members and were to be treated as such. The children were brought to Sunday school, sang in the youth choir, and when the Lord's Supper was served, the children participated in the ritual of Holy Communion.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes clarifies the importance of the Black Church in the life of black children in America. Gilkes informs that the Black church, from its beginnings, serves as an agency of socialization, writing, "Because of the pervasive problem of racial oppression and its destructiveness of black children, the church also participates in the constant struggle to establish the humanity of black children and to forge an inclusive future for them."[42] But also with further exclamation she writes, "the central emergency

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[40] Interview with a member of Bethlehem AME Church, Langhorne, PA., Interviewee 4, 12/19/2023. Interview conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney. ("All interview were confidential, the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.").

[41] Ibid.

[42] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Black Church and Children," in *Children and Childhood in American Religions,* ed. Don S. Browning and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Rutgers University Press, 2009) 87.

facing the church has been the reclamation and redemption of stolen and destroyed childhoods."[43] This is critical to understanding the importance of a liturgy that speaks to past trauma and empowers hope for the future. Black bodies must be affirmed. Black bodies must be allowed to be made whole.

Intentionally creating a space around Holy Communion acknowledges that broken Black bodies are present and removes the Western Christian evangelical thought of individualism. To continue that struggle of affirming young black bodies, the Black church must ensure that our languages and liturgies uplift black children and continue to establish the humanity of black children. Affirming all black bodies around the Communion Table is needed when we consider the broader social context in which black bodies are still subjected to racialize oppression and gun violence, just to name a few of the present social issues facing the black community. We live in a society where stolen and destroyed childhoods are yearning to be made whole; thus, the Holy Communion Table offers healing and affirmation to those who continue to experience racial oppression and violence.

Those who are missing from the Lord's Table are the victimized bodies, the marginalized bodies that white Christian evangelicals have determined are unworthy to come to the Lord's Table. The question again, "Should we, as Christians, invite others to the Lord's Table," from the perspective of another parishioner, answers this question with a passionate "Yes," indicating that non-believers should be welcomed as well because Jesus did not exclude them. This parishioner, influenced by the "Summary of the

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[43] Ibid.

Decalogue," which is recited in ours and many other AME worship services every Sunday, could see the other at the table, even if the other may not follow their faith, believe in their faith, or even have a faith.[44] A young parishioner notes that inclusivity is severely lacking and that the bare minimum the church can do is to be warm and welcoming. Both parishioners might not have understood what they did by including those without faith and those with faith, but their response equates with the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is a Zulu greeting, "Sawu Bona" is translated, "I see you," and the response is "Sikhona," meaning, "I am here," suggesting that "until you see me, I do not exist."[45] According to Ngcobo, Ubuntu relates to the understanding and importance of being a human being; that is, human beings find their sense of being through being part of the community. He expresses that Jesus, when faced with an ethical dilemma of feeding the five thousand, in which his disciples ask Jesus to chase them away, Jesus applies the principle of Ubuntu.[46] Jesus understood the vital role of humanness. The Black Protestant church, centering itself around the philosophy of Ubuntu, with the joining of Holy Communion, allows the church to see the other entirely, removing patriarchy and white Christian ideologies around piety and individualism and opening up the table to invite others. The author expounds more on the Ubuntu philosophy that it is not only relatives and family invited to participate in a ritual or ceremony but the whole

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[44] Summary of the Decalogue in *The African Methodist Episcopal Church Book of Worship,2021,:* "He said to him, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You all love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40). 642.

[45] Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, & Dori Grinenko Baker, *Another Way Living and Leading Change on Purpose*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2020). Chap. 1 Kindle

[46] Matthew 14:31-21 NRSV

community is invited. All are welcome. The sharing of the meal allows and makes human relationships strong.[47]

Read the Prayer of Humble Access/Prayer of Humiliation. Can You Relate to this Prayer?

I asked the participants to read the Prayer of Humble Access, or the Prayer of Humiliation, as it is titled in the Book of Worship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Again, I must say that this prayer is one of the church's most passionate and well-loved prayers. The most significant and troubling line reads, "We are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy." [48]To me, this line means to come to the Lord's Table in a humble posture, but on the other hand, it has also perpetuated (white) Western Christian notions of "unworthiness" that persist to this day. So, while I love this prayer, this particular portion of the prayer requires deeper examination and nuance, as I have done above and will continue to do throughout this project.

The majority of those interviewed found this prayer to be very relatable. Members identify that they are not worthy to gather the crumbs because of their sinful souls and bodies and identify with this as God giving mercy, and all of their righteousness is filthy

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[47] Themba E. Ngcobo, "The Holy Communion and African Rituals: An Encounter Between African Religion and Christianity" in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no.3, (2020), 5. African Journals Online (AJOL).

[48] "Prayer of Humiliation" in *The Book of Worship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*: Digital Edition, "We do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood that our sinful souls and bodies may be made clean by his death and washed through his blood, and that we may ever dwell in him and he in us. Amen."

before God. Some equate this prayer with confessing their sins before taking communion and coming to the table without guilt. A member admits that he has been listening to this prayer all his life and agrees that mercy comes from it, but we might lose a younger person who hears it. One young member expresses that he cannot relate to the prayer. His reaction is if one tells me that I am a child of God, then when I am here, I am unworthy. For this member, the prayer presents an oxymoron. He understands the humbleness within the prayer, reminding us of our fragility. Not being worthy to gather crumbs under the table made him feel, in his words, "quite small."[49] Another member understands the concept behind the prayer of humiliation, and for him as well, the prayer speaks of the mercy of God but addresses that the prayer needs to be updated for a modern audience.

Do You Believe that Holy Communion Can Bring Reconciliation to Broken Churches and Communities?

A question similar to the invite was asked this way, "Do you believe that Holy Communion can bring reconciliation to broken churches and communities?" With this question, most participants took time to think about their answers. The majority struggled with an answer. The answer would involve not seeing the Holy Communion as personal but contemplating more about what "communion" means. Some members answered that it is possible that Holy Communion can bring reconciliation. However, they insisted that people accept the Lord and receive Jesus, for all should be on one accord. For one

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[49] Interview with a member of Bethlehem AME, Langhorne, PA., Interviewee 2, 12/12/23, Interviewed conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney. ("All interviews were confidential, the names of interviewers are withheld by mutual agreement.").

member, this question brought up past church hurt. My work here is not to force any individuals to relive their trauma, but I recognize and honor the pain of this member. Her response to this question is, "I, too, am a vessel that was marred in the potter's hand, but he deemed me good and worthy. Others just like me have been torn apart by the church."[50] Like with other members, she struggled with the question, but she was able to identify with whom the church may be deemed "unworthy" to come to the Lord's table, for she had been deemed unworthy, and in this honesty, and a safe space created, she expressed that she is still seeking healing, even as she participates in Holy Communion, gathered in community, there is no permission granted for her to express this. This brings to the attention the critical importance of creating liturgy on behalf of the people whom the church serves.

What Do you Enjoy Most about Receiving this Sacrament (The Holy Communion/ Lord's Supper)?

The responses to this question brought most members great joy and excitement. One response mentions a sense of community, where the Holy Communion brings the church to the community. A response offered that this act allows the community to take a break and restore from trauma and grief, which helps us to keep peace. Other responses from members were more personal. One says that receiving the sacraments is remembering what Jesus has done for all of us and that Jesus has a spot just for him. Another responded that she feels Jesus at the table right with her when she receives the

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[50] Interview with a member of Bethlehem AME Church, Langhorne, PA., Interviewee 1, 12/12/23. Interviewed conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney. ("All interviews were confidential, the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.").

sacrament. She is always excited to get to the table and hangs on to every word of the Holy Communion. For another, it was more about culture and tradition in receiving the sacrament. This simple response from a member, "I enjoy most being able to receive it (the sacrament)," points to an individual knowing they belong and are accepted to the Lord's Table.[51]

Even still, there are empty spaces at the Lord's Table—spaces that have been empty for a long time, missing connections between broken bodies that seek to heal and bodies that prevent that healing because of (white) Western Christian practices that exclude instead of offering an inclusive and open table. The members of this local congregation offered their best and most honest responses to the questions asked and outlined above. When asked, specifically, if one should invite others to the Lord's Table, it is clear of the influence of Western Christianity and the embedded aspects of white supremacy that seem to have unintentionally remained in a local Black Protestant church.

I asked the congregation to invite others to the table on the first Sunday, Holy Communion Sunday, March 2024. One member invited his mother and brother to the Lord's Table. Another member invited her daughter. A child was present, but the adults did not include her at the table. This was a little unsettling, but there was still joy knowing that these questions piqued congregants' minds and allowed them the space to see and ask others to join them in receiving this meal of grace. From this simple task, the congregation intentionally invited others to the table, not asking if that person is saved,

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[51] Interview with a member of of Bethlehem AME Church, Langhorne, PA., Interviewee 7, April 5, 2024, Interviewed conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney, ("All interviews were confidential, the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.").

but instead just seeing one as human, and therefore worthy of inclusion. It will take time, but this small congregation is open to inviting others to the Lord's Table, capturing the spirit and energy of Jesus' words in Luke's gospel, "*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,"*[52] and for that, I am grateful.

[52] Luke 14:13 NRSV.

CHAPTER TWO

LITURGY AND TRAUMA

What is remembered in the black community?

"I, too, am a vessel that was marred in the potter's hand." [1]

At an AME 2023 post-planning conference held in Philadelphia, a workshop was presented on the importance of celebrating Holy Communion. When the Prayer of Humble Access/Prayer of Humiliation, "We are not worthy to gather the crumbs," was read in the presence of over one hundred attendees, the majority exclaimed with passion, showing how much this particular phrase serves as a communal memory. But what specific and emotionally laden memories does this phrase elicit for the black community? Surely, the suffering of Christ and the reconciliation with God are elicited in the communal mind. But what of the reconciliation of a community that has been traumatized by police brutality and the impact of the COVID pandemic, sexual and domestic abuse, and the havoc of white supremacy? For many in the AME setting, these words have been assumed to be comforting, but I wonder what if and how these words might be negatively impacting those who have experienced trauma and victimization. What do these words hold for them? For me, my body tenses when I hear these words. I recognize my trauma associated with these words, having experienced domestic violence while serving as an associate pastor in the church and staying silent before the congregation due to fear and the patriarchal system of the church. I would imagine that I

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[1]Interview with a member of Bethlehem AME Church, Langhorne, PA., Interviewee 1, 12/12/23. Interviewed conducted by Jacqueline Pinkney ("All interviews were confidential, the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.").

might not have been the only person experiencing domestic violence and keeping this traumatic experience hidden from my faith community. The church should be a safe haven for the oppressed and the marginalized. Still, the social stigma around domestic violence and other "personal" or "family" issues have seeped into the institutional hierarchy and culture of the church, pushing people to remain silent for fear of not being believed or of not being worthy of help. In reflecting on the sacred space of the Communion Table, I ask, do we recognize the whole body (of the church) at the table? Certain bodies and experiences seem to receive preferential treatment, which is antithetical to the communal sacrament of communion.

The purpose of this chapter is to help the AME church and other mainline denominational black churches recognize that trauma exists in our community and to be critical of liturgical language that can cause harm to the body when the church is unaware, for the church is also called to discern the body. This, of course, is not for the church to snoop to uncover individual stories that can be distorted but instead to imagine that collective healing must occur in marginalized communities. Communities that have experienced violence and have lost loved ones are struggling to find ways to survive. The church where I pastor grieves the loss of church members due to their children and grandchildren moving out of the community to find jobs. The church itself, the *ecclesia*, experiences trauma. The empty pews, the lost generations, the financial hardships, and the struggle to keep old sanctuaries afloat can be traumatizing.

Literary Trauma Theory

Literary Trauma was popularized at Yale University in the 1990s by such theorists as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Shoshanna Felman, deconstructs the theorization of trauma. Their theory explored the traces of traumatic memory embedded within literature and testimony and how the narration of trauma might aid in recovery.[2] Literary trauma theory enables scholars to use a theoretical framework to understand the historical context and the psychological impact of traumatic events ingrained within narratives. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette define literary trauma theory as being "concerned with the ways that trauma may be encoded within texts, on the ways that texts may function in witnessing to trauma, and on the ways that texts may facilitate recovery and resilience." [3] Literary trauma theory once only focused on individual trauma narratives as a means to recovery, but the field has expanded to include neurobiological understandings of communal trauma, communal memory, intergenerational trauma, and their narrative representations.

The work of Cathy Caruth in earlier literary trauma theory and other's foundational claim was that language was incapable of capturing the truth of traumatic events. Elizabeth Siegelman writes that, in this case, traumatic memories are "unspeakable" because words inevitably fail to recreate or represent the traumatic event.[4] Siegelman responds that for Caruth and others, the traumatic experiences ignore knowledge and attempt to represent traumatic experiences within literature or narrative as

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[2] Elizabeth Sigelman , "Literary Trauma Theory from the 1990's to Present: From: "Unspeakable " to "Speakable" in *Interdisciplinary Comprehensive* (Drew University, 2018), 1.
[3] Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frichette, eds. "Defining 'Trauma' as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (SBL Press: 2016), 10.
[4] Elizabeth Sigelman, "Literary Trauma Theory", 3.

referential or symbolic at best, and in agreement with Siegelman, the use of language through art and literature serves as representation and are key to the treatment of and recovery from trauma.

According to Siegelman's study, another literary theorist, Geoffrey Hartman, takes an ethical and clinical approach to the relationship between words and trauma, viewing literature as a way to read the wound.[5] Hartman's view of embedded trauma in literature considers the political, cultural, and religious implications. Similar to Caruth, Hartman believes that figurative language can possibly access traumatic knowledge but not fully capture the experience or representation without distorting the traumatic event.[6] In agreement with Hartman, literature can inform trauma culturally, but I must disagree that the experience of the traumatic event cannot be captured fully because of trauma that is passed generationally, even if the event is from centuries ago, i.e., Slavery, Jim Crow, and the Holocaust. If literary trauma theory is to be understood through a narrative, then who controls this narrative, and how is the traumatic experience of others represented?

Trauma Theory and Liturgy

Serene Jones presented the definition of trauma from the ancient Greek word, τραῦμα, meaning a "wound" or "an injury" inflicted upon the body by an act of "violence." [7] In the second edition of her work, Trauma & Grace, she expounds that this Greek definition of trauma focuses primarily on physical wounds. Still, in her trauma

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[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Serene Jones, *Trauma & Grace, Theology in a Ruptured World*, Second Edition, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 12.

studies, it is realized that trauma also extends its application to the minds and emotions, focusing on the effects of violence and how this manifests itself in our psyches. Although this kind of wound is internal and might not manifest itself where it is always visible, like a physical wound, this trauma nonetheless is damaging.[8] Caruth's understanding of trauma as "… much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language." [9]

Extreme trauma, such as that which stems from atrocities such as slavery, can be defined through a clinical diagnosis as post-traumatic stress disorder.[10] Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) came into use as a clinical diagnosis in the 1970s. It was recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Orders in DMS-III in 1980. The DSM-lll originally defined PTSD as an anxiety disorder. Since that time, there have been different approaches to the classification of PTSD, with additions made to the APA classification in the DMS-V (2013) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in ICD-II in 2018. In the DMS-V classification, PTSD was relocated from the anxiety disorders category to a new diagnostic category titled "Trauma and Stressor-related Disorders." [11]

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[8] Ibid., 12.

[9] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction: The Wound and the Voice," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (John Hopkins Press, 1996), 4.

[10] The American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III, (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1980), 236-9.

[11] American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed., (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 265.

According to Lange's definition, trauma theory can reveal how we approach meaning in history. Lange believes that trauma theory plays a role in the repetitive ritual action that is called liturgy.[12] Again, the question becomes, what does the community remember within the repetitive nature of the words they speak, especially within the African American community, where the ideology of white supremacy believes that white people are better than non-white persons and that non-white persons are inferior.[13] Although, using Lange's thought around a description of trauma theory, in this paper, there cannot be a medical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder applied to the entirety of the African American community, but it can be stated that Black folks have endured trauma that is embedded in our history, stories, art, and our very bodies.

Black bodies endured violence in slavery and continue to endure violence within America's culture of white supremacy, what Kelly Brown Douglas refers to as an "inevitable reality of collective trauma."[14] The 2015 killing of nine Black people from Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, shows the influence of white supremacy and yet in this tragedy, through this traumatic experience, the love by Black Americans, the individual families that experienced this hideous crime, offered forgiveness to the white young man, who showed no remorse for his brutal actions.[15] This forgiveness was such a beautiful act, and also a sincere one extended towards a white supremacist who deems

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[12] Dirk G. Lange, "Trauma and Liturgy: A Disruption of Ritual," in *Liturgical Ministry* 17.3 (2008): 127-132

[13] Kelly Brown Douglas, introduction in *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World 2nd Edition*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 7.

[14] Ibid., 8.

[15] United States. White House (Producer), &. (,2015-06-18), "President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Shooting in South Carolina." (Video/DVD) United States. White House. Retrieved from https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/president-obama-delivers-a-statement-on-the-shooting-in-south-carolina

Black folks to be inferior.[16] But the trauma of this moment lies not only with the loving people of Emanuel AME in Charleston, SC but with Black churches across the United States, who, in response to this vicious hate crime, began to watch who came in and out of their doors, spending money on security systems, learning safety drills, wondering and praying if their church would be next. Black churches experienced a collective trauma as a result of this heinous crime. And the hypervigilance required to keep their congregants safe, is, unfortunately, counterintuitive to what I am suggesting, opening up the Table.

Bethlehem AME Church experienced a sense of collective trauma on a cold Sunday morning in February 2024, Black History Month, when two young white men entered our worship service. They sat in the middle row of the church. One member sat in the back. The dynamics that played out on that Sunday morning with one member sitting in the back row were intentional, but it was also an unspoken rule that someone needed to be in place just in case trouble happened. The congregation welcomed the two young white men, but tension could be felt among the congregation, who smiled and praised God in their anxiety. Even nine years after the Charleston massacre, I wondered if it could happen again. At the end of our worship service, the young men introduced themselves as students from the university close by. They were visiting us because it was Black History Month, and they were interested in the history of our church. Given America's culture and history, this act of inquisitiveness on the part of the young, white male students sent my mind to the worst-case scenario, causing stress to both myself and my congregation.

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[16] Andre Johnson and Earle J. Fisher, "But I Forgive You?" "Mother Emmanuel Black Pain and Rhetoric of Forgiveness" in *Journal of Communication and Religion,* Vol 42 No. 1 Spring 2019, 6-7.

The imagery of "not being worthy enough even to gather crumbs from your table" can be traumatizing, mentally and emotionally, to those who have experienced violence, such as rape, domestic abuse, and discrimination in the intersections of the Black, queer community. This is the challenge of the Black Protestant Church: to critically examine the liturgy we inherited many centuries ago and determine if it truly speaks to this century's context and still works on behalf of the people who receive and participate in it. Jones, who is white and writes on the impact of white supremacy on both the Black and white community, says it perfectly, "If the church's message about God's love for the world is to be offered to those who suffer these wounds, then we must think anew about how we use language and how we put bodies in motion and employ imagery and sound."[17] Violence is manifested in people's memories. People can verbalize it at times, and at other times, they cannot. Violence holds space; it dictates how we move in the world and even how we move in our own sacred spaces, as mentioned above. The act of being or feeling "not worthy" can be experienced as both traumatizing and violent.

A.L. van Ommen uses a pastoral view when discussing trauma theory. Ommen argues liturgy has a dynamic, active ethical relation to the world. This means that the relational nature of God and humankind made in God's image makes an ethical claim on liturgy to relate to the world in its suffering and that tradition and traditional liturgies should come to life anew in response to the events and the people to which they minister.[18] This becomes clear when celebrating the Holy Communion, where suffering

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[17] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 11.

[18] A.L. van Ommen, "Theories of Pastoral Care, Remembrance and Reconciliation" in *Trauma and Lived Religion, Transcending the Ordinary*, (Palgrave Studies, 2019), 207.

is remembered, and resurrection is hoped for.[19] The awareness of the community that is present within the AME context is also to have an awareness of a community that has been traumatized and to recognize that trauma, and its afterlives, presently exists and impacts the community.

Black folks, through slavery and even to the present, have learned how to manage pain in all its forms: physical, psychic, spiritual, and emotional. My view on this is that I grew up in the South and am very aware of not showing vulnerability. Vulnerability might indicate resistance to the status quo, which would indicate that one is human and therefore vulnerable to the abuses of power that existed both then and now in the South. Therefore, instead, emotions of hurt and pain were stifled. I remember so vividly when my mother responded to a young white girl, very close to my age, with "mam." My mother did this out of survival, and with that came stress. So, I am very much in agreement with Ommen's statement that "trying to be invulnerable to pain is a defense mechanism which is not healthy."[20] Therefore, Ommen points out that liturgy that does not attend to suffering is not true to its deepest self, and suffering is at the core of liturgy and central to the Eucharist, the elements of Jesus' body and blood.

Liturgy in the Black Church has always created space for a marginalized community through the preaching of the Gospel, the singing of hymns, and the many social organizations that come out of the Black Church, such as youth groups, women missionary societies, Sunday School organizations, men's groups, etc. Such organizations

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[19] Ibid., 211.
[20] A. L. Van Ommen, "Theories of Pastoral Care," 208.

are wonderful and can offer places of acceptance and care, but they can also be exclusive. Therefore, the Holy Communion, open to all, serves as a prominent place for healing, reconciliation, and transforming traumatized lives. However, it is noted that the church has also inflicted trauma; it is still critical that the church community play a vital role in healing the community, as the church recognizes its participation in inflicting and perpetuating trauma, as this is what the Christian church has been called to do by the God in which it worships.[21]

In its opening prologue, *The Body Keeps Score, Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D. argues that human beings are a resilient species, yet traumatic experiences leave traces, whether it is within history or culture, or our individual families, these traces can be passed down through generations. Even leaving traumatic traces in minds and affecting the capacity for joy and intimacy, as well as biology and immune systems. Van der Kolk describes trauma as unbearable and intolerable.[22] Black folks have always creatively found ways to survive unbearable and intolerable trauma in our lives through the expression of art that transforms something unbearable into something sacred and holy. We have created dances around trauma, such as that which is gracefully choreographed in Alvin Ailey's dance ensemble, "Revelation,"

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[21] Ibid., 218.

[22] Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score, Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015), 1.

which shows the grief and joy in the negro spirituals.[23] The art of poetry, as in the poem "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, forces a pretense of joy by hiding behind a smile while being aware of the trauma within.[24] Each generation has discovered ways to carry the burden of trauma inflicted by white supremacy. Kendrick Lamar's song "Allright" became a mantra in the summer of 2015 by Black Lives Matter activists protesting police brutality. The song became a song of hope and a look towards a brighter future. Just as the black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and "We Shall Overcome," some believed that this song could be the new "black national anthem."[25] In the lyrics of Lamar's hip-hop song, there is a vibration of unbearable and intolerable trauma that is collective. The lyrics delve into what collective trauma looks like and is experienced within Black America and describe the collective impulse to escape from such trauma. Lamar writes,

"Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
Nigga, when our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"

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[23] Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture, (*Oxford University Press, 2004) 2. Alvin Ailey's Revelation Alvin Ailey (1931-1989), Black American choreographer, created a body of dance worlds that shaped African American participation in American modern dance. He founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958. Ailey premiered *Revelations*, January 31, 1960. Ailey's program note at the Kaufmann Concert Hall YM-YWHA, describes the performance: "The suite explores motivations and emotions of Negro religious music which, like its heir, the Blues, takes many forms, "true spirituals" with their sustained melodies, ring shouts, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues - songs of trouble, of love, of deliverance."

[24] Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," in *Lyrics of Lowly* (First published in 1896), "We wear the mask of grins and lies it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes. This debt we pay to human guile with torn and bleeding hearts we smile and mouth to myriad subtleties. Why should the world be over-wise, in counting all our tears and cries. Nay, let them only see while we wear the mask. We smile but O, great Christ our cries to thee from tortured souls arise. We sing but oh the clay is vile beneath our feet and long the mile. But let the world dream otherwise. We wear the mask!" (Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature, 2022).

[25]Kendrick Lamar, "Allright" Genius. Accessed February 4, 2025. https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-alright-lyrics

Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo' sho
Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright"

"Nigga, we gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
We gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
Huh? We gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright[26]

The lyrics present a call-and-response. The call is to the struggle and pain; the response is the resilience to escape it. In this collective trauma, white supremacy sought to control the narrative of the hurt when the Fox Network anchor, Geraldo Rivera, indicated that hip-hop, pointing directly to the lyrics of this song, has done more damage to young African Americans than racism.[27] In Rivera's statement, he demonstrates how white supremacy continues to discount the hurt and pain experienced by Black Americans and discounts even their humanity to so much as express what Black Americans' hurt and pain should look and sound like to comfort white conscience.

True, there is a resiliency of Black people that may interpret to others that Black people can get over situations and devastations quickly. This resilience, bell hooks contends, has often deflected attention away from the legacy of psychological

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[26] Kendrick Lamar "Allright," *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Top Dog Entertainment, 2015.
[27] Kendrick Lamar, "Allright" Genius. Accessed February 4, 2025. https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-alright-lyrics

woundedness that the experiences of enslavement generated. In agreement with hooks, that in the past, and I believe even in the present, leaders of the Black church have preached for the triumph over the evil of slavery and racism, and so there has been little talk "psychoanalytically about the post-traumatic stress and negative scars on the psyche." [28] Black bodies continue to experience the daily trauma(s) of systemic injustice practices, such as lack of affordable housing and unfair funding within the public-school system. It is still that Black bodies put on the mask and smile through the trauma of it all. Black bodies experiencing trauma come to the Holy Communion table broken and dismembered and recite that they (we) are not even so much worthy to gather the crumbs from the Lord's table. I am not sure if this plays only in my psyche and presents itself as traumatic, but maybe the question should be explicitly asked: "Do those present at the table of the Body of Christ come bearing the scars of white supremacy?" And from the answers to this question, I content that we as a church reevaluate the words of our liturgy through the lens of literary trauma theory in order to determine if what is said heals the body brutalized by white supremacy or perpetuates white supremacist ideologies or worthiness/unworthiness.

Therapist and licensed clinical social worker Resmaa Menakem refers to the systemic racism embedded in American culture as "white-body supremacy." Menakem argues that white-body supremacy is a part of the operating system and organizing structure of American culture; it functions without our awareness, in the background of our institutions, as well as within our interpersonal relationships and interactions. White-

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[28] bell hooks, *Salvation Black People and Love* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 97.

body supremacy influences the decisions that we make, the options we select, and how we make decisions. It is an operating system that affects all of us, not only people of color.[29] Menakem further points out that white-body supremacy is not only thinking in our brains but that it lives and breathes in our bodies.[30] Our bodies hold stories. As Menakem describes, our bodies house the unhealed dissonance and trauma of our ancestors. These stories are hard to express with words but are expressed through the tenseness or numbness of our bodies, and in the Black church, those stories are sometimes expressed through shouts, tears, and dance. Black stories of struggle are expressed during the "altar call" when congregants gather to pray for themselves and others, with sounds of indescribable moaning or even silence, with those not leaving the space until they believe they have had an encounter with God.[31] Menakem says that to end the status quo of white-body supremacy, we must begin with our bodies.[32]

Trauma through the lens of Biblical Interpretation

The Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) created the program unit, "Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma, " researching ways the concept of trauma was being defined and presented in biblical interpretation. The organizers focused on

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[29] Resmaa Menakem, introduction "Our Bodies, Our Country," in *My Grandmother's Hands Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, (Central Recovery Press, 2017), 17-19.
[30] Resmaa Menakem, "Your Body and Blood," in *My Grandmother's Hands Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, (Central Recovery Press, 2017), 4.
[31] Melva Costen, *African American Christian Worship* - A period designated as the "altar call" in the African American Christian worship experience, meets the needs of worshippers seeking special prayers, healings or blessings. The altar call allows an opportunity for individuals to come forward for special prayer needs as a way of laying their burdens on the altar of God. Historically, call the "mourners' bench," where people seeking an encounter with God are aided by the community. 95-123
[32] Resmaa Menakem, "Your Body and Blood," 4.

three areas of interest: how an interpreter might define trauma, the relationship between individual and collective dimensions of trauma, and how employing trauma hermeneutics in biblical interpretation can benefit other theological disciplines. [33]

The psychological and social trauma, how it shows up in literature, and the appropriation of that literature have gathered attention among biblical interpreters. Biblical interpreters recognize the different aspects of trauma, what is immediate to the event, and how the ways are to facilitate the trauma through survival, recovery, and resilience. Trauma hermeneutics interpret texts in the historical context and expose the appropriation of the texts in contexts both past and present.[34]

Boase and Frechette argue that three dominant threads inform biblical traumatic hermeneutics: psychology, sociology, literary and cultural studies. Psychology contributes to understanding trauma's effects on individuals and the actions that facilitate survival, recovery, and resilience. Sociology gives insight into the collective depth of traumatic experience. Literary and cultural studies provide ways to explore the roles and functions of the text as it encodes and gives witness to traumatic suffering and on the way the text might foster recovery and resilience. The insights of psychology and sociology can inform and recognize the response of trauma in literature, and the use of literature can affect how individuals and collectives process trauma.[35]

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[33] Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds. “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation,” in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016.) 2.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 4.

CHAPTER THREE

CREATING SACRED BLACK LITURGY

> "*Our words are sacred, though no one may have told us. Our words flow like the beat of an African drum or the washboard imagined as an instrument."*
>
> *Rev. Jacqueline Pinkney*

Some might say Thomas Cranmer's words are sacred and holy. And yes, I can agree that Cranmer's words, exclaimed with passion, are sacred, but so are the words of black liturgists and theologians, whose words of litanies may go unnoticed in Black Protestant churches. Who defines what words become sacred? A black grandmother's words were sacred when she called our names out in prayer to her God, who she knew would hear. A black mother's words are sacred when she wakes up her children for school, calling them by their names that have meaning. Black grandfather's and father's words are sacred. Our black sons, as we pray for a protective covering away from blue lights that followed them in the dark, these words are sacred, and our tears are holy. Black boys remember the sacred words they were taught when the blue lights gained upon them, to keep their eyes straight ahead and their hands planted steady on the steering wheel. The sacred words of Mr. Ben Lowry's prayer, who sat in the deacons' corner and prayed the same prayer every Sunday morning in my childhood church, Mt. Olive AME Church in Woodrow, SC. Black folks' words helped build institutions, universities, and communities. Black folks' words inspire and provide hope. Black words heal and transform and cause democracy to rise. Therefore, black words, black liturgy, and Blackness are sacred.

Black writers like Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Cole Arthur Riley, whose words are spiritual and healing to black souls and bodies, do not hold a sacred place or repeated passionately with so much bravado at the Lord's Table where black bodies gather, identifying with the "Jesus" as the black brother, who was lynched because he stood against Empire, and who we praise as providing our salvation. I do not mean this to sound harsh or to throw Cranmer's words away. Instead, it is to imagine the sacredness of black litany around the sacraments. Imagine a litany around Holy Communion that invites black bodies to the table with words that are inclusive and healing to the black community. Lisa Allen writes about a "hidden wholeness" that people seek and may not find in churches, especially those between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. According to Allen, this group does not reject God or Jesus and has a desire to be whole. Instead, they have experienced or encountered fragmented and broken models of the church. Her question becomes how do we be made whole when "…worship and liturgical encounters that are built on broken, fractured histories that refuse to welcome and include everyone in their full personhood, and rest on problematic, death-dealing biblical exegesis and theological tenets?"[1] Allen gives a directive to the Black Christian church to begin to dismantle embedded white supremacy in the black church that affects the wholeness of the black community.[2] In her book, Allen offers a womanist perspective again, which she describes as a love letter to the Black church.

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[1] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness*, (Orbis Books, 2021) 166.
[2] Ibid.

African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion are three Black Protestant denominations that have continued to use the Book of Common Prayer liturgy to celebrate Holy Communion. This is done by following the Wesleyan and Anglican traditions of the denominations. Again, this dissertation does not suggest the liturgy presently used in the Black Methodist Episcopal churches around Holy Communion be done away with. There is recognition of the struggle and endurance of the ancestors who, for over two hundred years, have loved black folks hard when the world would not. The ancestors received at the time what they thought best for the community. Yet, in a complex world, the Black Church is called to speak with new thoughts and ideas in its continuous liberation mission.

In my research, I noticed very few litanies for Holy Communion written by black folks. There were the ones written in celebration to recognize Black History Month. One such litany was from the African American Lectionary, for Sunday, February 1, 2009, written by lectionary liturgist Edythe Poole.[3] This litany highlighted using African patterns and colors to adorn the pulpit and communion table. What was most refreshing about this litany was that it was inclusive. It presented God as both Mother and Father and included a language of justice to serve the community. Another Communion liturgy in the General Commission on Religion and Race library in the United Methodist Church embraced Black Lives Matter and was titled "Great Thanksgiving" by Rev. Mary C. Johnson. This inclusive litany presents the divine as "Life, Meaning, Giver of Sacred

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[3] Edythe Poole, "Holy Communion Worship and Music Resources" *The African American Lectionary,* February 1, 2009, http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PDF/HolyCommunion_WR_Feb0109.pdf.

Worth."[4] Another communion litany I discovered, which I shamefully did not know existed, was one written by Bishop A. J. Richardson, the 115th consecrated bishop of the AME Church. The litany, entitled " Palm Sunday, Holy Communion, and A Pandemic - A Litanty," captured the collective trauma that the black community experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] The litany acknowledged the community's pain and gave a voice to those who could not gather as a body. I was extremely grateful to Bishop Richardson for the foresight of a litany that named the spaces of people's residences, where they gather in worship during the pandemic, as sacred spaces.

Therefore, it can be said and noted that there is a need and desire for a liturgy around Holy Communion/Lord's Supper that is relatable, spiritual, liberating, black, and inclusive. To start creating sacred black liturgy, not just for special occasions or holidays, the Black church can look to a womanist liturgical framework, which is called to correct practices that have been antithetical to black life.[6] I believe that the black women who took on the role of stewardess, who prepared the elements for Holy Communion and directed the people to the table, were well aware of their inclusiveness by inviting all to the Lord's table, for these women always checked the pews to ensure that everyone was served communion, regardless of status. They may not have understood then, but they were doing womanist work.

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[4] Mary C. Johnson, "Communion Liturgy: Black Lives Matter, Great Thanksgiving (Black Lives Matter" *Religion and Race*, The General Commission of Religion and Race, 2025. https://www.r2hub.org/library/communion-liturgy-black-lives-matter.

[5] Adam J. Richardson, "Palm Sunday, Holy Communion, and A Pandemic - A Litany." *I am AME*. April, 2020. http://www.iamame.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Litany-Palm-Sunday-Holy-Communion.Litany.pdf.

[6] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship, Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness*, 173.

Womanist is a term coined by Alice Walker in *Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Prose*. Allen's monograph includes definitions of Walker's womanist and highlights this quote from one of Walker's definitions that a womanist is "committed to wholeness and the survival of entire people, male and female."[7] With this definition, Allen connects a womanist liturgical theology that seeks to nourish the entire community. Allen writes, "To be womanist is also capable of bringing others to liberation."[8] Womanist identifies in one's truth of Blackness secures liberation for oneself and one's community. I seek to do this and believe is necessary for black and marginalized communities, providing wholeness, healing, and worthiness that can be found at the Lord's Table. Allen expounds on the work of Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, who used the work of Walker's definitions, as she quotes Cannon, "as a critical, methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion."[9] Therefore, seeking to question the present use of the sacred words of the Prayer of Humble Access can be considered a revolutionary act of rebellion. If that is the case, then I am on the right path. Androcentric language is dominant in the prayer of humble access. The "not worthy to gather crumbs under your table" directly points to a marginalized woman who does not subject herself to the male-dominant voice that attempts to define her, but instead, she qualifies her worth. Saying these words out loud

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[7] Alice Walker, *In Search of My Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (OpenRoad: Kindle Edition, 2023).
[8] Lisa Allen, A Womanist Theology of Worship, Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness, 174.
[9] Katie Cannon, "Introduction" in *Katie's Canon, Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, Revised and Expanded 25th Anniversary Edition. (Fortress Press, 2021). 2.

directly points to the patriarchal hierarchy which uses biblical stories centered around female characters to center them as sinful and undeserving and in this case it was Jesus' voice which was the male-dominant, but later changes to include her worth.

I come to this theological position as a black woman who has experienced a sense of unworthiness from a white society and also from the Black church. I read the scripture text and sacred liturgies the black church holds from the lens of a black woman raised in the Jim Crow South who has experienced racism, poverty, sexism, and domestic violence. I do not come to this thesis as a victim; even with this acknowledgment, I should not have to say it, but black women, unfortunately, have to fight for the right to express themselves fully. This is not easy to do in the Black church. As Copeland conveys, "…black women have an ambivalent relationship with churches. Black Christian churches have been places of spiritual, psychological, and social refuge from the burden in black women's lives, but these same churches, in their patriarchal and androcentric biased liturgy and leadership, have been primary agents of the colonization of black women's bodies and minds."[10] I see Jesus as a liberator more than only my savior; therefore, I believe my worth is valued by Jesus, the liberator who made it so. With this theological position, the foundations of a womanist liturgical theology presented by Allen is where I begin to create a liturgy around Holy Communion that is liberating, holistic, and inclusive.[11]

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[10] M. Shawn Copeland, "Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse" in *Womanist Theological Ethnics A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 106.
[11] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness*, 175.

Allen helps the black church by bringing in the voices of womanist theologians such as Karen Baker-Fletcher, Monica Coleman, Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas, and others who fit the description Allen describes as not only bringing liberation to themselves but are committed, responsible, and serious, and capable of bringing others to liberation.[12] Rendering the voices of these theologians, Allen highlights the womanist God-talk, which examines and critiques theological and religious doctrines and beliefs. There are many tenets that womanist theologians' practice in constructing theologies that build upon liberating womanist ethics. Still, core principles and beliefs are where we can start to build a foundation to construct a womanist liturgical theology. To begin constructing a litany for Holy Communion, I will follow the core principles and beliefs Allen outlines from womanists, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Ancestors.

How do we view God? Do we view God as only angry? Do we view God as demanding? My mother viewed God as the "Waymaker," or as womanists describe God, as one who makes a way out of no way. Womanists understand God as Spirit. For many black churches, God shows up as a male, authoritative, and mystical God. The prayers and litanies of the church reflect God as Father. The image of God has been received chiefly from traditional Euro-American Christianity, which views God as masculine. Womanists challenge the image of only a masculine God. Mukti Burton points to the transcendent God as a gender-based God, masculine, feminine, and neither.[13] Womanist theologians call for the church to reflect on the use of only male pronouns for God and to

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Mukti Barton, "Gender-Bender God: Masculine of Feminine?," Black Theology An International Journal Vol 7, no. 2 (2009): 142-166. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1558/blth.v7i2.142.

be committed to changing using of male pronouns, but also acknowledging God as a transcendent God, the dismantling of androcentric patriarchy.[14]

Kelly Brown Douglas portrays Jesus in the black community as "The Black Christ." Douglas writes that despite Jesus's ethnicity and dark skin complexion, calling Christ black points to more than ancestry or biological characteristics.[15] Douglas emphasizes that The Black Christ reflects that Christ identified with the black struggle against the tyrannies of white society.[16] Douglas does note that although the Christ of black faith is committed to the liberation of black people from white racism, this is only one dimension of black oppression. Christ's blackness in the black church has been defined by male dominance, embedded in white supremacy, therefore causing the church the inability to respond to other complex issues, such as sexuality, gender diversity, and classism within the black community. Douglas sees the Black Christ as Christ's commitment to black freedom and not just the color of one's skin.

The understanding of Christ that emerges from a womanist theology engages as a social-political analysis of wholeness and religio-cultural analysis.[17] From a social-political view, it is to understand the ministry of Jesus and to imitate Jesus's ministry, which stood against oppressors, in a prophetic role that inspires communities to resist and rid themselves of their own oppression.[18] This also means not seeing salvation as a "self-centered" personal relationship with Jesus but acknowledging that salvation is established

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[14] Lisa Allen, *Womanist Theology of Worship, Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness*. 178.
[15] Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* 25th Anniversary Edition (Orbis Books, 2019), 25.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 113.
[18] Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness*, 179.

on the community's social, political, cultural, and religious well-being. Allen views this as partnering with God in that a relationship with Jesus calls us to work as co-laborers with Jesus and the community.

Dr. Allen writes on the work of Jacquelyn Grant, the pioneer womanist theologian and author of *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christianity and Womanist Response,* and *The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship*. In Dr. Grant's writings, she views Jesus as a liberator who embraces the outcast and the marginalized.[19] Grant takes the term discipleship instead of servant, advocating the concept of discipleship as a way of describing and internalizing being in relationship with Jesus[20]. According to Monica Coleman, this language of discipleship is a language of inclusion and subscribes to the act of the black church tradition of issuing a call for discipleship, which comes at the end of a worship service. Using Grant's model of discipleship, according to Monica Coleman, allows a call to be invited into power and participation in relationship to God and the community of faith.[21] This is the very definition of liturgy- the work that is done on behalf of the people. Therefore, doing liberating work with social and political thoughts, embracing the role of partner with God and Jesus, and divesting from a Eurocentric patriarchal power, which is embedded in white supremacy, creates a community that is free and whole.

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[19] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Scholars Press, 1989), 212-218.
[20] Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspective on Evil and Suffering* (Orbis Books, 1993), 199-218.
[21] Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Fortress Press, 2008) 16.

Douglas states that a religio-cultural analysis should challenge any aspects of black faith that perpetuate the discrimination of particular segments of the black community. Black churches that use the Bible to oppress others, such as the LGBTQIA+ and any other marginalized community, should be confronted. The gathering around the Lord's Table is an excellent place to remove discriminating factors learned unintentionally from a white supremacy culture and begin to recognize the beauty of all of God's children, who seek completeness and wholeness in their lives.

Womanist liturgical theology speaks to death-dealing theologies that have caused Black folks to internalize theologies of atonement, which cause persons guilt, grief, and feelings of unworthiness, which further intensifies Black struggles with self-identity in a society that already deems them unworthy.[22] A Eurocentric patriarchal theology stifles Black community and prevents the Black church from being creative, holding on to Eurocentric doctrines and creeds that are outdated and harmful. Allen writes that a womanist liturgical paradigm presents a way of dismantling these theologies and their stranglehold on the Black church.[23]

Black people see the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of God as the same. Believing that the Holy Spirit empowers them to do God's will as they travel in an inhumane society. When prayers are lifted in black churches, the Holy Spirit is invited to shape the worship service's environment. Black people believe nothing can be done in the service until the Holy Spirit shows up. Black people syncretize African cosmologies of Spirit, believing

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[22] Allen, 181.
[23] Ibid.

that the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of God are one, that inspires and empowers them to do God's will as they travel in a society that is inhumane.[24] Allen uses the words of Karen Baker-Fletcher, who conveys that the Holy Spirit is a comforter, teacher, guide, advocate, power of life, divine witness to the Word and Wisdom of God and that the Holy Spirit is also intercessor, one who prays on our behalf.[25] Baker-Fletcher uses the pronoun "she" when referring to the Holy Spirit. "She is the dynamic agent of divine healing revealed by Jesus the Christ. Her constant, unchanging nature is to comfort, heal, renew or, recreate, and instruct. She is the power through which God "creates a new thing." [26]

A womanist liturgical theology calls for the remembrance of the ancestors and the observance of African customs and rituals. The unfortunate is that Black folks have been taught to believe that African Traditional Religions or African Derived Religions are demonic and that any practices associated with these religions should be frowned upon and forbidden.[27] Europeans are the ones who have historically demonized African religious practices out of white supremacist hegemony. Out of their ignorance and fear, they also pass on their prejudices to Black Christians.[28] Allen uses the work of Charles H. Long, who teaches that enslaved folks, out of fear and survival, assimilated into their master's religion. The enslaved were unable to live in their authenticity, unable to share in the culture and community that had formed them, that had birthed them and given them names that represented their personhood. The enslaved were stripped of their humanity

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[24] Allen. 182.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

and, to survive indoctrinated themselves in a culture that only sought to use and abuse their gifts and talents. The continuation of constantly figuring out how to fit in and how to survive, I agree with Dr. Allen that appeasing white folks "has hampered Black liberation and wholeness, including the need for spiritual liberation and wholeness that emerges from a freedom to worship God in Spirit and truth."[29] Attempting to still fit in with the structures of white supremacy does not allow Black churches to fully preach a gospel of liberation for all.

Calling on the name of ancestors is essential to healing the Black community. Remembering those who came before us and learning from their struggles and successes teaches Black children the excellence of which they were born. Many Black Christians believe that family members who have passed away are still watching over them, interceding on their behalf with God in everyday circumstances. In some Black churches, one might find the names of ancestors engraved on stained glass windows, stenciled on the side of church pews, and listed on the cornerstone of the church buildings. This is a recognition of the great cloud of witnesses who still pray and watch over the people and the sanctuary. What better place than the Lord's Table to include the remembrance of the ancestors, the Anamnesis, along with the remembrance of Jesus?

In her article, Williams reminds us that in the liturgy of Communion, we are called to a critical remembering of individual culture and history, past and present. Still, first, it is to remember the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[30] The institution of the holy meal in which Christ commands, "Do this in remembrance of me," Williams

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Khalia J. Williams, *Liturgical Undoing: Christ, Communion and Commodified Bodies,* 357.

expresses from this point, using the work of Bieler and Schottroff, that Communion is established upon the act of remembrance or anamnesis. Bieler and Schottroff write that in biblical tradition, remembering expresses the experience of liberation given by God, which they understand as eschatological anamnesis, essential to Communion's liturgical experience and critical remembering.[31]

Bieler and Schottroff define eschatological anamnesis as a "praxis based on empathy, on embodiment, and on reciprocity between God and human beings; it is a praxis of remembering painful memories and dealing with them in a courageous and life-giving way. It is a praxis that does not shy away from the stories of suffering, it rather delves into it by perceiving concert faces, bodies, and places.[32] This praxis of remembering allows families and communities to create ways toward reconciliation, which brings those who have been missing from the table, those who have been neglected because of the embeddedness of white evangelical religiosity that says only certain ones are invited to the Lord's Table.

Through the praxis of eschatological anamnesis and critical remembering, we bring the memories, pain and victories of where we have come and our future hope. In eschatological anamnesis, we remember all of Jesus Christ, his life, suffering death and resurrection. Eschatological anamnesis engages us with the story of Christ's body through what Bieler and Schottroff call, "anamnetic empathy."[33] Anamnetic empathy is an embodied practice. It is not the salvation stories that begin this awareness of the practice,

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[31] Ibid., 358.
[32] Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread & Resurrection*. (Fortress Press, 2007), Chap. 5, Kindle.
[33] Ibid.

but the listening, praying, eating and drinking. It is an awareness of seeing those present with us at the Lord's Table. We bring to the table all that we are: our actual bodies, which contain a myriad of memories.[34] Therefore, it is my belief that anamnetic empathy leads to salvation, to wholeness, which is generated by receiving all, showing compassion, care, and empathy for all who are present at the Lord's Table. The Lord's Table is where freedom begins.

When we create Black sacred liturgy around the experiences of the Black community, we bring the stories of the devalued Black bodies, the wounded and marred bodies, alongside the lynched and resurrected body of Christ. Williams continues that when we remember Christ's body through realities of our own bodies, a liturgical undoing occurs.[35] A liturgical undoing ensures that the actions of the words we recite, the work on behalf of the people, are inclusive and healing words. Words that heal wounded bodies that have been ridiculed, abused, and ostracized. A liturgical undoing invites us to see an individual as part of the community, not separate from the community, but God's creation. In what follows, I attempt such a liturgy.

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Khalia J. Williams, 359.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Holy Communion Litany for the African Methodist Episcopal Church

All: We have come, O God, Our Father, Mother, and Creator. We gather at Your table in remembrance of our Liberator and Sustainer, Jesus Christ, who we co-labor with to make our communities well and whole. We gather at Your table, acknowledging the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We hold to the Good News of the Gospel and all you have done and call us to do. Forgive us where we have failed to renounce injustices. Empower us to operate in the capacity of which you have called us, to minister to the social, spiritual and physical development of all people.[1]

Ordained Clergy: We gather at your table with praise and thanksgiving. We humble ourselves before you, thanking you for your invitation. You have opened your table so that we will become one with you and each other. We remember where we have come from. We remember that you are the God of our ancestors, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who called upon your name when they were not welcomed at your altar. The Holy Spirit guided them to create a place where your children can call upon your name.

We gather at your table with the spirit of Jarena Lee and Sarah Allen, the tenacity of Henry McNeal Turner, the dreams of prayers, and other saints who stayed on the path of justice and righteousness for the sake of our people, led by the Holy Spirit, never doubting the work You called them to do. We pray to God that we will remember.

Congregation: Thank You for Your grace and mercy.

Ordained Clergy: We gather at your table in remembrance of your liberating acts that allowed us to walk in a strange land with the strength of the Holy Spirit. We did not walk alone. You were always there with us and with our ancestors who built homes, erected churches, grew communities, created schools and universities, and established families.

Congregation: Thank You for Your grace and mercy.

Ordained Clergy: We gather at this table of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who preached a gospel of love, embracing those who are weary, caring for the brokenhearted, and redeeming us through the power of the Holy Spirit. We remember when you walked and

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[1] Roderick D. Belin, *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Fifty-First Edition (The AME Sunday School Union, 2021), 21. In accordance with The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Mission of the AME Church is to minister to the social, spiritual and physical development of all people.

carried those who came across the Atlantic, holding them close against your breast, making way for now this generation. We do not forget from whence You have brought us.

Congregation: Thank You for Your grace and mercy.

Ordained Clergy: We gather at your table, O Divine One, trusting as you continue to breathe life into us and as we continue to breathe life into each other. There is mercy and grace here at Your table. One can find acceptance, wholeness, and worthiness at Your Table because You have made it so.

Congregation: Thank You for Your grace and mercy.

Ordained Clergy: Forgive us for our neglect to care for others who are beside us. Teach us how to love all of who you will send our way. Teach us to care for all in our communities and to be good stewards of the properties you have placed in our possession. We shall pass down the stories of our hopes and dreams to our children and our children's children and to generations to come, telling them that You, Our Liberator, made the way possible for us all.

Serving the elements of Holy Communion/Lord's Supper

If there is an older member in the congregation, have that member recite the prayer before serving the elements of Holy Communion/Lord's Supper.

Prayer: O Most Holy God. We come in adoration of all the blessings you have bestowed upon us. We sit at this table—a table you have prepared for us. We sit in awe of the One we call our Brother Jesus, who identifies with us. Our Brother, Jesus, spoke truth to power and was lynched by those who were afraid of His might. Jesus calls for us to "Do this in remembrance of Him." We remember Our Lord who stood for justice. We remember Our Lord who healed and delivered those in bondage and gave them freedom. We remember Our Lord who gives us life and calls us to follow Him as His disciples, as partners with God, to uplift our brothers and sisters in the world in which we live. We remember Our Lord.

Consecration of the Elements: ***(Ordained Clergy)***

Most Gracious Lord. This is your body given to us so we might be complete and whole. This is your blood that provides us to walk with the strength of our ancestors. Bless this body who has gathered around your table. Bless this body to be one with you. We remember the blood that was shed on the cross for our redemption and the blood of our ancestors who dare not forget that you, O Lord, walked beside them. Bless our walk as we drink this wine in remembrance of you. In our Lord's Name, Jesus the Christ. Amen (The ordained clergy partake of the elements and distribute them to other clergy present).

Serving the elements of Holy Communion/Lord's Supper

If children are present, have one or two help serve the elements with the ordained clergy. The stewardesses present can help guide and direct the children with this. This may slow down the service, but that is okay. Doing this brings in community and inclusion, as the children are a vital part of our community as well as the body of Christ.

Distribution of the Holy Communion Elements:

As bread is distributed, the ordained clergy can say: "Take and eat of the body - do this in remembrance of our Lord who makes us free." (Or something relevant to the congregation).

As wine is distributed, the ordained clergy can say: "Take and drink of this cup - do this in remembrance of our Lord who makes us free." (Or something relevant to the congregation).

Those gathered at the table will eat in unison. When the table has finished, the ordained clergy will release those at the table and ask others to come. Continue in this way until all are served.

Closing Prayer: ***(Ordained Clergy)***

Thank you, Lord, for inviting us to your table. You have asked us to "Do This In Remembrance of You." And we remembered. We remember how you have helped us and walked with us. We remember. We remember your peace in times of trouble. We remember. We have shared in your grace, which only you make possible. We remember the words of our ancestor, Rev. Dr. Clementa Pinckney: "Our calling is not just within the walls of the congregation, but the life and community in which our congregation resides."[2] Now, we get up from Your table, ready to share Your love with others and to serve all of humanity. May our spirits shine with the strength and hope of our ancestors and the love of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen & Ashe.

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[2] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President in Eulogy of the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney," (College of Charleston, 2015) https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

"For more than four hundred and fifty years on the North American continent, greed, law, labor, and violence consumed the bodies of black women and men. If, since the first Eucharist, a "hurting body has been the symbol of solidarity for Christians," how are we to grasp the relation of Eucharist to hurting black bodies? In a context of white racist supremacy, what is the position and condition of black bodies? If the Eucharistic meal is that ritual which celebrates the redemption of the body, then how do the sign and reality of Eucharist contest the marginal position and condition of black bodies?"[1]

That one sentence that screams out from the Prayer of Humble Access/Prayer of Humiliation makes me wonder what we hear and internalize as we gather at the Lord's Table. Do we hear the black bodies that hold memories of struggle and victory in a country that caused despair upon a people who were considered to be property, believed to be three-fifths of a human being? Do we hear the voices of black bodies incarcerated in jails and prisons more than any other racial group imprisoned in this country? Do we see the black bodies of our LGBTQIA+ community? It is that one sentence, "we are not worthy to gather the crumbs from underneath your table," that moves me not to question a humbleness before God but to question if the Black Protestant Church seeks to ask if the rituals and liturgies we carry from the white supremacist culture in which we live and from which they were created, is healing and transformative to the communities which we serve. Some may ask, why question the rituals and liturgies we have cited for over two hundred years. And to this, I answer that liturgies are powerful and can be used to meet the moment in which we find ourselves, providing hope and care to a hurting

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[1] Shawn N. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom, Body, Race, and Being* (Fortress Press, 2010), 110.

community in a broken world. Liturgy has the power to reach out to those who have not historically been invited to the Table.

I began this dissertation with my love of gathering with the community around Holy Communion. As a child, I loved celebrating the Lord's Supper. I loved how the stewardesses were so precise in their attention to the Lord's Table, and the people gathered around the altar. I love how the stewardesses attended to the children who came to partake in the Eucharist and looked out for the others who could not walk to the table because of age or physical disability but ensured that the ordained clergy distributing the sacred elements were aware of their presence. Holy Communion was valued in the life of a southern Black community, and the community was required to attend on the first Sunday of the month. But from what I have experienced as an associate minister and now pastor, on first Sundays, the Lord's Table is not packed with the presence of the community. There are no children. There are no young families. The Lord's Table is bare.

Holy Communion, a sacrament of the Black Protestant Church, acted as a resistance to the Jim Crow South. Black men and women put on their best suits and dresses on the first Sunday of the month and gathered around the Lord's table with the same experiences in common: fighting to be freed from the white supremacy of the South. The Lord's Table was where all were welcome: sharecroppers, school teachers and principals, maids, and even juke-joint clientele. The Lord's Table resembled the family dinner table in the Black church where I grew up. The solidarity of the community, with

the brokenness and hardship of white supremacy, gathered with the One who identifies with their brokenness and hardship.

We are at a critical juncture where a racist and misogynist has been re-elected as President of the United States. The Black Protestant Church can no longer go with the status quo of the liturgies we use that can bring harm to people of color without taking a hard look at the language the people hear that undercuts their personhood. The Black Protestant Church, once again, must bring families to the Lord's Table, with the intention of creating space for all black bodies to be cared for, accepted, and loved. The Black Protestant Church must become again, as the eldest member stated from Bethlehem AME, "the children in the community were invited to the Lord's Table." [2]

I introduced this small AME congregation that has experienced a decrease in members in their church and the community. This knit-tight community of only 4% Black people, where only a tiny percentage of that 4% attend any church. Within this small community, the Black Protestant Church is not influential in the community's livelihood. There could be many reasons for this, such as traditional worship services, the length of a worship service, or possibly the white supremacy of language that has been embedded for generations that is uninviting.

The birth of the Black Church came out of slavery and the racism displayed in America. The Black Church became a political force, demanding the needs of her people. The Black Church created schools, medical institutions, and economic programs for the well-being of Black Americans. The Black Church became such a political force

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[2] Interviewee 4, Date Interviewed 12/19/2023. Interviewed by Jacqueline Pinkney

that the Civil Rights Movement and Voting Rights Act were born because the people were taught they had value and worth. It was in the Black Church where the children were taught they could flourish amid white supremacy. And so, this dissertation is offered by a Black female pastor who relates to the Syrophoenician and Canaanite woman in the Bible, still speaking in the voice of inclusivity and from the feet of her ancestors who taught her that she too mattered. She no longer accepts the crumbs but the wholeness and fullness of the imago dei, she who is created in the image of God.

In the era of the 2024 presidential election campaign, derogatory statements were made regarding hard-working Haitian immigrants who came to the United States to have a better life as people who steal their neighbor's pets and eat them.[3] A Christian nationalist named Lance Wallnau spewed vile words against the black female presidential candidate, saying, "Kamala Harris, "the spirit of Jezebel in a way that will be even more ominous than Hillary because she'll bring a racial component and she's younger."[4] Racism and misogyny were on full display throughout the 2024 election cycle. The 2024 presidential election campaign also displayed hatred towards the transgender community. Black transgender women experience both racial and gender oppression, amplifying their risk of multiple forms of violence.[5] All of this is done under the auspice of America, which some identify as a Christian Nation. How does the Black Protestant Church

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[3] Merlyn Thomas & Mike Wending, "Trump repeats baseless claim about Haitian immigrants eating pets." *BBC Verify and BBC News*, September 15, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c77l28myezko.

[4] Jefferey St. Clair, "The Spirit of Jezebel." *CounterPunch*, July 26, 2024, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=b15ce061-675a-3de1-b5a2-0bc0e2679fd1.

[5] Athena D. F. Sherman et al., "Transgender and Gender Diverse Community Connection, Help-Seeking, and Mental Health Among Black Transgender Women Who Have Survived Violence: A Mixed-Methods Analysis. Violence Against Women.." *SageJournals*, Vol. 28, Issue 3-4 (2022): 890, https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211013892.

disassociate itself from a Christian Nationalist view that seems determined to keep white supremacy intact and still uplift those who continue to be ostracized? What the Black Protestant church says in its liturgies matters-we, as ordained clergy, have a responsibility to speak truth to power in order to pursue liberation for our communities.

Liturgy is the work performed by people for the benefit of others. Its outward signs are to be transformative. Liturgy empowers, blesses, and challenges us to make a difference in our communities. Liturgy is to speak to the innermost being of the person's heart, soul, and mind. Liturgy should reflect the environment of those who receive the words directed solely for them, created for them, and molded purposefully for them. Liturgy is action. Therefore, it should be fluid, always moving, and relevant.

In my dissertation, I also reflected on generational and collective trauma in the Black community. I looked at the work of Resmaa Menakem, who writes on the inherited trauma of "white-body supremacy," which is embedded in American culture. That our bodies have adapted. White-body supremacy is a part of the organized culture in the background of our institutions and interactions. As it persists, so many African Americans continue to die because of it. There might be no better place to come for healing and restoration than the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Lord's Table. There might be no better place where families that have experienced brokenness can be reconciled, where generational and collective trauma begin to heal. The community's gathering around the Lord's Table offers a space of love and acceptance, a place that is non-judgmental. Holy Communion is not an individual event. Holy Communion is communal, where communal healing takes place.

Holy Communion can be where the Black Protestant Church returns to, inviting the neighborhood to come and share in the meal Jesus prepares for us all. One member reminded me that she came to the table as a child because the Black Protestant Church in her neighborhood included her and her friends at the holy table. This story is why I can remember the connection I felt on the first Sundays of the month when it seemed like a family reunion where everyone came to receive communion. All who had experienced the hardness of the weeks prior now knelt at the table with others who related to their brokenness and were invited by a savior whose brokenness identified with theirs.

The stewardesses dressed in white, who prepared the Lord's Table and guided the community to the gathering, can be said to epitomize the character Baby Suggs, found in the novel *Beloved* by Tony Morrison. Baby Suggs gathers those who are seeking freedom from slavery in a place called the Clearing, a place that allows them to be all flesh, all human—a place where they can breathe, cry, laugh, and dance. Baby Suggs calls the children and grown men to come to the Clearing, offering them a place to love themselves and love themselves hard.[6] The act of the women dressed in white, extending graceful hands to come and feast, away from the struggle, for a little while, guided children and grown men to a table filled with love and no judgment. The women dressed in white said no words but, like Baby Suggs, only gave their hearts to the people who were weary and tired of white supremacy attempting to take away their humanity.

In this pivotal moment in history in the United States, under the Trump Administration, it is time for the Black Protestant Church that continues to repeat to their

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[6] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin Group, 1987). 87

congregation, *"We are unworthy to gather the crumbs underneath your table,"* to evaluate honestly if this is still relevant in this 2025 moment. I understand that raising this thought might be perceived as dangerous. Though the questions remain, as presented by M. Shawn Copeland, how do we begin to heal hurting and broken Black bodies? My thought? Invite all Black bodies to the Lord's Table with the Black Jesus who greets, welcomes, and makes room for intentional healing and transformation, giving all the right to be authentic to who they are, created in the image of God - the imago dei.

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