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Works of Love: Beauty and Fragility in a Community of Difference

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M.Div., Emory University, 2009

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Abstract

Works of Love: Beauty and Fragility in a Community of Difference By Rebecca F. Spurrier

This dissertation explores the significance of mental difference and disability for Christian community based on a year of ethnographic and theological research at a church in which the majority of those who attend services and weekly day programs live with diagnoses of chronic mental illness. I investigate the relationships that help to identify this diverse group of people as a church rather than a mission to or a program for the mentally ill. I argue that, rather than drawing attention to a set of central practices—a uniform liturgy requiring able-bodied and able-minded participation—this community highlights theological aesthetics by which people with differing abilities belong to one another and transform a common liturgy. Offering an aesthetic frame for differences, I argue that Christian liturgy is not first or primarily the ability to grasp or articulate a set of ideas about God, nor to conform to a set of practices; rather, Christian liturgy relies upon consensual, noncoercive relationships that embody and reflect a sacramental understanding of the beauty and nonviolence of divine love. The liturgy of Holy Family, choreographed with and through mental disability, reveals both the fragility of human connection that is requisite for any worship of God and the persistent beauty of this connection as those who gather find, create, and improvise access to one another and the divine. Bringing together the fields of liturgical studies, disability studies, embodiment, and aesthetics, I explore “art forms” of improvised access—touch and gesture, silence and imagination, jokes and laughter, and naming—that are essential to shaping a community of difference with and through psychiatric disability. Naming and recognizing these arts illumines both the beauty and the struggle that incorporating difference into a common liturgy entails. Furthermore, I analyze theologies of space and time that make these artistry possible as well as the violence of space and time within a segregated city, where some lives are given more value than others.

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Introduction – Disabling Liturgy, Desiring Difference: Arts of Becoming Church

“The beauty is there, all over the church, on the inside, right there on the inside of the church . . . That’s us, that’s the beauty, the attitude and the love and respect, and showing respect and love and happiness.”

Rose, Friendship Circle participant at Holy Family Church

“Attending to life as it is lived and adjudicated by people on the ground produces a multiplicity of approaches, theoretical moves and countermoves, an array of interpretive angles as various as the individuals drawn to practice ethnography. At stake is finding creative ways of not letting the ethnographic die in our accounts of actuality. We must attend to the ways people’s own struggles and visions of themselves and others—their life stories—create holes in dominant theories and interventions and unleash a vital plurality: being in motion, ambiguous and contradictory, not reducible to a single narrative, projected into the future, transformed by recognition, and thus the very fabric of alternative world-making.”

João Biehl, “The Right to a Nonprojected Future”¹

A priest I know once described an Episcopal liturgy as a dance. Sitting, standing, setting the table for communion, moving to the altar, participating in the Eucharist—all of these movements were a way of being caught up in something greater than herself, a mode of prayer and praise that was not solely about the words she was professing but also about an embodied unity with others in love to God. I have frequently visited Episcopal churches over the years, and I have to come to know what she means. Although I initially felt awkward and inept, juggling prayer books and learning to sit and stand at appropriate moments, I grew used to the rhythms and became able to keep worship time with the rest of a community. I have come to understand her description of liturgy to extend to many

¹ João Biehl, “The Right to a Nonprojected Future,” *Practical Matters*, no. 6 (2013), <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2013/03/01/nonprojected-future/>.

kinds of worshipping communities, where a unity of movements, songs, cries, shouts, and silences becomes a dance whose rhythms guide each member to take their part.

Over the last nine years, I have become a regular visitor at an unusual Episcopal community in Atlanta, Georgia, one that has called into question these understandings of a well-choreographed dance of prayer. Holy Family² is a church in which over half the congregants live with diagnoses of chronic mental illness; many of them come to the church from personal care homes or independent living facilities. Here the dance of the Sunday Eucharist often seems dissonant or disjointed. Some people stand for the hymns and the gospel reading as the prayer book instructs. Some people sit with their bodies folded over into their laps for most of the service. Some wear dresses and suits, and some wear sweatpants and never take their coats off. Some people sing all of the hymns, and some do not sing at all. During the prayers of the people, a congregant inserts his own needs and concerns before he is called upon to do so. A woman reads her own poetry softly to herself. A congregant flips through a travel magazine during the Eucharistic prayer. Another congregant negotiates with his neighbor for a cigarette. People walk in and out, disappearing from a pew for a time only to reappear in the same seat or in another. Even in the long Amen after the Eucharistic prayer, someone's voice bursts forth with an "Aaaa" before the rest of us begin to sing. Whenever one worships God at Holy Family Church, there is someone who is doing it differently.

"What do you need in order to have *church*?" theologian Gordon Lathrop asks to begin his study of the holy people God calls to be community.³ He describes how *holy people* in all their diversity gather around the central symbols—reading of Scripture,

² The name of the church and all names of persons have been changed to protect confidentiality.

³ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1.

collection for the poor, celebration of a meal. He suggests that these symbols invite difference by means of “a strong center and an open door” through which all are welcome. The open door is a symbol of access by which the holy people come, bringing their own gifts and needs to the transforming work of the assembly.⁴ Holy Family opens wide the church doors, and yet the central elements and rituals of Christian worship raise questions rather than supplying clear markers of unity. Not everyone is awake for the Scripture reading. Not everyone pays attention to the sermon. Not everyone goes forward for the meal. Even the collection highlights the differences between poor and wealthy, as some congregants dig pennies from their pockets and others lay folded checks and envelopes on the offering plate as it is passed.

To begin my reflection on Christian community, I ask, “What do you need in order to have a church that assumes difference at its heart?” Holy Family is not a communion of different people with similar capacities to read, pray, think, move, and love, but a gathering of people with mental disabilities who challenge assumptions about the bodies we call church. Holy Family congregants embody the struggle of a church imagining people with disabilities as essential to its life and faith. They point to the gathering of difference itself as an act of faith: the belief that human beings in all their variation can enter through an open door to be held together through love rather than coercion or conformity to particular practices or beliefs. If, as theologian Nancy Eiesland argues, a body is that which is being held together and enabled to act out,⁵ how are the bodies at Holy Family held together and guided into the rhythms of acting out this life

⁴ Ibid., 93–94.

⁵ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

together? What does Divine Love, spoken and embodied through the liturgical symbols of the Christian tradition, have to do with this holding and acting?

The central argument of this dissertation is that Christian liturgy is not first or primarily the ability to grasp or articulate a set of ideas about God nor to conform to a set of normative practices; rather, it relies upon consensual, noncoercive relationships that embody and reflect a Christian understanding of the beauty and nonviolence of divine love, which makes possible belonging to a community through and across difference. I argue that the liturgy of Holy Family, choreographed with and through mental disability, reveals both the fragility of human connection that is requisite for any worship of God and the persistent beauty of this connection as the gathered ones find, create, and improvise access to one another and the divine. In making this argument I suggest that the unconventional arts of becoming church are key to a liturgical theology with and through mental disability. By artistry, I invoke the forms of interaction between people that highlight the ordinary works and pleasures of a disabled church. Naming and recognizing these arts illumines both the beauty and the struggle that incorporating difference into the church as the Body of Christ entails.

Exploring Holy Family Church as a fragile community of difference, I analyze the significance of embodiment in shaping a sacramental community. My research methodology was primarily ethnographic participant observation, with its attention to thick description and listening to a multiplicity of voices within a community. I also investigated this community through a three-fold approach to theological aesthetics: an emphasis on the role of sensory participation in relationships with God and others; attention to the role of art in theological interpretation; and a focus on beauty as a

theological category.⁶ This dissertation is a conversation among: the community at Holy Family with the theological categories it performs and creates, disability studies/disability theology with its critiques of cultural and theological presuppositions about well-being and embodiment, and liturgical theology with its emphasis on a physical gathering of human bodies as a primary mode of knowing and loving God.⁷

Holy Family as a Community of Difference

Holy Family, founded in the late 1800's as a mission church, moved to its current location in Atlanta in the 1950's.⁸ A small and struggling white parish for many periods in its history, Holy Family, like other churches and communities, was challenged by the racial integration of schools that took place across Atlanta's neighborhoods in the 1960's, as well as the effects of post-war white flight to the suburbs. According to one story told around the church, in the early 1980's, after a series of changes in the neighborhood and conflicts over church leadership, membership at Holy Family had dwindled once again, and the parish faced imminent closure by the bishop.⁹ The vicar at that time began inviting people he met in the neighborhood, many of whom lived in group homes. The

⁶ Farley summarizes these three different approaches to theological aesthetics in the introduction to his book *Faith and Beauty*, although he chooses to focus on the third approach.

Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001).

⁷ Throughout the dissertation, I also engage theologians who wrestle with what Mary McClintock Fulkerson calls "a worldly church": a church that is both participant in forces of oppression and injustice, as well as a community that performs love and justice as part of its witness to the divine presence. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.

⁸ The church first met in a saloon and then in private homes for some time when the saloon burned down. It moved into its first church building in 1899. Later it would be forced to move again, to its current location, due to the City of Atlanta's plans to build an expressway through the neighborhood where it was located.

⁹ I encountered different narratives about how demographic changes in Atlanta affected this particular neighborhood, but it seems clear that practices of racial segregation and integration were important factors in the parish's current identity.

church not only shared a weekly meal with those who visited but also welcomed them into the worship life of the community.

When the 1996 Olympics were held in Atlanta, some advocates for people with mental illness became concerned about the increased vulnerability of those who spent time on the streets.¹⁰ As part of an initiative by the Georgia Department of Human Resources to create safe spaces for people with mental illness during the Olympic games, Holy Family began its day programs.¹¹ What began as a temporary response to possible stress and displacement during the Olympics evolved into a set of programs known as the Friendship Circle. Many of the Circle participants have been diagnosed with various forms of mental illness—such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, or cognitive illnesses due to aging. Some live with other kinds of disabilities. Many describe themselves as people whose lives have been affected by addictions and homelessness. Some of them have been incarcerated.

Most of those who come to the Friendship Circle have been affected by government and state policies that took effect in the 1970's and 80's when persons were released from psychiatric institutions with the anticipation that community-based supports would provide necessary resources for their well-being.¹² In place of government institutions, there emerged for-profit group homes, many of which cannot or

¹⁰ For an account of the debates surrounding the City of Atlanta's treatment of homeless people and people on the streets in preparation for the 1996 Olympics, see Ronald Smothers, "As Olympics Approach, Homeless Are Not Feeling at Home in Atlanta," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1996, sec. U.S., <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/01/us/as-olympics-approach-homeless-are-not-feeling-at-home-in-atlanta.html>.

¹¹ Staff Writer, "Atlanta Preview '96: The Olympic Games Begin in 2 Weeks," *Fort Oglethorpe Press*, July 3, 1996.

¹² For a discussion of patterns, practices, and policies of de/institutionalization in North America, see Chris Chapman, Allison C. Carey, and Liat Ben-Moshe, "Reconsidering Confinement: Interlocking Locations and Logics of Incarceration," in *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10–15.

do not provide adequate support systems for the people who live there. Church staff and lay leaders at Holy Family speak of group homes as enmeshed in systems that frequently exploit the vulnerabilities of people who have few viable options about where or with whom they live. Those who work at Holy Family understand part of their mission as ongoing advocacy to secure essential resources for safe housing, adequate medical care, and, above all, the right to communal friendship and support. They believe that Holy Family itself is one of these resources, a place for relationships that are life-giving and transformative. They also acknowledge the limits of what Holy Family can do and be for those it gathers.

Relationships at Holy Family are constituted through a wide variety of interactions and contexts. Four to five different kinds of church services take place throughout the week: Tuesday and Thursday morning and noon-day prayer; Sunday morning and Wednesday evening Eucharist; and the monthly music event known as Saturday Night Light, which features both dancing and solo performances by community members. In addition to attending services, some members gather twice a week for the Friendship Circle (located at the church) to do woodworking and weaving, to paint, and to play bingo and do yoga.¹³ Some sell plants from the greenhouse on second Saturdays during the warmer months of the year. Tuesday and Thursday mornings begin with breakfast, and all mid-week services are followed by a shared meal, which is supplied either by Holy Family or by other Episcopal churches. After lunch some choose to stay for support groups for those with mental illness. Many Circle participants also share a life

¹³ The church is currently working to establish the Friendship Circle as its own 501c3 organization in order to secure funding and support that is not available for churches.

together outside the church, returning by van to the eight or nine group homes where they spend the majority of their time.¹⁴

Ethnographic Methods and Assembling the Pieces of a Theological Puzzle

During one of my first interviews, Tanya, a young woman with mental illness, volunteers to speak to me about experiences at Holy Family. She appears nervous, and as soon as we enter the interview space, she confirms that she feels anxious about taking part in the conversation. In line with my research protocols,¹⁵ I assure her that she does not need to participate in this recorded discussion if she feels uncomfortable. I also give her the option to meet with me at another time when she feels more at ease.¹⁶ Tanya insists that she wants to continue our conversation and that she likes being able to make a contribution in this way, even if she feels anxious. She wants to participate because she thinks she might be the “missing piece of the puzzle.” She might have just the clues I need to understand this community.

Like Tanya, I imagine that all of the people at Holy Family are missing pieces of a puzzle about the church as a beloved community that witnesses to divine beauty and justice in the world. I also investigate Holy Family Church as one missing piece in a larger puzzle about how the Christian church not only feels obligation to include those

¹⁴ While a number of group homes were located near the church when its ministry to persons with disabilities first began, gentrification has increased property values, and many of these homes are now located in other parts of the city. Many congregants now travel into the neighborhood rather than being a part of it. The number of group homes fluctuated during my time at Holy Family.

¹⁵ My research was approved by Emory University’s Institutional Review Board on October 16, 2013. The Institutional Review Board aided me in establishing research and informed consent protocols that took into account the mental differences that are present at Holy Family.

¹⁶ Taking into account the differences of people with mental illness meant that I was always careful to make such options clear and to take note of any signs of discomfort during my interactions at Holy Family, so as to do no harm through my research.

with disabilities but also how it comes to desire the beauty as well as the struggle that human variation brings. I assume that assembling these pieces of the puzzle requires that my readers be able to imagine what it would feel like to be part of a community like this: the excitement, the confusion, the boredom, the laughter, the distress, the tenderness, and the exhaustion. As Nancy Eiesland writes, “an accessible theological method necessitates that the body be represented as flesh and blood, bones and braces, and not simply the rationalized realm of activity.”¹⁷ Ethnographic methodologies keep me located within my field of inquiry: to record in fieldnotes and to evoke for my readers what it feels like to be part of Holy Family’s everyday liturgy. As a participant-observer I investigate the stated goals, descriptions, and explanations offered to me by different kinds of participants about the purpose and identity of the parish, but I also investigate the sounds, gestures, silences, and relationships that are as much a part of Holy Family as that which is explicitly claimed for the church’s identity. I also include in my study the kinds of participation and non-participation that confirm or contradict this church’s own explicit theological claims about what Holy Family is and does. Ethnographic methods encourage me to pay theological attention not only to the places most obviously associated with religious or theological identity but also to a range of relationships that happen across space and time when people gather at the church.

While, as a theologian, I remain invested in theological assumptions about human beings, churches, and divine presence, ethnographic methods as well as ethnographic writing ground my theological interpretations in a close description of ecclesial life. Such descriptions bring to my theological writing an openness to multiple and, at times,

¹⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 22.

disparate and diffuse interpretations of who God is and how God is working among those who identify as Holy Family. By grounding my methodology and my writing in close and careful descriptions of particular times and spaces at Holy Family, I hope to offer a multi-dimensional, theological portrait that illustrates both the beauty as well as the ambiguity of this church's struggle to keep the doors open to all who would seek a place at Holy Family.

Holy Family's doors were opened to me long before my formal research and writing began. Holy Family is unusual not only as a church that welcomes people with mental illnesses, but also as an educational and training center that welcomes many students of diverse backgrounds to come for a season. I was first introduced to this parish six years prior to my study through a supervised internship program during my master of divinity degree. Even after I completed the internship, I found it difficult to leave and often returned to visit Holy Family. Whenever I encountered a broad theological or humanist claim about virtue or capacity, in the academic settings of my master's and doctoral work, the faces of Holy Family parishioners appeared in my mind, gently interrogating its premise.

How did Holy Family come to inscribe itself so deeply on my theological imagination and the imagination of so many who spend time there? As one woman, a volunteer for over thirty years, declares to me, "There's no other church like Holy Family . . . I don't think there's any place in the world you can say is as nice as Holy Family; what do you think?"¹⁸ There are many members of the parish and former interns who would confirm her sentiment. Through a research period of careful participant

¹⁸ Ellipses in material from field notes and recordings indicate omission, as well as incomplete thoughts expressed by the speaker.

observation, I have sought to better understand both what makes Holy Family unique and what it shares in common with other Christian churches and communities.

In order to better understand and describe divine and human love manifest through difference at Holy Family, as well as to study the forms which constrain or obscure such configurations of difference, I have spent three years of research at Holy Family (one full time and two part-time years while I wrote the dissertation). I have attended Sunday morning and Wednesday evening Eucharist and eaten meals with the community. I have also participated in Friendship Circle activities: gardening, art, games, socializing, yoga, and Bible studies. I have attended occasional events such as plant sales, Saturday Night Light services, social outings, and visits to other church communities. I have visited personal care homes and independent living facilities, so that I have a sense of life at Holy Family in relation to other primary communities that affect relationships within the church. I have also conducted interviews with congregants, interns, and volunteers in order to hear stories less frequently shared in the regular day-to-day activities of the church. I have tested my own theories and assumptions about the community by inviting others to reflect on the categories I employ. As an ethnographer and a theologian, I both trust and evoke divine agency in calling and shaping the church, an assumption shared by many who gather as part of this community. At the same time, I also listen to voices and observe behaviors that would counter these beliefs and assumptions. I both seek confirmation for and doubt the possibility of this community being called “a church.” I take seriously the woman who says she can feel the presence of God at Holy Family and the man who sits at the entrance, refusing to go in for noonday prayer, because he “never saw Jesus in a church.”

Like ethnographer Karen McCarthy Brown, I understand ethnography to communicate a particular, subjective truth that occurs “in between” a participant observer and the people she is studying and, as such, to rely on the process of ethnographic research as a “social art form, open to both aesthetic and moral judgment.” Such an art form acknowledges that ethnographic methods rely on the creation and maintenance of human relationships that affect both researcher and those she seeks to learn from and about; thus, there is no clear boundary separating the ethnographer from those she studies.¹⁹ Even as I seek a truthful representation of the community and individuals I spend time with, I also help to create this representation through my interactions with others. Aware of the part I have played in Holy Family, even as I write about it, I have written my interactions directly into the narrative of this dissertation so that readers can observe my participation in the community I describe. I have often used a first person narrative both in fieldnotes and in this chapter to remind myself and my readers of my active part in discovering, selecting, and interpreting particular elements of Holy Family’s life together.

I am a Christian, who has been going to church all of her life. Although I am currently a member of a Mennonite church, I have worshipped with and deeply engaged churches of many different denominations throughout the forty years of my lifetime. I am also a temporarily able-bodied, white, heterosexual, married, childless woman, who has not yet been diagnosed with a mental illness and who has never lived in poverty. I have spent time with communities advocating for people with disabilities and mental illness

¹⁹ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, updated and expanded edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 12.

prior to coming to Holy Family. I have also had friends and family members who have been diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities.

Occupying both insider and outsider positions, I follow ethnographically and theologically this church's movements and struggles. I do not offer Holy Family as a model that should be replicated by other churches and faith communities, but as a window into the kinds of aesthetic frames and questions a disabled church inspires. As I do so, I take my cue from the French philosopher Jean Vanier, founder of a worldwide movement of intentional communities focused on core members with intellectual disabilities. When Vanier was asked to give a formula for the organization called L'Arche, he argued that L'Arche is a sign not a solution, a movement to transmit a vision and a counter culture rather than an institution that is about successful replication.²⁰ Following Vanier's suggestion, I do not view Holy Family as the ideal form a church or community should take. I do maintain the vital significance of what Holy Family points to: its desires and limitations tell us something about the presence and absence of God in community through disability. I offer wisdom about the formation of noncoercive faith communities that manifest divine and human beauty as a theological response to subtle forms of social violence.

In keeping with Holy Family's vision of respecting the dignity of each one who comes, I gathered information so as to accurately represent the encounters I took part in, as well as to maintain the research forms that felt least intrusive to the community. I took psychiatric disability into account not only as a critical lens through which to interpret church community but also as an experience that might affect a process of informed

²⁰ Krista Tippett, "The Wisdom of Tenderness: Lived Compassion, L'Arche, and Becoming Human," Interview, May 28, 2015.

consent. I built an awareness of possible mental distress or change into my research protocols. Because some congregants struggle to remember certain kinds of information, I reminded those with whom I was speaking as often as possible about my role in the community; this included not only congregants but also staff who sometimes asked me to help out and take on volunteer roles. I made sure congregants were always aware that they did not need to respond to any questions I was asking and could choose to hold or continue our conversation at a different time if they were feeling uncomfortable. Some congregants asked to speak with me but then changed their minds when I offered them an option not to speak. I tried to build in a flexible and sensitive approach to interactions that did not contribute to any anxiety that congregants might be experiencing and that also took into account dramatic fluctuations in the ways that people expressed themselves to me. I used a process of oral consent so as to help protect the confidentiality of those with whom I met one-on-one in formal interviews, made sure they knew that what they shared would have no impact on their participation in the church or its programs, and made clear that those with whom I had formal interviews knew that they could come back to me prior to the completion of my dissertation and ask me not to use any information they had shared.

I carried a digital voice recorder with me, taped all formal gatherings and interviews, and recorded some informal interactions. Some congregants were more comfortable with note taking than voice recording during one-on-one interactions. Thus, there are numerous events and conversations that I recorded in a small notebook and then reconstructed through fieldnotes. I give my readers clues to these different forms of gathering information through the punctuation I use during the dialogues I recreate here.

Quotation marks denote conversations where a recording or the pace of a conversation allowed me to capture the conversation verbatim. When I do not use quotation marks, I have reconstructed conversations from notes I have taken when I was not able to capture every single word. Thus some conversations are written with the use of quotation marks and some are not.

Mental Illness through the Lens of Disability Studies

I come to the study of this community as a theologian who uses ethnographic methods and as a disability scholar. I am not trained as a mental health practitioner nor as a psychiatrist. Thus, I attempt to describe behaviors and interactions within the parish as I observe them or as I hear them described rather than analyzing them through a medical model. For example, I describe genres of touch and what this touching evokes within community, rather than asking what mind-body processes lead a certain group to use touch rather than speech or how certain kinds of medications are affecting the embodied interactions of the community. In doing so, I assume the legitimacy of non-conventional forms of interaction and behavior. By drawing on my own experiences and the experiences of others who participate and encounter this community, my primary interest lies in investigating communal experiences of church with and through disability. I seek to keep the disabled and non-disabled together as theological subjects within my field of inquiry rather than to turn to the disabled body or mind as an object of inquiry. At times, I offer explanations for both conventional and non-conventional forms of interaction when people in the community choose to explain behaviors for me, and I want to highlight their interpretations of themselves or one another.

I use disability criticism to consider the activities of persons with diagnoses that explicitly label them as mentally ill or as people with mental health challenges. Psychiatric disability is not a term that is cited at Holy Family, where mental illness or mental health challenge/disorder is more commonly used to refer to the experiences of many congregants. While some scholars might desire a clear distinction between disability and mental illness, much disability criticism emphasizes different forms of embodiment on a continuum rather than making hard distinctions between embodied experiences. I find three approaches of disability criticism particularly helpful in thinking through the relationships that Holy Family explicitly seeks to nurture and transform.²¹

First, disability studies and theologies tend to emphasize the capacities and limitations of embodied minds as manifest through relationships with other people and places and through political, religious, and social assumptions about what it means to be human. That is, if I come to know myself as mentally ill, I come to know this through cultures, environments, and discourses that give me that designation and that construct some behaviors as sane and others as crazy. Real suffering exists, and people desire that their bodies be transformed in light of this suffering. However, these desires are inextricably enmeshed in social relationships and cultural representations through which people negotiate their own meaning and worth. Through these relationships and representations, we learn to identify the meaning of sickness and health, capacity and incapacity; we learn to name and understand our conditions, as well as envision alternatives. Using the language of psychiatric disability, I identify two systems

²¹ For a brief introduction to the term “disability” from a disability studies perspective, see Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, “Disability,” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5–11.

(psychiatry and law) through which persons at Holy Family come to know themselves and others as normal or abnormal. In doing so, I acknowledge both the usefulness and the limitation of these systems that describe human life in this way.

Second, disability studies as a form of critical discourse, therefore, emphasizes that in order to talk about a particular category of embodiment (woman, black, queer, disabled, sick, crazy) we must also think carefully about the construction of its opposite. What kinds of behavior come to be designated as abnormal and through what relations to the normal? What sorts of descriptors, capacities, and aesthetics come to set the able bodied apart from the disabled, the mentally healthy from the mentally ill, the sane from the insane, the ordered mind from the disordered one? In particular, disability discourse highlights the “normal” as an exclusive and elusive category—one that often remains uninterrogated and, therefore, works against an affirmation of human difference. If, in a given year, one in four American adults experiences a diagnosable mental illness and over sixty million Americans live with mental illness, disability studies raises questions about what constitutes a “normal” human life.²² Thus, disability studies provides a critical framework for understanding how mental illness, a common human experience, occupies an aberrational and stigmatized position.

Third, disability scholarship also tends to emphasize vulnerability, interdependence, accommodation, and bodily variation and change as part of what it means to be human. This emphasis stands in opposition to certain ideals of ability, health, wholeness, independence, progress, and normalcy that are unattainable or unsustainable

²² National Alliance of Mental Health, *Mental Illness Facts and Numbers* (March 2013). According to NAMI's figures one in seventeen adults will be diagnosed with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression.

over the course of a human life. While there are different forms and degrees of joy and suffering, all of us face radical changes in our embodied minds and relations with the world and with others throughout the course of our lives. Some disability theorists emphasize that if we live long enough, most of us will experience disability. Thus mental illness is not an extraordinary fate that affects only a small number of abnormal people, but a condition that is shared among many families and communities. Disability must be reckoned with as part of human life; it is not something from which we can isolate ourselves.²³

In this work I use the terms “psychiatric disability,” “mental illness,” and “mental difference.”²⁴ Mental illness is language that is used most often by the people I encounter at Holy Family; I use it as a description indigenous to the community and to the surrounding culture. Psychiatric disability places this community within a larger conversation about what disability means and provokes as it encounters the assumptions of normalcy and ableism. The language of mental difference emphasizes the fact that a range of body-minds are present within any human community, even if particular mental differences come to characterize Holy Family. By using alternate terms I intend “to recognize the complex interactions among individuals, their illnesses, and the larger

²³ Recent North American discourses about gun violence and public shootings illustrate this desire to distance and distinguish between normal and abnormal persons. As discussions focus on how to keep guns away from the mentally ill, persons with mental illness quickly become associated with a potential violence that those who do not live with mental illness are automatically exempt from. When I ask my students what they think of when they hear the words “mental illness,” they quickly respond with notions of instability and violence.

²⁴ For an insightful reflection on the liabilities and benefits of different kinds of language used for mental disability, see Margaret Price, “Defining Mental Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, fourth edition (New York: Routledge, 2013), 298–307.

social contexts in which these are all embedded.”²⁵ Thus, I work to keep multiple frames for identifying and understanding human persons and interactions in play.²⁶

Disability and the Christian Church

In *The Disabled God*, theologian Nancy Eiesland describes significant ways that Christian theologies have failed people with disabilities. She names these as “carnal sins” of the institutional church, forms of injustice which reveal not only the fragility of human bodies but also the fragility of the church that claims to be a witness to God’s love in the world. These theologies have prevented the church from accessing the lives of persons with disabilities, as well as barring disabled persons from the symbols of the church. In doing so, these theologies regard disabled persons as props and instruments of theological inquiry, rather than as “historical actors and theological subjects.”²⁷

Eiesland identifies three “carnal sins” that have prevented churches from accessing the lives and insights of people with disabilities. First, she argues that the church has tended to practice segregationist charity. While congregations desire to help people with disabilities, they often maintain safe distances between church members and those whose forms of embodiment might challenge the theologies and body practices of the church. Charitable practices that focus on helping and healing individuals—those deemed dependent or needy—often obscure the broader questions of “political

²⁵ Karen Nakamura, *A Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 25.

²⁶ For two helpful introductions to mental illness from a disability studies perspective, see *ibid.*, 35–69, and Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1–24. For a theological perspective on mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, from a practical theologian and former mental health professional, see John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

²⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 67–70.

engagement and social inclusion.” Second, the church has used persons with disabilities as examples of “virtuous suffering.” By highlighting their suffering as a means of divine work in the world, the church symbolizes disability as a temporary test to be endured for a spiritual reward. Disabled lives provide inspirational examples of suffering and overcoming for others. Such theologies have been used to further isolate people with disabilities and to encourage them to adjust to unjust circumstances. Third, the church has participated in what Eiesland calls the “sin-disability conflation,” where a causal relationship between sin and impairment is implicitly or explicitly evoked. Disabilities are associated with evil; they are not part of God’s good intentions for the world, and thus, persons with disabilities become evidence of the sinfulness of the created order that God seeks to heal and transform.²⁸ Through these three critiques, Eiesland identifies what she sees as a persistent thread in Christian theology: persons with disabilities are “either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero.”²⁹ Such theologies fail to represent “the ordinary lives and lived realities of most people with disabilities.”³⁰

Holy Family is a community that seeks to transform these carnal sins of the church into new relations with persons who are often excluded from ecclesial practices and theologies. Although the church explicitly promotes its Friendship Circle activities as part of its mission, it intentionally distances itself from a communal ethos that views persons with mental illness as recipients, rather than full participants, in community. In a

²⁸ Ibid., 70–75.

²⁹ Ibid., 70.

³⁰ Ibid., 75.

pamphlet written about Holy Family entitled “WHO we are! WHY we are! WHAT we are!” I read this assertion:

It seems so difficult for many to accept the fact that Holy Family is not a Church with a program for the mentally ill. Just as we are not a church with a program for women or persons of differing races, cultures, or lifestyle preferences; we are likewise not a church with a program for the poor, the ill and/or the oppressed. **They are us.** We are one body. We are a church. They run for church office, serve on parish boards and committees and help lead our congregation in worship. We at Holy Family do not differentiate between persons or types of persons. Together we respect the dignity of every human being as all are welcome and included in our community.

And in a newsletter reporting on activities in the Friendship Circle, the community is described this way: “We are not a community of staff and clients, or even staff and participants. We are a community in the tradition of mutuality. We are all participants, we all benefit from [the Circle] and we are all supporters and friends of one another.” Holy Family does not speak of its parishioners as singled out for divine blessing, nor is mental illness connected to discourses of evil and sin. Rather, congregants, interns, and volunteers explicitly and implicitly challenge other churches and communities to consider how they might be more welcoming to persons with mental illness and participate in the work of social inclusion.

At the same time, like any community of radical difference that embodies a shape of communal interaction rarely found in the wider church or society, Holy Family struggles to become a group that is not easily divided: into “us and them”; into people who have mental illness and people who do not; into people who have money and people who do not; into residents of group homes (a greater percentage of whom are black) and leaders, church visitors and volunteers, and donors (most of whom are white). Such divisions are performed regularly through church structures, liturgical practices, and

patterns of administration. Sunday congregants who work during the week rarely attend the Friendship Circle activities or experience the relationships created there. Few people from group homes participate in the primary decision-making positions and committees of the church.³¹ At the same time, these power structures affect the shape, the rhythms, and the meanings of community life together as well as performing what is considered the primary “work” of the church. A smaller group of persons who do not live in group homes is often asked to bear numerous responsibilities for the everyday running of buildings, meetings, congregational care, and fundraising efforts. Many of the home-owning, wage-earning congregants must find money to provide for the inclusion of persons from group homes and for sustaining community programs and meals.³² Such asymmetries in care and responsibility for Holy Family provide potential places of fragility and explicit divisions within the community. They raise questions about who and what is central to the work of the people that Christian liturgy assumes.

Eiesland argues that the church’s constant conversion to a more truthful understanding of God involves “two-way access,”³³ so that persons who have historically been marginalized find themselves at the “speaking center” of their own lives in a community of grace and struggle and the community itself comes to understand God

³¹ Potential divisions in the church are not primarily identified as occurring between those with mental illness and those without mental illness, but rather, between persons from group homes and those who are able to live in their own homes and maintain full time work. A number of the staff and committee members identify themselves as persons with mental illness but also identify their choice to “pass” as normal or to “come out” as a person with mental illness. Persons from group homes, who embody the intersections of disability and poverty, are often immediately identifiable as those unable to perform the activities, work, or social interactions of a “normal, healthy person.”

³² Holy Family receives significant support from the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, which pays the salary of its vicar in addition to other forms of monetary and institutional support. At the same time, Holy Family must raise additional funds to support its Circle staff and programs. During my time at Holy Family, raising such funds was a significant source of concern and stress for leadership at Holy Family, most of whom were not people from group homes.

³³ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 20–21.

differently in light of the experiences of people with disabilities. She argues that it is not enough to make a physical space within a church building for persons with disabilities, but that the actual “body practices” of the church must be transformed.³⁴

As a participant-observer at Holy Family, I both look for evidence of two-way access and study forms that facilitate such bridges across difference. I ask: How do the community’s body practices incorporate and make space for the differences of congregants? What kinds of relationships shape the possibility of shifting not only the speaking center but also the moving, dancing, sitting, walking, and reading centers of the liturgy? What forms of interaction resist the asymmetries of power that so easily divide faith communities, where hierarchies threaten and sometimes obscure the work and witness of Love? Conversely, I also ask: What are the obstacles that prevent such a community from being held together and acting together as a communal body able to bear witness to Divine Love?

For Eiesland, as for others who think theologically through the lens of disability, these questions are not only about justice for persons who are excluded from the church;³⁵ rather, they are also about the possibility that Christian communities will cut themselves off from experience of the infinite differences that illumine Divine Love and Justice. When congregations fail to recognize persons with disabilities, they also fail to adequately name God. People with disabilities surface new truths about what it means to be in relationship with God and others, uncovering hidden histories of the Christian tradition.³⁶ Such embodied truths participate in an “insurrection of subjugated

³⁴ Ibid., 112.

³⁵ As her book illustrates, they may find alternate forms of community.

³⁶ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 98.

knowledges” that Eiesland describes as “the corporate enactment of the resurrection of God.”³⁷ In other words, Christian churches need the wisdom and struggle of disabled lives to help them interpret anew their holy texts and body practices, their traditions of gathering, their symbols and sacraments, in order to grasp the latent truths suppressed through segregation and stigma.

The One and the Many

To attend to the wisdom of disability within Christian community is to question what disability theorist Tobin Siebers calls “the ideology of ability”³⁸ or what theologian Thomas Reynolds describes as “the cult of normalcy.”³⁹ It is to query assumptions about able-bodied human capacities as prescriptions for gathering as church. It is to mine the implicit prerequisites for experiencing and manifesting love and knowledge of God and neighbor through prayer, praise, contemplation, and reflection. It is to ask about the subtle forms through which we isolate and elevate individual persons or devalue and obscure their differences through assuming their similarity with others in community.

Descriptions of Christian worship often assume an ideal worshipper, who is also an able-bodied, able-minded congregant capable of demonstrating that he is being shaped by God through the sacraments and Christian practices in a particular way.⁴⁰ If, as a

³⁷ Ibid., 105.

³⁸ Tobin Anthony Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, fourth edition (New York: Routledge, 2013), 279. Siebers writes, “The ideology of ability is at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons.”

³⁹ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 59–63.

⁴⁰ Molly Haslam argues that theological anthropologies often describe what it means to be human in a way that occludes the intellectually disabled. I would argue that liturgical anthropologies also often assume capacities that do not assume intellectual differences in their descriptions of and prescriptions for individual

liturgical theologian, I only focus on ideal individual capacities to perform and grasp Christian practices of prayer, interpretation of Scripture, and participation in communion, then I imply that certain people with disabilities lack the proper ability to be in relationship with God. Graver still, I imply that they lack the preferred abilities to participate in Christian worship in a way that reflects the depth of liturgy's symbolic meaning. For example, when a congregant from Holy Family goes forward to take communion, grabs the wafer from the priest, dunks it in the wine, refuses to say "Amen," and rather than consuming it, brings it back to stick it in his pocket or in the prayer book, he becomes an unlikely exemplar of Christian community. While loving exceptions might be made for such a congregant, who is unable to show the reverence or intentionality expected of him, such a person would not be conferred the implied status of ideal Christian practitioner. At the same time, other congregants might experience the presence of this congregant as central to their worship at Holy Family. His presence might serve as an icon of the cherished differences that are essential to being a worshipping community at Holy Family, even if he is not an ideal practitioner.

Focusing on an idealized, synchronized communal body often obscures the diversity of individuals, the forms by which the many congregants access a common liturgy, and the varied tones and textures throughout a gathered assembly. If I describe a parish as an assembly capable of doing and being one thing, I might obscure the full range of responses and experiences occurring throughout the liturgy and liturgies of the community. For example, when I note that the congregation at Holy Family offers

and communal responses to God and one another. Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

prayers of intercession together by responding in unison, “Lord, hear our Prayer,” such language fails to conjure the group on the back right who appear to be sleeping. It also fails the two in the front right who eagerly desire to insert the names of their beloved family and friends into the formal prayers we are reciting. Worship at Holy Family is different depending on where and with whom I sit and stand. I will argue that such differences matter not only to the prayers that are offered but also to a theological understanding of a beautiful liturgy as pleasing to God. Those with whom I worship contribute to a theological aesthetic of gathering and sending a communal body even if they seem to be utterly disengaged or disruptive to others.

Theologian Min-Ah Cho writes of the urgency of attending to the divergent responses of those who are present:

The weakness of the believers at the margin, their “flaws” and “crooks” are precisely the nudge that their power lodges, as they reveal the illusion of the homogenous institution. Even though they seem passive and guided by established norms, each of them is an agent that brings divergent plurality to the institution and alters its conventional determinations. Without the individual bodies, the body of Christ remains dormant and fails to incarnate.⁴¹

Cho emphasizes what may be lost when we elevate the communal response as a way to counter an individualistic one. *The many* may obscure *the one*; but *the one* is always affected by *the ones* around her. Her worship is informed by the bodies that open or obstruct her way into the church, the individuals who border and nudge her thanksgiving or petition or lament. Thus, the quest for a liturgical theology that captures the “divergent plurality” of Holy Family includes a frame that holds the individual difference and communal action in dialogue, interanimation, and tension.

⁴¹ Min-Ah Cho, “The Body, To Be Eaten, To Be Written: A Theological Reflection on the Act of Writing in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée,” in *Women, Writing, Theology: Transforming a Tradition of Exclusion*, ed. Emily A. Holmes and Wendy Farley (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 205.

Theological Aesthetics through Embodiment, Art, and Beauty

Theological aesthetics affords a nuanced yet dynamic way to attend to dimensions of difference and interdependence present within a communal body through individual bodies. Attending to bodies, to sensory experiences, and to the performance arts evoked by clusters of individuals within the church helps me to recognize the possibilities of difference while at the same time refusing to elevate individual capacities as the ideal for those who come in through the open door of the church.

Likewise, when I think of communal interactions at Holy Family, in all their ambiguity, the word *beauty* comes to mind; the way that beauty, in all its culturally constructed and often very conventional forms, calls forth attention and invites some shared word or comment of appreciation or curiosity. I consider this word *beauty* not only in relationship to the ostensible pleasures of an ecclesial gathering but to all of the sensory experiences that evoke disgust or confusion in this community: strong body odors and disheveled clothing; a man's pants falling down; the way some people who no longer have teeth eat their food; some people standing too close to others and staring; someone's condescending words to another; and someone else's expressionless face. Are these beautiful too, or ugly, or neither? What makes someone or something beautiful, and for whom?

According to theologian Edward Farley, Christian theological language has often neglected beauty as a lens through which to consider a relationship with the divine as well as to trace the process of redemption. Fearful of idolatry and concerned that beauty is a superficial distraction from the ethical dimensions of faith, Christians have paid

insufficient attention to beauty as a way to describe the Christian life.⁴² Reflecting on the absence of an aesthetic dimension in his own theological writing, Farley observes, “It was as if the most concrete way in which human beings experience their world—namely, their emotional participation in surprising, interesting and attractive events—had no place in the world of faith.”⁴³ What might it mean, he asks, to take this dimension of faith and beauty seriously?

Farley distinguishes the “aesthetic” as an immediate relation to beauty mediated through embodied experience from “aesthetics” as a theological consideration of the arts.⁴⁴ Thus, he articulates two approaches to the relationship between Christian faith and human embodiment: theological aesthetics attends to the relationship between religion and the arts, and a theological aesthetic reflects on beauty’s role in the life of faith. Both require discernment of embodied practice and response. Both involve attention to the sensory experiences of faith, to the way it *feels* to be faithful.

Farley argues that discerning a theological aesthetic begins with attention to the beauty in “redemptive transformation,” which he describes as a life moving from unfreedom to new freedom through transcending oneself toward another in need. Made in the image of God, humans are freed by God for a transcending turn in which freedom and compassion are non-competitive. Discerning what is beautiful has to do with identifying the faith of one who is called to respond to another: a theological aesthetic tracks the shape of this faith, its desires and hopes for “ethical self-transcendence” in a relationship

⁴² Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 6–12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

with another through divine grace. It looks for the beauty inherent in such a relationship and tracks the sensations that a life of such hopeful turning to another arouses in them.⁴⁵

For Farley, beauty, as a theological term, marks the lived experience of one's outward turn to another, a turn both passionate for another and restrained by the needs of the other. As we turn to the ones who call to us—through their need for us to turn—we become beautiful, and the turning arouses our interest and desire in the beauty of another. A theological aesthetic thus implies an inherent sweetness, an eroticism to asceticism: a faith in the pleasures of the disciplines of loving God and another. Beauty in this sense “means the inevitable grace of a living body as it movingly negotiates the world of space, place, time, and gravity.”⁴⁶

In an alternate analysis of the aesthetics of Christian doctrine, Serene Jones also articulates two approaches to theology: one analyzing the category of beauty (a theological aesthetic, using Farley's definition) and another offering a more detailed analysis of “what particular features of something—an idea, an object, a person—make it appealing to us or not” (a theological aesthetics). For Jones, this second level of analysis should focus on “the qualities of a given topic or object—its form, shape, texture, proportions, feel, sound, color, and so forth.”⁴⁷ Giving an example of the aesthetics of a Christian understanding of creation, Jones asks: “What does creation look like when we see it in our mind's eye: what does it taste like, what colors appear when we hear the term; what memories do we associate with it, what kind of music does it play?” This kind of theological analysis connects with the affective connotations of particular Christian

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83–99.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁷ Serene Jones, “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 22–23.

discourses. To explore the meaning of a Christian doctrine, we begin by asking: Does it make one fearful or indifferent, or does it elicit passion or desire?⁴⁸ Jones, like Farley, suggests a different approach to evaluating faithfulness to Christian belief, one that traces the subtle patterns of embodied relationships within and among human persons.

In this dissertation I begin by using theological aesthetics as an analytic tool, with attention to both sensory descriptions of bodies in space and time and to the artistry of relationships that constitute the parish of Holy Family. I remain as close as possible to the affective responses and embodied interactions that constitute the space, time, form, and names of Holy Family—the qualities of the given congregation and the associations to which they give rise. I hope to turn my readers from fear or indifference to desire for the kind of community that Holy Family hopes for and imagines. In doing so, I also propose an understanding of “art forms,” broadly conceived, as a helpful frame for describing the unities and coherence of Holy Family’s practices with attention to the nonconformity of human differences. I illustrate how an expansive week-long liturgy is created with and through particular configurations of individuals in ongoing, flexible, imaginative, and collaborative forms that exist alongside assumed sets of Christian practices (reading prayers, listening to scripture and a sermon, participating in communion, silence).

At the same time, I also use a theological aesthetic as I evaluate these forms and the relationships they help to create through the lens of beauty as a theological and ethical category. I want to argue for a theological criteria of beauty as a means of assessing the communal life of Holy Family: its hopes and fragilities, its strange humor and its suffering, its cohesion and incoherence, its consent to difference and its powerful

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23–24.

hierarchies of ability, wealth, and race. In this dissertation I argue that beauty, as a theological mark of consent to a shared liturgy, matters to an unconventional, disabled church community struggling to incorporate difference into the heart of its gathering.

In choosing aesthetic/s as an analytic framework, I join a company of disability scholars and theologians concerned with how senses of the good and beautiful exclude many bodies from the desires of others. In the contrasts they establish, some definitions of goodness and beauty thwart desire and, instead, conjure up disgust, revulsion, or fear in the wake of strange difference. At the same time, disability scholars and theologians also emphasize the potential of the arts as catalysts for altered experiences of difference and for the transformation of human perception to new understandings of what it means to be beautiful. They maintain the hope that “rare beauty” might be allowed to do the works of justice in the world.⁴⁹ Aesthetic concerns can be said to serve justice insofar as they probe the heart of stigma. Sharon Betcher asks: “What ‘rites of passage’ make sharing of this everyday world and our urban neighborhoods possible among bodies with whom we do not always share taste, smell, or cultural resonance?”⁵⁰ She goes on, “To find a place of equanimity, of deep love and insight about the world, humanity, and our urban situation will require the navigation of disgust, fear, and pain otherwise than by encultured avoidance, will require the ‘cripping’ of urbanely assumed Platonic notions of beauty.”⁵¹ Betcher describes the vocation of Christians who seek to transform the aesthetics of public life through intentionally navigating and occupying the streets of a

⁴⁹ I borrow this phrase from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s description of disability activists who use their bodies to help us understand beauty in a new way. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 188–189.

⁵⁰ Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology for the Global City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17. For a discussion of the term “crip” see footnote 76.

city.⁵² In turn, I pursue the aesthetic encounters offered by a church: through the places it creates and sustains and through the persons who navigate and occupy it.

A turn to theological aesthetic/s also marks the work of scholars who consider the subtle ways that oppression moves through the guise of the well-intentioned and charitable congregation. For these theologians, an emphasis on aesthetics invites witness and reflection on power, stigma, and violence without proclaiming solutions that only further obscure the means by which certain bodies, minds, and lives are inherently idolized over others.⁵³

I find a particularly helpful example in Anthony Pinn's reflection on the significance of arts for theologies that take human bodies seriously. In *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*, Pinn argues that black theologies, in their quests for liberation from unjust systems, often exit certain normative hierarchies only to reinscribe harmful constraints through other exclusive definitions of a good human life. Thus, he argues that when black religious communities seek freedom from the pervasively racist ideologies and institutions of North American cultures, they often force worshippers to identify themselves through other rigid and reductive categories that fail to account for the complexity of human beings: certain definitions of black and white, cults of domesticity and notions of masculinity, descriptions of good and evil, and even distinctions between human and non-human. Pinn argues that the task of theology is not to fix and confine bodies but to move with them, finding new ways to keep embodied

⁵² Ibid., 22–23.

⁵³ See, for example, a theological interpretation of the arts and of beauty in James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, second revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992). James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, reprint edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 93–119. See also M. Shawn Copeland's focus on human beauty in theological anthropology in M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 7–22.

lives visible in relation to the social and religious definitions that identify them.

Theologians must engage in this task without pretending to escape the discourses within which we all live and move.⁵⁴

Pinn broadens the discourses in which theology moves by turning toward the public arts. He finds resources for black theology in photography and hip hop, in the blues, and in abstract expressionism. He regards these art forms as an interrogative rather than prescriptive mode of struggle. Interrogative art both keeps individual particularity perceptible and troubles the rigid categories through which embodied lives seek expression. In doing so, some art communicates a genre of “creative disregard” that respects religious forms and institutional norms while also calling them into question, sometimes playfully, sometimes angrily, sometimes mournfully.⁵⁵ Pinn’s work raises provocative questions for a community like Holy Family, which not only seeks to exit the practices of charity, segregation, and stigma, but also desires justice for congregants who live without adequate resources and community support.

At the same time, there is a danger that Holy Family as a liturgical community exits certain harmful relations only to reify other stigmatizing identities. For example, on Sunday mornings, those who can read and participate fully in the explicit liturgy of the community and those who cannot read and participate in such ways are set apart from each other. Every Sunday I watch some members refuse to engage the two to three books we use to worship, and I watch others who begin by engaging with the texts and stop somewhere in the middle of the service, apparently giving up or growing disinterested.

⁵⁴ Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 38–52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24–33, 123–141.

Still others keep the books open without singing or reading. While Holy Family is intentional in offering forms of community life that everyone can take part in, there are also occasions in which some people are invited again and again to do what they seemingly cannot. Disability scholars Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell critique a rehabilitation approach to persons with disabilities that reinforces a “persistent historical attention to formulations of disability as excessive functional deficit.” They ask, “What is the psychic toll of repetitiously attempting to perform activities beyond one’s ability?”⁵⁶

While Pinn turns to public art forms outside the institutional church in order to address this question, my intention is to extend a definition of artistic forms and to think them from within the community. How does a church keep mental difference visible, audible, and palpable without dismissing it as distraction or deviation from the common good? What I find most surprising and arresting at Holy Family are the artistry of interpersonal connections that make community life not only possible but also joyful. I identify a form of performance arts in the creativity of interactions that enable a frame for difference to emerge from Holy Family’s liturgical choreography. I choose the phrase “art form” rather than the word “practice” to highlight the differences that arise within the congregation rather than to evoke regular habits of worshippers. It is my conjecture that such art forms complicate categories of exclusion and practices of condescension that obscure the lively and perplexing differences of people in the church. These forms also illumine how congregants creatively regard and disregard expectations or anticipations, turning them into something new. For example, where leaders often assume what

⁵⁶ Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 8.

liturgical theologian Siobhan Garrigan calls “the myth of the single acting agent”⁵⁷ (i.e. will everyone please turn to page 121 in the hymnbook?), there are ways in which people at Holy Family interrogate these ideals of uniform liturgical ability.

One man, who is almost blind, walks and plays bingo with the help of another woman who leads him around. I observe the two of them walking one in front of the other, her large frame followed by his slender one with his hand resting on her shoulder. They have learned the rhythms and postures by which walking in tandem is possible, and they serve as a perceptible reminder that when each individual is invited to do something, some people might only respond if others move with them. These sorts of interdependent art forms do not dispel the normative habits through which Holy Family orchestrates community life. However, they do keep visible, audible, and palpable the differences within community while at the same time transforming the possibilities for participation and access. Watching two people walk together or play bingo through the other’s presence suggests an alternate response to a liturgy that assumes capacities either on the level of individuals or on the level of the community as a whole. To mark this as an art form, rather than as a reciprocal gift between two people or the relationship between a dependent person and an independent one, is to emphasize what is created through relationships in the community. It is to draw attention to who is beside whom and what hope or harm might occur among them through their presence. Such new creations become possible within configurations of relationships that would be difficult to prescribe ahead of time, but that emerge over time from this community’s life together.

⁵⁷ Siobhan Garrigan, “The Spirituality of Presiding,” *Liturgy* 22, no. 2 (2007): 5.

Such art forms have theological significance for a community where God’s presence and transforming love are often claimed through sermon, song, and in conversation.

Dichotomies such as disability/ability, mentally ill/normal, leader/recipient of help, high-functioning/low-functioning, wealthy/poor, arrive by van/arrive by car powerfully impact Holy Family’s desire to be an inclusive community. These divisions occlude the complexities of a diverse group of people who, living out their faith, struggle with love and loss together. Like other churches, Holy Family participates in what Mary McClintock Fulkerson calls obliviousness, “a form of not-seeing that is not primarily intentional but reflexive. As such, it occurs on an experiential continuum ranging from benign to a subconscious or repressed protection of power.”⁵⁸ For Fulkerson, the theological response to wounds of obliviousness involves accessing the embodied practices through which transformation occurs: “What is needed to counter the diminishment and harm associated with obliviousness is a *place to appear*, a place to be seen, to be recognized and to recognize the other.” She sees this as “essential to a community of faith as an honoring of the shared image of God.”⁵⁹ If embodied responses to ourselves and other people obscure their particularity and beauty from us, how is it that the church might become a “place to appear” to one another?⁶⁰ In light of my experiences at Holy Family, I argue that such artistry of interpersonal relationships—performed through touch, through jokes, through gestures, through music, through stories, through paintings and tiny plants, through sitting together, through silence, through the struggle to name one’s relationship to another—are key to answering this question. People “appear”

⁵⁸ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17–21.

to one another at Holy Family insofar as these artistries bridge the socially and theologically inscribed categories through which difference is obscured. People create and manifest access to one another in their ways of inhabiting sacred space and time and in their patterns of naming their losses and desires together.

Furthermore, such artistries of social interaction are intimately involved with a theological understanding of beauty. In claiming beauty as theological, I intend the qualities of joy and pleasure that mark the possibility of non-violent transformation. Certain forms of oppression challenge Holy Family's ability to name its life together as one of love through God. Certain mysteries of human pain and difference may also make it difficult to envision a communal transformation in which oppressive practices no longer operate. Such possibilities render all the more necessary these artistries of difference as signs of love and hope for a community with psychiatric disability at its heart. To hold a community like Holy Family together as a common relation is costly and may require hard work from many of its members; but I assume that where the Spirit of God breathes and animates, beauty ensures that such a journey is humanly possible and even pleasurable. Thus, discerning beauty's presences and/or its absence is an important and even urgent theological task, one that Pinn describes as moving with bodies, noting their fluidity, and noting places where such movement is constrained or obscured.

A Liturgy in Five Movements: Gathering, Weaving, Disrupting, Naming, and Sending

To describe Holy Family as a community of difference, I follow a liturgy through five movements. While each chapter explicitly focuses on one movement, a single

chapter also highlights multiple movements. For example, the chapter on weaving also includes movements of disrupting and the chapter on sending turns a reader back to choreographies of gathering and arts of weaving. Thus, each chapter is, itself, woven of threads that run throughout the dissertation, as the movements of the liturgy are performed in concert at Holy Family.

I begin in chapter one by describing how those who gather understand their access to this church and community. I map different centers of interaction at Holy Family, exploring their relationships to one another, and making the case for a decentered liturgy that takes into account activities and relationships outside the boundaries of the sanctuary and the prayer book. Decentering a liturgy emphasizes the central works of persons who might otherwise be deemed peripheral to its movements. It also requires a definition of a week-long liturgy that does not confine common prayer to ritual actions within a church building but understands liturgy as a work of/for the people. Such work involves the multiple actions and relationships which a community might offer to God both within and outside the walls of a church building. Thus, Holy Family offers clues to the significance of a consensual and noncoercive unfolding of sacred space.

In chapter two, I examine the arts of interdependence through which congregants weave one another into community, with a particular focus on three art forms: arts of gesture and touch, arts of silence and imagination, and arts of jokes and laughter. I consider the role these unconventional arts play both in inviting people with very different abilities to be present with and through one another and in keeping the doors of the church open. I argue that, in light of barriers to a common liturgy, congregants improvise access to one another through their artistries of social interaction, revealing

such art forms to be essential to a pattern of belonging premised on consent rather than on coercion.

In chapter three, I consider how time is made for these artistries of interpersonal connection by focusing on disruption as a common experience of liturgical time at Holy Family. Arguing for disruption as a fluid category across difference, I examine how different senses of time, work, and pleasure disrupt anticipations about what it means to come to church. I describe the ambiguities of a community formed with and through people whose lives are often disrupted by poverty and by loss of families, jobs, and homes. I argue that consenting to shared time together requires an experience of time as pleasure rather than as measured by obligation. Thus, pleasure disrupts an approach to “the work of the church” as efficiently accomplishing a set of objectives or worship practices for God.

In chapter four, I return to the arts of community by exploring a fourth art form, the arts of naming. I consider how this church as a “communion of struggle”⁶¹ uses multiple discourses about what it means to be human, Christian, and mentally ill, and how the church searches for adequate names to account for the differences and desires of community members. I argue for the significance of a Christian theological method for understanding the church’s struggle to adequately name the losses and recoveries congregants experience. I maintain that a desire for consensual relationships at Holy Family is revealed in the ongoing struggle for good names for these relationships, and furthermore, that this struggle for good human names is essential to a communal pursuit of the love and knowledge of God.

⁶¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 108.

In chapter five, I explore the limitations the church faces in sending congregants to do the work it gives them to do—to love and to serve—within a segregated and increasingly gentrifying city. Given that, outside of the church, some of the congregants have lives that are deemed of little public worth, these limitations raise questions about the church’s mission. Examining Holy Family’s past and imagining its future, I consider how structures of ableism, as they intersect with racism and poverty, challenge this church’s abilities to imagine a common good for all of its members. I argue that coercive relationships outside the time and space of Holy Family trouble the consent to a shared liturgy and point to the importance of other shared spaces and times across a segregated city.

In the conclusion, I connect the artistry of interpersonal connections that I have explored in the previous chapters to the assumption of Holy Family as a place where God is manifest and works with and through human difference. I turn to beauty as a theological lens and argue for its significance in evaluating the ways that Holy Family names both its own works of love and the mysteries of divine work in its midst. I suggest that Holy Family’s creative patterns of consent to shared time, space, and form, as well as the struggles to belong to one another that Holy Family embodies, manifest a theology of beauty. Such beauty is revealed through the creation of shared surfaces spacious enough for both human difference and manifold belonging.

Being Human, Becoming the Church

Ginny tells me a story about how she first became a part of Holy Family. She came because she and her friends could no longer carry her disabled friend Belinda, for

whom she provides care, up the seventeen steps through the doors of another church they had lovingly attended for over ten years. Ginny came tearfully at first, grieving the loss of access to a church they could no longer attend together. She came alone the first time and then, the second time, accompanied by Belinda in her wheelchair. She became certain in just one Sunday that “the Spirit of God was there” and that they could find a home at Holy Family. What happened that day is a story she repeats to me on several occasions:

A guy who introduced himself as Orange Juice brought up bulletins and gave me a bulletin and handed one, *tried* to hand one to Belinda, and I said something like “Oh, thank you, she can’t read.” And he just looked at me with these beautiful eyes and said “Lady, you don’t got to know how to read to need a bulletin.” And I thought “Wow!” (She laughs.) He wasn’t scolding me but he had *told* me. (Again laughter.) And then I notice that people are singing out of the wrong books, and the books are upside down, and it was quite alright. Then I began to hear the rhythm of Roy’s voice always praying and somebody else who is no longer here always praying, and I began to see the rhythms.

Seven years later, she does not know what happened to Orange Juice, who no longer comes to the church. She still recalls him as a sign of the open door at Holy Family, a gentle challenge and reminder about what she and her loved ones needed in order to worship God.

Whom do you need in order to have a church that assumes difference at its heart?

Liturgical theologian Don Saliers asserts that “in assemblies to meet God is to meet our own human lives in unexpected form, and to ‘pray without ceasing’ is the stretch of a whole lifetime—in season and out of season, in joy and pain, in fear and hope, in great gratitude and sorrow, in cries for justice and healing and in sheer ecstatic delight in the beauty of God.”⁶² The arts of becoming church, then, have to do with the possibility of meeting human lives in an unexpected form, so as to understand the ways these lives

⁶² Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 22.

stretch our understandings of what it means to be holy, human, community, disabled, and mad. It is my hope that the readers of this text will meet their own human lives in unexpected form in the strange rhythms of liturgy, lament, love, and fragility that is Holy Family.

Chapter 1 – Gathering: Unfolding a Liturgy of Difference

“Assembly, a gathering together of participating persons, constitutes the most basic symbol of Christian worship. All other symbols and symbolic actions of liturgy depend upon this gathering in the first place.”

“Do the structures of power in the assembly, at least begin to reorder the structures of power in the world? Are yielding, love, and service present? Is the stranger—the stranger in all of us—welcome? Is the meeting accessible?”

Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People*⁶³ and *Holy Things*⁶⁴

“It should be obvious by now that turning to the liturgical tradition is not a turning away from other sites of encounter with the Holy One. It is, rather, a turning to all other sites with utmost passion and clarity—but a clarity sharpened, deepened, and nourished by liturgy.”

Teresa Berger, *Fragments of Real Presence*⁶⁵

Ethnography and liturgy both acknowledge particular locations as essential to knowledge of divine and human others. As an ethnographer, I occupy a particular place in order to participate in a kind of knowledge that I could not grasp from a distance. As a participant in liturgy, I likewise inhabit a space in order to grasp an experience of the divine I could not obtain at a distance from those with whom I gather. Ethnography and liturgy both require access to a physical location, a space for gathering that facilitates the meeting of different kinds of embodied minds. In this chapter, I trace my own paths of entry into the liturgy that is Holy Family, as well as reflect on the access of those who count themselves a part of this community. I offer an introduction to the different ways Holy Family gathers as a community and, simultaneously, a meditation on how

⁶³ Lathrop, *Holy People*, 21.

⁶⁴ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 170.

⁶⁵ Teresa Berger, *Fragments of Real Presence: Liturgical Traditions in the Hands of Women* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2005), 6.

difference is gathered within the physical location that is Holy Family. I illustrate how this difference matters to a faithful map of Christian liturgy.

Through the lens of disability, the question of access to the space of the congregation is not taken for granted.⁶⁶ It involves oak trees, picnic benches, cement steps, doorways, gardens, parking lots, and variegated landscapes that make up the contours of church. It also involves people, relationships, and different ways of imagining being together. It begins, as Eiesland reminds us, with “two-way access,” to and from the church and to and from the lives of people with disabilities, so that each informs the other.⁶⁷

In this chapter, I argue that disability, once gathered into a common space at Holy Family, transforms both an understanding of the borders of sacred space and the isolation of a sacred space called “the sanctuary.” Disability difference amplifies the space of the liturgy, decentering and creating multiple points of access, a plurality of interconnected centers. I begin with (and return to) the most recognizably liturgical of spaces, the sanctuary. It is here that the community gathers for celebrations of Holy Eucharist on Sundays and Wednesdays, and where morning and noonday prayer occur on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Alongside the sanctuary, as it assumes different movements and relationships throughout the week, I map other spaces of gathering. I argue that these spaces are not peripheral but essential to the liturgical fabric of Holy Family as it unfolds.

⁶⁶ Williamson notes the history and significance of the term: “The noun form of the word ‘access’—meaning ‘the power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something’—first appears in published texts in English as early as the 1300s. It has been used to characterize the relationship between the disabled body and the physical environment since the middle to late twentieth century.” She then describes the ways a broader set of meanings around inclusion and integration have become attached to this word in the history of disability rights. Bess Williamson, “Access,” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 14.

⁶⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 23.

In doing so, I orient readers to the daily lives of people who help to create spaces of encounter and to the interactions that characterize each encounter.

A Point of Gathering: The Center of the Sanctuary on Sunday Morning

I begin with a story told to me about the sanctuary, an image of the church that reveals central assumptions about space and difference at Holy Family. Mother Daria has been a visiting priest at Holy Family for a year when we meet at a coffee shop. As a young, queer woman, she embodies some of the differences that Holy Family gathers and affirms as part of its community. Even so, she acknowledges the congregation's struggle to make room for all of the differences of people who come. She offers me a hopeful image of what it means to gather such a diverse group on a Sunday morning. From her vantage point she witnesses the moment when the gospel is carried from the altar to the center of the sanctuary. Lifting the holy book from the altar, the deacon walks it into the congregation. According to the rubrics in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, the congregation honors the reading of good news by all standing.⁶⁸ The assembly sings a hymn and turns in their pews to face the deacon as she reads.

From the front, Mother Daria witnesses different responses to this reading. In her words, "it is an amazing vision, because everybody is in a different place, some people are just sitting down, and facing in their own world, other people are turned toward the gospel being read, other people are like . . . everyone is doing something different and it is all okay, it all fits together. It's one of my favorite visions to watch." All of these

⁶⁸ *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1979), 326.

responses evoke for her the meaning of Holy Family: it is a place where difference is part of what it means to offer a common prayer.

Gathering as an Act of Faith

What I see in this space is a faith that human variation can be gathered and held, and that the church itself is part of this holding. If I look closely at the image Mother Daria offers, I can make out the differences in abilities to read, to stand, to focus, to sing the hymns, and to follow a prayer book liturgy. I can see those in the back, who are sleeping, and the ones in the front, who whisper to one another. The various positions of human bodies around the gospel resonate with the ambiguities of a congregation's faith and its diverse narratives.

Jack, for example, first came for the food. A middle-aged white man then living in a group home with other Holy Family participants, he found the parish the way many congregants do: by word of mouth. Housemates spoke about a place to go during the weekdays. I ask Jack how he now describes Holy Family to those outside the church.

I would tell them that this is a church that is doing what the church is actually supposed to do, and that is reaching out to people with disabilities, whether they be mental or physical, and to become an intricate part in the community, and that's what they are to me. And I admit when I first came—I still use tobacco—and I came just to eat and smoke cause I was hungry. But after coming for a while and noticing the people in the garden and seeing what was going on around me, I started asking questions, and before you know it, I was a part of the church. But there are people who come just to eat and smoke.

“Is that alright, you think?” I ask.

“Yeah, that's alright.” he said. “That was me for a couple of months.”

Jack's story maps entry points into the landscape of Holy Family. He references the smoking circle at the east entrance: under a set of old oak trees not far from the

official church sign, a designated set of picnic benches and green plastic cigarette receptacles. Jack's story involves the Friendship Circle hall, where most of the eating takes place. It also identifies the garden where vegetables and flowers are grown for selling and eating, as well as for offering on Sunday morning along with the bread and wine for communion. During my time there, Jack is baptized at the font in the sanctuary with members of his family present, and then a few months later, due to a series of hospitalizations, he is absent for many months. Occasionally, other members bring news of him back to the church, reminding us of his absence. In Jack's narrative, as in many Holy Family narratives, gathering happens not once, but over time in multiple ways.

Brittany's story also highlights this multiplicity. A young black woman, one of the youngest Friendship Circle gardeners, she describes her initial encounter with the church as one not of her own accord.

"It was kind of a little bit forced because I was living in a group home, but the lady who was over the group home had us to come here, and at first I wasn't very fond of the place to be exact."

"What made you not very fond of it?" I ask.

"We came into the eating area, and it had beautiful pictures on the ceiling, but it was limited space, and I figured that's the only place we can go, to be in that space outside or in the eating area."

"Did it feel cramped?"

"It did, and it was a whole bunch of people I didn't know. That's what I remember."

After leaving for about a year and a half because of a close relationship turned sour, she returns. Brittany now comes to work in the garden, but does not attend services. She cites differences in her religious beliefs that she does not think everyone at the church would be comfortable with.⁶⁹ I ask what keeps her coming back to the Circle in spite of her initial distrust of the church space and in spite of differences that she feels distinguish her from other congregants. “I think it’s the friendship. There are a lot of people who respect you as a person. I remember when I left the Holy Family for about a year and I came back, they treated me like I was a celebrity. They yelled, and they were saying ‘yay!’ I was like, ‘I didn’t know you guys would miss me so much.’” Her return also has to do with a sense of peace she feels here as compared to other programs for the mentally ill that she has attended. “Holy Family is peaceful. There isn’t many fights. There isn’t really many people arguing. There’s just a whole bunch of friendship, and if not friendship, it’s like your distant family. You don’t really talk, but at least you know that people are there for you when you need them.”

Brittany’s narrative, too, reflects spaces and relations across the Holy Family landscape that enable her presence here. The church space that initially felt crowded, transformed into an experience of “distant family,” who take note of her coming and going, even if she does not engage with everyone. The garden, which centers her time at Holy Family, provides a space outside the eating and worshipping areas where she tends to friendships with other gardeners. Although she does not feel comfortable sharing her own faith with everyone who gathers, she describes her relationship to the community as one of peace rather than coercion. This has to do with her ability both to choose the

⁶⁹ Brittany was nervous about disclosing these beliefs, so I choose not to name them here.

communal aspects in which she participates and also to be part of Circle activities. For Brittany the garden itself is a site of encounter with God. Recalling a science class with a teacher who nourished her appreciation for growing things, she describes her first encounter with the Holy Family greenhouse: “When I first went into the greenhouse and started working, it was like the garden of Eden; I was in the right place.” A “right place” at Holy Family was not immediately accessible but had to be discovered over time, and it was the garden rather than the sanctuary that created this possibility.

Like Brittany, Fiona recalls an initial gathering at Holy Family as unintentional, something she may not have chosen. As a middle-aged, white woman on the vestry, who lives in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Atlanta, she remembers a slow process of belonging to this Episcopal parish. About fifteen years ago, she was a member at another parish and was invited by an active Holy Family volunteer to a social, a dance for Holy Family congregants. She recalls the intentions that compelled her to the dance:

I was just getting to know people . . . I always like to make new friends, new church community. I thought: ‘Okay, I’ll come to the dance’ . . . I had no clue what this was. I thought it was a way to meet friends at St. Mary’s, which is ultimate [wealthy Atlanta], and so I come down here and think ‘holy moly!’ That night I came and I brought Coca-Colas, and I had no idea what I was coming to and it really was quite different than my world, and it really captured me. And then I came down here (to Holy Family) and after I got over the . . . not shock, well it was shocking right at first, but after I thought, ‘what in the world?!,’ then I was really interested in learning more and then I started volunteering.

I ask what captured and shocked her.

Well, you know I’m a professional, wealthy, affluent, white woman that lives in Atlanta, Georgia, that lives an exquisite life, and so you come to Holy Family, you come to an Episcopal Church that is in [this neighborhood of] Atlanta, which I didn’t even know where it was, and it’s like, okay, (she pauses), and then everyone here is . . . they look, they speak, they smell differently, clearly very, very different, cause this is not from my world, so, just initially, it is very surprising to someone who lives in the village or the bubble that I live in. I was like: ‘What? What the hell?’ But not only negatively, just in . . . I wasn’t . . . I

didn't even know what Holy Family was . . . I think that it is not unusual actually because it's raw from our definition when you live in the bubble I live in.

“So what captured you?”

It captured me in so many different ways . . . after me getting over the shock and surprise, then I settle into (it). This is the experience of coming to Holy Family, it has been my whole life and still could be today: the very worst thing that could ever happen to me, to be homeless and to lose my mind, that would be my deepest fear of my universe, to be homeless and to lose my mind. And then you come here, and that's what this is, and I meet my fear, right there in my face, raw, staring back at me, touching me, looking at me, doing the hokey pokey with me at the dance . . . cause that was the first thing it was, a dance. That was my deepest fear, and then you settle into it and you take a breath, and you know, okay. And that's what captured me and hooked me. And the fear hasn't gone but it's . . . so I'm right here with it (the fear). . . because even from that first dance, it was fun. I didn't know anybody. Yeah it was my deepest fear, but it was fun. Everybody is so pleasant and so wildly grateful of a Coca-Cola and a hamburger, and they are so polite and so gracious to me and to each other. Just watching how my family here, how they invite everyone in—these are the kinds of things that made me want to learn more. After I go home to my village and my bubble, I think: ‘what the hell was that and who are these people and let me learn more’ and so I kept coming back . . . As a friend of mine says, you put your toe in the water and then your foot in the water and then your ankle in a little bit, so you come on Wednesday night suppers and you get to know the group. And I kept coming back, learning, and just being really interested, and interested in mental illness and poverty and learning about my friends here . . . I'm kind of embarrassed. This could be anybody. This could be my brother. This could be me. These are just my family here that suffers from severe mental illness and poverty. From where I sit, I often think, you know, we're all . . . what I have are resources and a support network that keeps me tethered to my bubble and my village, but it's real, I believe passionately, for all of us, fragile, and if you become ill and/or your resource network goes, anybody could be here. You could come from any walk of life. This could be me.

Fiona speaks of spaces that are utterly segregated, and at the same time, she speaks of these spaces as permeable. She imagines that she could end up on the street or in a group home if she were to lose her mind, her social network, and her material resources; she could see herself attending Friendship Circle on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She enters Holy Family through a dance hall in another parish and also through the eating of hamburgers and the drinking of Coca-Cola, which she brought as an offering to the

social. Fiona rarely comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when Brittany attends Holy Family, but she describes Wednesday evening Eucharist and the suppers afterward as a place where she learns how to “take a breath and settle” into a space apart from the bubble of wealth she describes as home. It is a space that helps her move from the segregated, protected village of her “exquisite life” to the “difference” of poverty and mental illness that she struggles to define. Fiona eventually leaves her membership in the wealthier parish and becomes a Sunday morning regular; she later moves into a leadership position at the church. After that position ends, she also disappears for a time.

Another leader and staff member in the Friendship Circle, a young, white man, Neil, recalls being gathered into life at Holy Family when he was a ministry intern from a local theology school. He locates a particular time and space when his lines of identification crossed with those of Circle participants, and he knew he could be a part of Holy Family.

My job [as an intern] was just to come and be with people. I thought that was the greatest thing ever . . . I wasn't a chaplain facilitating this prayer service, I was Neil, who was getting to know a host of people and in the process evaluating what my own hang-ups were and the ways I was preoccupied with myself that was damaging to others. . . . At the time I was going through some very dark days myself. I was very depressed. . . . My marriage was dissolving. I was in a bad place. I was drinking extremely heavily, I mean, shocking amounts of alcohol each day, and living just a very sad, depressed, and lonely life, and meanwhile coming to church here. (He begins to laugh.)

“And it was a good place to come?” I ask. “How did you find it as someone who was feeling in a dark place?”

“And it was a very healing place to be.” He reflects on this comment a moment, and then tells a story to illustrate this.

I missed a week of site work because I was hospitalized for psychiatric observation for suicidal ideation. So I just, I called in sick. I missed that week,

and the next week I was back again. I was sitting out at the picnic benches drawing because I just love to draw. I'm not very good, but I love to draw. I drew a picture of Karl Marx that week. *The Life and Writings of Karl Marx* is a book I got out of the church free library downstairs. And I drew this picture, which was a bust of Karl Marx, and I didn't label it. I just drew it. And later that day I pinned it to the board where everyone pins everything that they draw. And the next week I came back and it had a giant red X; someone had exed through Karl Marx. Apparently, a very passionate opposition to Karl Marx! I just left it up there cause I thought it was hilarious, and the next week I came back, and it had been torn into eighteen pieces and then repinned to the board. So apparently someone was very opposed to my drawing of Karl Marx. Anyway, to get back to the story again, so I'm sitting at the picnic benches and drawing . . . and the man sitting next to me is Jason, who in many ways, is, or no longer is, but has been one, of the most significant sources of frustration in my employment at Holy Family. I would not say he is my nemesis, but if I had a nemesis, it would be Jason.

And so Jason said, 'We missed you last week. You weren't here.'

And I said, 'No, I was out for the week.'

And he said, 'Well, where were you?'

And I said, 'I just, I wasn't feeling well. I didn't come in.'

And he said, 'What was wrong? What was wrong?' (Neil uses his voice to imitate Jason's pestering voice.)

And I said, 'Well I had made plans to kill myself, and instead of killing myself, I committed myself for psychiatric observation. And I was in the hospital.'

And he said, 'Which hospital were you in?'

And I said, 'I was in [this] hospital.'

And he said, 'Well, which room were you in?'

And I said, 'I was in the first room to the right.'

And he goes, 'Oh! The one with the huge plexiglas window?! The plexiglas observation wall?!'

And I said, 'Yes, the one directly in front of the nurses' station where all of the family members just come in and sit and watch you, literally, watch you in this misery.'

And he said, 'Man, that's the best room in the house!'"

Neil concludes the story:

So, I just . . . that was a very clarifying moment for me . . . Almost immediately my identification with people at Holy Family changed radically. It wasn't me talking to a staff member about being a vegetarian, blah, blah, blah, but it was me chatting with Jason about the best room in the house for psychiatric observation. (He laughs.) That was a significant experience for me.

As I listen to Neil's story, I am struck by Neil's response to Jason's persistence,

which assumes that Jason can handle the full truth of Neil's story. I note the

unconventional lack of pity or horror that Jason displays for Neil's struggle. As I listen to Neil, I can easily imagine this conversation taking place at Holy Family: two people sitting outside, side by side on a bench, each doing their own thing (Neil is drawing Karl Marx), but also engaging one another in a way that is both intimate and casual. As Neil's story illustrates, relationships are not always easy at Holy Family; yet, Neil finds it is possible to share aspects of his life that he may have withheld in another community, where stigma makes it difficult to share the struggles of mental illness. Neil locates his access to the church through a bench where he and Jason sat. And yet this space opens a common experience of another space, an experience of a hospital room.

Jack, Brittany, Neil, and Fiona all narrate their initial gathering into the community as one that occurs both for and against their own desires. In the stories above, there is no direct line into the center of the church where the altar stands. Nor is there a direct line to the deacon reading from the gospel book. Access, points of entry and gathering, are mapped across the landscape of Holy Family: a set of picnic benches where a common experience of suffering can be shared, the garden where Brittany and Jack work together, the Circle hall where all four have shared meals, the smoking area in front of the church, and a dance hall outside of Holy Family in another church building.

It would be possible to read each of these access points as pathways leading into the sanctuary, entries into the Sunday morning service and the reading of the gospel. Jack, for example, begins with his hunger for a meal, moves into the garden to work, and gradually becomes a member of the church. Fiona begins by dancing with her fear and later finds the peace of the fellowship on Wednesday evenings. But as I listen to the narratives and observe the choreographies of the dance that is Holy Family, the gathering

does not follow a linear progression or direct pathway. Rather a series of centers—garden, art center, picnic tables, sanctuary, meal hall—are laid out next to one another. Each space allows for assemblies of people through which difference gathers and manifests abilities and desires differently. The communal “We” of Holy Family’s congregational liturgy is diffuse, dispersed across a set of interactions and relationships.

From the perspective of Christian liturgy, it is plausible to view these spaces as peripheral or extracurricular. Smoking and playing bingo seem to pale in comparison with the gravity of those gathered for prayer and praise in the sanctuary. Yet, in the mental maps I draw of this parish, I find it impossible to isolate or imagine the red brick building with its small brightly colored sanctuary in isolation. The spaces connected to it are the lifeblood of its work and imagination. It is also difficult for most congregants to imagine the life of Holy Family without its weeklong liturgy and without all of the physical spaces these activities entail. During difficult discussions about money, the possibility of cutting programs on Tuesdays and Thursdays is tentatively spoken aloud as a financial necessity. However, such hypotheses are met with immediate consensus that such measures cannot be considered. The weekday activities are not accessories to a Sunday gathering but animate a sense of gathering as the difference that is Holy Family.

When Fiona remarks, “I didn’t know what Holy Family was,” she evokes an enigmatic entity to be discovered. Following Fiona’s train of thought, we can ask: “What in the world is this?” What makes this a church, with and through people with psychiatric disabilities, and not a social program for those labeled mentally ill? When I explicitly raise this question, congregants often point to activities within the sanctuary—prayer, sermon, hymn singing, communion, and worship. The sanctuary materially marks it as

Christian church: with its altar and icons of the Trinity; with its sacred hymns and texts; with its celebration of Christ's body in the Eucharist; with its stations of the cross around the walls; and with its bright red banners of a dove, the Holy Spirit descending, on either side of the door.

In contrast, the Friendship Circle does not intentionally mark itself as Christian, even though there are always morning and noonday prayer options. Resisting the explicit label of Christian identity creates space for anyone who might need such programs, regardless of affiliation. In addition, a number of the Friendship Circle regulars, who regard themselves as part of Holy Family, attend other congregations of other denominations. "What in the world is Holy Family?" is invariably a question about how the sanctuary as an explicitly marked liturgical center relates to other centers: the garden, smoking circle, the dining hall, and the art center two miles away. It is also a question about how the sanctuary becomes a place for yoga, community meetings, or dancing.

A vital center of gathering, the sanctuary can also be the least accessible space. Walking up the steps (or entering along the side ramp and down a hall through another entrance), I enter a small room with rows of wooden chairs facing forward. Narrow passageways along the sides of each row and a narrow aisle do not offer much room for movement as parishioners feel compelled to walk in and out during prayer book services. Each chair is surrounded by six texts (hymnals and prayer books) while those who sit in each chair often struggle to read. In this Sunday sanctuary space, congregants from group homes never preach and rarely serve as lectors. They are usually welcome to respond as they are able but are unable to participate as able-minded members do. The Sunday

liturgical gathering accommodates disability, but anticipates the full participation of able-bodied, able-minded congregants.

Mapping a Permeable Ecclesial Topography

To map an ecclesial topography in which disability difference matters to a reading of church space, I turn first to a feminist history of contested liturgical spaces and then to a disability scholar's method for mapping disability space in contemporary urban environments. Both scholars provide helpful methods for mapping and reading sacred spaces at Holy Family and for troubling conventional assumptions about the sanctuary room as the most significant parish space.

Teresa Berger's historical work around issues of gender is important for contemporary liturgical reflection on disability because she offers a method for the unfolding of difference within traditioned ecclesial spaces. If some bodies are absent or less able to participate in certain spaces, it is an act of faith, an imperative of the liturgical practice of truthful and faithful remembering,⁷⁰ to look for the participation of these others elsewhere. As Berger claims, "The activity of 'traditioning,' then, is an ongoing, situated, and interested mode of knowing that selects, orders, and interprets."⁷¹

In her inquiry into the traditional sources of Christian liturgy, Berger argues that attention to gender within the liturgical context invites a reworking of conceptions of time (periodization), space, and source material.⁷² Through remapping the where and when of worship, more sites come to matter in accounts of liturgical history. "Ecclesial

⁷⁰ Teresa Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy's Past* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2011), 166 (citation in original omitted).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 30.

topographies” are richer and more varied. As she argues, “the nature of gendering processes in sacred space, narrowly conceived as a church building, cannot be mapped in isolation from other spaces, which themselves can become liturgical space.”⁷³ Attention to a diversity of sites reveals the shifting nature of authority and participation across different sites and invites comparative and connective moves.

Thus, as Berger emphasizes, gender has always mattered in what constitutes Christian liturgy, but gendered differences are easier to account for if we attend to the places where difference becomes most visible. For example, relations within the liturgy of a household may differ or inform relations within a public ecclesial space. Additionally, processions draw liturgical imagination to the “permeability and malleability” of what one considers sacred space. “Public, ecclesial space is interrelated with these other sites of liturgical practice, chief among them those in the domestic realm, and the public square. They are permeable or ‘porous’ toward public ecclesial spaces in a variety of ways.”⁷⁴ Berger insists that tasks such as recovery and remapping of the porous boundaries of liturgical encounter in the past are not a departure from tradition, but a trust in the Spirit’s restless, ongoing work of “traditioning.”⁷⁵ In remapping, Christian scholars pursue a more truthful rendering of where and how the divine is and has been worshipped and the multiple places through which the Christian church comes into being.

In the Holy Family context, Berger’s question can be reframed: how does the church open the sacred traditions of its past to a future more attentive to mental disability? What kinds of attention to time, space, and worship forms might this

⁷³ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 171–172.

reimagining reveal? I would argue that historical work examining disability analysis of liturgy is as necessary as analysis around gendered processes. Nevertheless, my research here is focused on a contemporary present, one that no less attends to Berger's modes of analysis.

Crip/tography and the Theological Task of Unfolding rather than Dividing Space

In an equally vital theological approach to sacred space, Sharon Betcher contemplates disability difference, desire, aversion, and obligation within global cityscapes. She proposes “crip/tography”⁷⁶ as the work of mapping the interdependence of shared city spaces by tracking the presence and absence of disability, as it intersects with race and class, in public spaces. She thereby questions the assumptions of a pluralist society that supports “ways and means of avoidance” of some by others. Crip/tography, as defined by Betcher, involves a mapping of the “physical and psychological space” that the choreographies of city life entail and create. It traces the “lines of force and avenues of resistance” by which aesthetics and expectations of inhabiting the city together are revealed.⁷⁷ Disability difference attunes the crip/tographer to enforced expectations for beautiful public spaces through the implicit or explicit division of certain individuals from others. It also locates sites of empathy and shared pain.⁷⁸ Like Berger, Betcher assumes that mapping is a process of unveiling the complex relations that unfold between

⁷⁶ “Crip” is a term used to describe disability by some disabled people as a reclamation of the stigmatizing term “cripple.” Victoria Ann Lewis writes of its emergence in the 1970’s disability civil rights movement as “an informal, affectionately ironic, and provocative identification among people with disabilities.” Victoria Ann Lewis, “Crip,” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 46.

⁷⁷ Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

and among various spaces. To map a space is to track the different relations possible across a set of interconnected locations.

Imagining crip/tography as a religious vocation, Betcher recalls the work of medieval “seculars” who walked the city streets in order to occupy public spaces in a revelatory way: “uncloistered religious persons who carried their spiritual passion and sense of an obligated life into temporal concerns, specifically, in their daily circumambulations of the city.”⁷⁹ Seculars were to walk and occupy the city on behalf of its inhabitants and to offer alternate visions of the materialism and the isolation that city relations often encourage and require. Betcher imagines such religious practices as able to create anew “social flesh.” Through this flesh, people assume responsibility for one another in ways that are not divisive or condescending. The resulting social responsibility deepens understandings of mutual reliance, the ways in which we share limited resources while occupying the limited space of our planet.⁸⁰ Such “social flesh” requires actual physical locations within the city to acknowledge together the “precarity” of flesh, the “existential fragility” we inherit at birth, and to nourish “corporeal generosity and forbearance” with others as a practice of nonviolence.⁸¹ Thus, the spiritual work of those who occupy the city is to reveal the spaces where social flesh becomes apparent and to nurture these possibilities. Requiring particular locations of gathering and encounter, this

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7. Betcher builds on the work of Chris Beasley and Carol Bacchi who define social flesh as an “ethico-political ideal” with an emphasis on “*embodied* interdependence” and “the *mutual* reliance of people across the globe on social space, infrastructure, and resources.” Chris Beasley and Carol Bacchi, “Envisaging a New Politics for an Ethical Future: Beyond Trust, Care, and Generosity Towards an Ethic of ‘Social Flesh,’” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 3 (2007): 280.

⁸¹ Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 7. Betcher is drawing on Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, reprint edition (London: Verso, 2006).

spiritual work deepens one's awareness of the patterns through which one way of life affects or is affected by another.

How then does the naming of “social flesh,” and the spaces that make this flesh manifest, relate to theology and its task of invoking the divine? Referring to theology as an “incantatory poetics,” as well as “a cultivated way of feeling the world by means of one's senses,”⁸² Betcher incants the Spirit as a “placeholder of the sacred,” as one who cultivates a sense of generosity, entrustment, and forbearance toward another through the sharing of common space.⁸³ Betcher recalls the Christian naming of Holy Spirit as “*pli*,” as a vision of the divine energy; it unfolds shared spaces in relation to one another. She names Spirit as a response to division of shared space rather than relation or obligation to one another through a shared location: “This loose weave of urban relations leaves us vulnerable to the apartheid of wealth and poverty, to psychic loneliness, to the compulsory, individualist task of human identity formation, and the potential political ineffectiveness of that singularly crafted identity.”⁸⁴ She imagines theology's work as naming and loosing “a *pli*—a pleat, a fold, a manifest—of Spirit over cosmopolis.”⁸⁵ The *pli* or fold of Spirit invokes a multiplicity that does not place plurality in opposition to unity; rather, it teases out the possibility of unfolded spaces rather than divided territory.⁸⁶ As she articulates it, “multiplicity does not so much then signal plurality in opposition to unity, as it looks to the actualization of plural space, of the many-enfolded—thus, of the active and energetic manifold.”⁸⁷

⁸² Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 19, 166.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

Betcher is interested in city space rather than church space and in the religious vocation of seculars rather than the liturgical vocation of churchgoers. Nevertheless, her invocation of Spirit as *pli*, the One who unfolds a possibility of gathering through difference, invites us to look again at Holy Family.⁸⁸ One notices how those who gather occupy and unfold all of the spaces around and within the church that would otherwise be spaces to pass through or by (entrance, parking lot, garden, smoking benches).

Attending to disability difference, I want to describe my own “cultivated way of feeling” the grounds of Holy Family, offering both general observations and particular encounters that evoke the liturgical and relational possibilities of each space. When I first encountered Holy Family, in the fall of 2006, I was invited by a priest to “loiter with intent.” Inheriting this phrase from a priest who came before him, Father Brian suggested an approach to becoming a part of the community that is Holy Family. Such an approach often felt strange for the group of newcomers of which I was a part. It required us to spend time at Holy Family without a clear agenda. It asked us to move slowly and carefully around the parish grounds in order to perceive what was taking place there. In this chapter, in the spirit of Holy Family’s holy loitering, I attempt to “loiter with intent” in order to shed light on the people who spend their time hanging around the red brick church building in Atlanta.

I begin with the Friendship Circle days. These two mornings a week are the heart and soul of the church for many mentally disabled congregants who not only access the space of church, but also unfold and create its meanings and possibilities. The space of the church expands through disability difference when congregants from personal care

⁸⁸ Betcher also writes of Spirit as “a necessary ‘prosthesis,’ an aid that might help us advance toward spacious and fearless empathy, toward forbearance amid messy entanglements.” *Ibid.*, 12.

homes center the relationships, hopes, and laments of church members. As Neil describes it, “This community is so beautiful, and because people work nine to five, they miss the most beautiful iterations of this community—noonday prayer, Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

The Smoking Circle

When I enter Holy Family on a weekday morning, I invariably pass through multiple centers of gathering. If I walk to the church from my home a mile and a half away, I use the east entrance. I pass by a set of picnic tables. Gathered there are the many Circle participants who smoke cigarettes. At first, I am unsure how to negotiate this space as nonsmokers rarely occupy it. I feel like an awkward intruder. If I sit down next to someone, he or she might move, wary of smoking next to me. Yet over time I look forward to the relationships, the humor, the silence, and the news that characterize this ritual of smoking together. Eventually, the smokers invite me into their circle, calling out to me as I pass to sit down and engage them in conversation.

For example, on a Tuesday morning in January, Margo calls out to me from the bench where she and Denny are smoking. They are discussing the seductive nature of the Family Dollar. “Whenever I get my money, the Family Dollar calls to me. It calls my name. ‘Margo! Margo!’ And I say, ‘I got to get out of here!’” She laments the store’s adverse effects on the small amount of cash she receives each month. Charles sits down near us. At this time, Charles regularly chants the Psalms at noonday prayer, in his own unique song-chant style. I ask him how he learned to chant the way he does. He says, “The Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s been with me my whole life, teaching me.”

Across the way Claude asks me about my New Year's celebration. "What about you?" I return the question. He shakes his head from side to side. "So-so." He hasn't been feeling well and has been falling down a lot. His family is worried about him and thinks it might be his heart since his mother and two siblings died of a heart attack. He is going to the doctor on Monday.

"Do you have hypertension?" asks Charles.

"No, high blood pressure," responds Claude.

"So hypertension," confirms Charles, and then after some time, a different response: "Claude, we'll be praying for you."

On other mornings at the smoking circle, I gather initial news of happenings in the community that I might have missed: memorable meals, a church outing, someone is sick and in the hospital, someone else is back after a long or short hospitalization.

Alexander entertains the group and gets on a few nerves with comedic monologues. He comments on something I'm wearing and teases me, asking if he can borrow it. Margo and Denny discuss a favorite TV show or a special meal. When Margo is in jail for a short time, Denny brings updates. Such joys, concerns, laments, and desires rarely make their way into the intercessory prayers of noonday, Wednesday, or Sunday services, but they are shared here in this center under an enormous, beautiful oak tree.

The Parking Lot

If I drive rather than walk, I enter through the parking lot where the vans come and go at least twice a day. There are usually one or two congregants sitting on the

cement blocks that frame the entrance. They wave at neighbors walking by and occasionally converse with them.

Max often sits here. One spring day, pausing to greet him, I ask him if he is going to noonday prayer. He tells me no; he has a problem with church. “I never seen Jesus in a church. He sits on rocks and stands up and preaches. He never went to the synagogue. You know how religious people are.” He is gentle and apologetic, reluctant to give offense. I nod sympathetically. Continuing in an associative pattern of thinking, he reflects on several stories linked by the word “church.” His parents took him to church as a child, and he couldn’t behave. They would take him out and bring him back in, and still he couldn’t behave. Then he moves to a story about sleeping in a church graveyard, during a time when he was homeless. He associates this experience with food—with fish and cranberry salad to wash it down. I attempt to follow this thread; I wonder if the church where he slept outside also served meals.

As in many conversations at Holy Family, I work to keep up with Max’s train of thought; his complex patterns of association often challenge my own mind to use a different kind of intellect than I typically employ in my graduate program. There are gaps in narratives, which I must guess at; sometimes I test my guesses with those who are narrating, but I find it common that a speaker will agree with whatever particular interpretation I offer: multiple interpretations appear valid in linking sets of associations. My interpretations are also corrected or adjusted at times, but congregants are less worried about tracing the origins of topics than I am. A conversation is a means of relation as much as an exchange of information, so it is less important that each part of the conversation cohere than that the parties gathered find a way to keep talking. Max

will sometimes apologize for taking up my time and abruptly end our conversation. I take this as my cue to move on to another space and continue our conversation at another time. He is eager to talk to me and sometimes just as eager to stop talking. Standing or sitting outside near the entrance, it is possible for both of us to move in and out of a conversation with more ease than we might otherwise. This entrance, an inherently transitional space, provides a flexibility that indoor spaces may not.

Over my time as a researcher at Holy Family, Max appears more comfortable inside the sanctuary. During Tuesday morning yoga, we sit in a small circle of folding chairs in front of the large altar. Circled around a therapy dog, we stretch, breathe, and laugh as we move our bodies. Some sit in the church pews nearby and watch us. Max rarely misses an “easy yoga” class and apologizes when he has to miss for some reason. In the second year of my research, Max attends another program and no longer comes to Holy Family. I do not know why he has left, but the church entrance is not the same without his regular presence as a greeter and conversant.

Leaving Max, I walk along the garden. Hard at work, the gardeners pull weeds, carry jugs of water from the rain barrels, dig, plant, and repot. Alongside the garden, people wander in the parking lot: looking for something to do; seeking solace or solitude; or joking as they wait for the art van. One morning, Wanita pulls a folding chair into the driveway, taking full advantage of the spring sunshine. I sit with her, crouching next to her chair. I ask how she knows so many Bible verses (she has a reputation as someone who can quote Scripture). She says that her mother would read the Bible to them all week and then make a big Sunday dinner with mac and cheese and collard greens. She lists others foods they ate with their mother. She associates the Bible with the meals that

accompanied it, as well as with the mother who read aloud and cooked. Her mother was a good woman and took good care of her, she assures me. Is she still alive? I ask, guessing that Wanita herself is in her fifties or sixties. No, she died of cancer.

Do you like the sun? I ask.

I love it! We talk and then sit in silence in the pleasure of the sunshine.

The Garden

Leaving Wanita, I make my way to the garden. A small group of Circle participants are hired as gardeners and earn wages for their few hours of weekly work. The gardeners often find the tasks difficult, a strain on tired backs and knees and medicated body-minds. They also express pleasure in the plants they grow, in the small paychecks they earn, and in the friendships they share with other gardeners although conflicts are also common.

On this sunny spring morning, Jack is happy for my help because he has trouble bending over. "You can be my knees," he tells me. He points to each place in the earth where a plant should go, and I drop the cucumber seeds. We plant two rows. Then we rake the newspaper and straw off one of the empty beds and turn over the earth. Jack is pleased with how good this earth looks. While we garden, we discuss music and sing. Jack gets excited over a story about the Moody Blues in one of the old newspapers. Later, in a more serious turn, he comments that his family does not want to spend time with him. He associates his feelings of loneliness with mental illness and with the way people with mental illnesses are treated by their families. He tells me that if he ever needs money

and contacts his family, all he has to do is threaten to come see them, and they send him money. They would rather give him money than have any contact with him.

On another morning, Jack needs my help again to retrieve a gardening tool he borrowed and forgot at home. Unlike many other Circle regulars, Jack is not on the small monthly income of Social Security Disability Insurance. He pays rent by doing yard work in the neighborhood in spite of the fact that he struggles with intense knee pain. On the drive to a house that he shares with eight others, he tells me that the neighbors do not like them.

Why not? I wonder.

Well, we have three alcoholics living with us, and they like to sit outside and drink.

I think about Jack, who is quite open about his own difficult history with alcohol and drugs, and I wonder how it is to share space with people who invariably make this ongoing struggle more difficult. He expresses affection for them.

It doesn't bother me, he shrugs.

When we return from our errand, Jack invites me to pray with the gardeners in the greenhouse before work. We move from the cold into the warmth of the greenhouse. Andie, his wife, tells him they are waiting for Ann Marie, the head gardener, to pray. Jack insists that they don't need to wait. Lloyd, an accomplished reader among the Friendship Circle group, picks up the Book of Common Prayer and reads a psalm. Jack, Andie, and Joshua wrap their arms around each other in a prayer huddle with a hand on Wallace who also stands nearby. They murmur affirmatively to encourage him as he reads. They are far more vocal than they would be during a reading at a service. Pat

stands further back from the huddle with me. I know he associates himself with another church denomination, and he appears reluctant to join in this form of prayer. As Lloyd concludes, Joshua bursts into a long prayer, praying first for former Holy Family members and for one of his closest friends who died several years ago and then names others who have died, praying for them in heaven. He prays for a sick van driver and for the priest and his wife. Joshua often prays silently for a long time before each meal begins, but I have never heard him pray aloud like this. Jack prays for me and for my work, and for other interns who came to Holy Family. Wallace prays for the van driver, too. After prayer, they set out to work. I walk across the parking lot to the Circle hall, where the game players gather.

The Friendship Circle Hall

From eight to ten, a large breakfast crowd assembles. Rose, a Circle artist and soloist at noonday prayer, administers the coffee. She maintains vigilance so that no one gets too close to the coffee station. A group sits near her station to chat with her while she works. Rose is proud of her service here and her work at the art program. She attends another church on Sundays, an African-American non-denominational church, but she also identifies Holy Family as her place. Belonging to multiple church identities and spaces seems natural to her, and she occasionally interchanges the names of the congregations.

Near the coffee station, a bingo game occupies the back right corner. Most players sit close together; a few sit apart, leaving empty spaces between themselves and their fellow players, so that they have more solitude to play. The competition is intense, and

players are called out if they try to cut corners. Ms. Mary strives to maintain the quiet necessary for everyone to hear. She admonishes anyone who gets too loud. If I join mid-game, players show off their prizes or offer to share them. One morning we laugh at how much body lotion Mr. Cornelius has accrued through his winnings; his bingo helpmate Annie has chosen his prizes for him. He doesn't appear to mind the teasing.

In the back left corner, a table is set apart for church staff or nursing students to take vital signs and paint nails. I find it interesting that health check-ups and bingo occupy the same space as the games, but also see the benefits in not having to leave this center of play and gossip and eating in order to talk to a health care professional. Proximity facilitates access. Additionally, Holy Family is a small church. Its limited spaces are therefore multiple, requiring a necessary permeability to one another. Such ways of multiplying limited space defy certain parameters of privacy, but they ostensibly fit with the ways that many congregants relate to the space of the church. They feel free to come and go from activities, to enter an office, to interrupt a private conversation or join it, and then to leave again as abruptly as they came.

The Library

Over time, the health and wellness station moves upstairs to the church library, allowing for more privacy. On Sundays and Wednesdays, the library is where those who want to study the Bible gather, but on Tuesdays and Thursdays congregants gain access to the attention of health care professionals. As the parish nurse sees it, this center functions to validate people's health concerns when "you can't access health care without standing in line, without having some kind of card, some kind of whatever . . . it's the

idea that folks can get their vital signs taken, and we do some teaching, breast self exam, that kind of thing, that they wouldn't get otherwise." Health care professionals cannot administer medications on site at Holy Family, but they do make recommendations. They might urge a person with very high blood pressure to demand that their group home staff take them to the doctor and send a note home with them to that effect.

When it is a health center day, half of the library is dedicated to manicures and pedicures, a pleasure-filled activity that also responds to the need for adequate nail care that most Circle participants require. Both men and women choose from an extensive collection of nail polish colors. From my vantage point, one of the health benefits that the congregants seek in the library is an opportunity to flirt with the young nursing students, grasping an opportunity for one-on-one interaction and attention. Another health benefit that the parish nurse names for me is the possibility that these students, encountering these same people in a hospital space, will take from their encounters at Holy Family a different way of relating to mental illness and poverty. Nurses have a power to listen to or ignore the stories their patients tell them about their own bodies. At a future hospital bedside, these future nurses may remember interactions in this church library.

Just before and after mealtime the library again assumes another identity. It becomes the more private space of support groups, such as the Connections Support Group for people with diagnoses of mental illness.⁸⁹ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) facilitators are also Holy Family Congregants. NAMI peer-to-peer education groups also take place here. The small group attests to the support they feel in sharing their stories and struggles in this environment. Another group called DTR (Double

⁸⁹ This Connections meeting is one of the few parts of Holy Family's liturgy I do not have direct access to: I do not have a diagnosis of mental illness, a strict requirement for participation.

Trouble in Recovery), facilitated by people outside of the congregation, also uses library space.⁹⁰ The DTR group supports those with dual diagnoses of mental illness and substance abuse. For a person like Mason, attending these groups is some of the most important work he does here; the art program is equally important.

The Art Studios

One of the most beloved gatherings of this weeklong liturgy makes room for artful craft and creative expression. Holy Family dreams, discerns, and plans for a day when the art studios will be on site, so that artists can easily access the art rooms and so that the neighborhood might also use the creative space of the church. But for now access to the art programs depends on a driver and a van.

A group of about twenty board a small bus that will take them the mile and a half from Holy Family to the art studios on the second floor of rented space in a Baptist church.⁹¹ Mounting two long flights of stairs, some with the assistance of others, the group enters a long hallway that doubles as an art gallery, covered with the colorful paintings of Circle artists. The group disperses into rooms by the art forms they prefer: the largest belongs to the weavers and their looms. Those who prefer to sew or crochet join them here. A room in the back is for the woodworkers and their lathes and tools. Near the front is the small glass mosaic room and on the other side a ceramics studio. Finally, several rooms are reserved for the painters in the group. One of the most prolific

⁹⁰ I did attend one DTR meeting with special permission from the group.

⁹¹ During my research time, the landlord asks Holy Family to move out of the space it rents for the art program, and so the art program is moved temporarily to the Circle hall, which limits the kinds and number of art activities that can be offered. Holy Family considers buying a house next door, but it is too expensive. As I conclude this project, Holy Family continues to dream of an adequate art space.

painters, Kirby, has his own room filled with stacks of his paintings. This dark and cold-in-winter wing of an old church building with its bare white walls and bright florescent lights would feel unwelcoming if it were not for the vibrant art on display and for the pleasure and collaboration of the artists. An outdated space that might stand empty and wasted comes to life.

On the gallery walls hang several paintings of the landscape of Holy Family Church with the small red brick building at its center. One day, Rose points out to me details by which I might know that this is “the Holy Family”—the trash cans on the side of the building and a bench for sitting. The details bear evidence of a life that happens around the edges.

The Sanctuary Revisited: Noonday Prayer

After an hour, the vans transport the artists back to Holy Family. A line for lunch forms on one side of the church building. A small group heads straight up to noonday prayer. Kayla announces as she gets off the bus one day: “I’m going to give God my time.” She incants something pleasing to God in this small assembly and in the songs and prayers she offers. Noonday prayer unofficially begins with solos sung by Circle participants. Some soloists perform their pieces and hurry to lunch without waiting for the prayer to come to an end; others stay. During noonday prayer, all kinds of songs are acceptable—explicitly religious, rock and pop, folk and patriotic. Like the prayer book liturgies, the songs are repetitious, circling round week after week. Rose sings: “I know I been changed/the angels in heaven done signed my name.” Many of us come to know it so well, we sing along, which pleases her. Kayla sings, “His eye is on the sparrow, and I

know he watches me.” And Forest sings, “Take me to the king.” Roy sings “The old rugged cross” by heart at a racing pace that no one can keep time with. Lloyd uses the hymnbook. Sometimes a soloist sings the same lines over and over until I wonder how she will ever find a way to exit the song; but another congregant seeks a small break in the melody and claps enthusiastically. Clapping is one of the most respectful ways to help another, caught in a singing loop, to close out their contribution and make way for another.

After the solo performances, one of the interns will stand up and say, “Noonday prayer begins on page 103.” Noonday prayer has ostensibly already begun, but the intern’s words signal the text as an explicitly recognized form of prayer and the official beginning to the service. Congregants who attend noonday prayer, the shortest of the prayer book liturgies, show much greater engagement with the prayer book during these services than on Sundays. Many know its rhythms by heart. Unlike other services, they easily find the text. During the intercessions, Kayla prays the same prayer again and again. Roy anticipates the end of the short service well in advance, standing up halfway through the spoken prayer to ready himself beside the one leading. As an unofficial leader, he stands up beside the official one with his large bag of library books thrown over his shoulder, ready to say a prayer over the food and move us all out the door to lunch. When Kayla or Roy is absent, I miss their anticipated voices filling out the prayer book prayers.

The Sanctuary Revisited: Wednesday Eucharist

Like noonday prayer, Wednesday evening services begin with a plurality of activities and end with a meal. Coming early for Wednesday services, the same participant might join in a discussion of the raising of Lazarus in the gospel of John, feed the goats and pick okra at a nearby farm, do calisthenics on the lawn, or share stories over a manicure. Activities change from year to year, emerging as an experimental fit between the abilities of the nine or so seminary interns and the desires of Circle participants. Participation varies over time, as maps of gathering at Holy Family are in flux depending on who comes and how it is they feel able to participate on any given day.

On Wednesdays, Circle congregants do not lead the service music although some of them read the Scriptures (a very rare occurrence on Sundays). Although the Wednesday evening interns have the primary tasks of reading, chalice bearing, and preaching, a few Circle members read biblical texts, usually the same three or four people each time. Longer than noonday prayer, congregants often struggle to keep up with the prayer book order of service. Nevertheless, Wednesday sermons are short and more interactive, providing a closer fit between the embodied minds of many who gather and the shape of the homily.

One Wednesday, as we wait for Eucharist to begin, Patricia, a long-time Holy Family congregant and volunteer, reminds us that the candles are lit, which means that we need to be quiet. Sitting quietly is a challenge for some congregants. Later Patricia will come up to Jack and Andie and lay her finger across her lips, reminding them.

Father Brian explains that we will be singing a cappella this evening and that means without piano. He urges us to stand as our bodies allow; he reminds us that we are

a resurrected people, which means “a standing up people.” Many people choose to sit, implicitly defying the posture of resurrected people. We sing the spiritual “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.” On Wednesdays, we use *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, an African American Episcopal Hymnal. Many of the congregants, black and white, know at least some of the hymns by heart. More congregants sing on Wednesdays than on Sundays when the “white” hymnal is in use. Still, Wednesday hymns are more reserved than the longer, improvisational gospel pieces of noonday prayer solos.

Right before the sermon, Timothy who has been looking all around him, surveying the church scene, as I do, turns around to stare at Erica right behind him. Erica, laughing, asks him what he is doing and tells him to stop. Timothy and Erica speak to one another as if this were another space and time, as if they are sitting at picnic benches outside. When Father Brian comes forward to preach his sermon, he addresses them. “Timothy and Erica, would y’all quit talking to each other during the worship service? Please respect the congregation and don’t distract us that way. That’s not in order at all.”

In contrast with Sundays when Father Brian preaches from the pulpit, on Wednesdays he stands close to the congregants. As a result, the sanctuary space feels smaller and more intimate. Closer to all of us, he easily draws us into the creation of his homily. The embodied arrangement of Wednesday space encourages the associative logic often used outside of the sanctuary. On this night Father Brian preaches from a passage in the New Testament Epistle, *James*. “Be patient,” he begins.

Immediately, Forest responds: “Yes, you’re right, be patient.”

Father Brian continues: “What does that mean? What does it mean to be patient? And don’t just tell me ‘be patient,’ Forest, tell me more than that.”

So Forest tries out another answer, “Faithful.”

Father Brian nods. “You’re on to something there. Victoria?”

Victoria offers a different take: “You got to have trust in somebody.”

Father Brian acknowledges her: “We’re getting something here.”

Another congregant speaks: “Never give up hope.”

Father Brian: “Never give up hope. Y’all got it.”

Roy adds, “Have faith.”

Mariah continues: “Longsuffering.”

Father Brian: “Longsuffering, exactly. You’re reading another [version of the] Bible aren’t you?” (Everyone laughs.) Father Brian calls on another: “Lillian?”

Lillian: “You got to wait on God . . . in his own time.”

Father Brian: “Jack?”

Jack has a different take: “Patience through tribulation.”

Roy announces, insistently: “I have something to say.”

Father Brian: “Yes, Roy.”

Roy is imperative: “Have faith!”

Father Brian talks about how sometimes people say that he isn’t very patient, and what they mean is that he gets irritated really easily. (Some laugh, and Forest interjects: “Have faith in God!”). Father Brian acknowledges his earlier rebuke of Erica and Timothy. “Erica, y’all saw that didn’t you? Sometimes it’s warranted, and sometimes it’s not. Sometimes it’s just having too short a fuse.” He goes on to say that here patience has a different meaning, and they all got it just right. “It is waiting and waiting and waiting and keeping on waiting. You heard that little dog out there barking, didn’t you?” (Yes!

we all murmur in agreement, with laughter, acknowledging the persistent dog from outside the sanctuary barking into our worship space.) “And we’re often like that aren’t we? Things don’t go our way and we lash out at others . . . As we are being longsuffering, we can also get irritable. Much tribulation can foster much irritability.” (Yes. Yes. Murmurs of agreement resound.) “So James says among other things, do not grumble against one another. We get grumbly when we get tired of waiting, when our longsuffering has suffered too long . . . That’s because waiting is not easy, is it?”

“Amen!” articulates Margaret, “It’s not!”

“No it’s not.” Wallace says, “No it’s not.”

“What if waiting goes one year or two or two thousand years?” asks Father Brian.

Wallace says: “You got to pay attention.”

Father Brian concludes, “But it’s not easy. (Murmurs of agreement.) That’s why both Isaiah and James say pretty much the same thing because waiting, especially waiting for God is not easy.” He rereads a passage from Isaiah: “Strengthen the weak hands and say to those of fearful heart do not fear, here is your God, he will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

This beginning leads to a very participatory, occasionally noisy service with people talking both to Father Brian and to each other. I wonder if it is this particular evening before Christmas or if the difficulty of patience resonates with these longsuffering congregants. I also wonder if the sparseness of accompanying music results in the proliferation of sounds. This lack of accompaniment occasions more private conversations, breaking the communal flow, but also encourages communal response.

Father Brian suggests that the instruction to be patient might mean that the Lord is teaching us to look for his coming in all kinds of ways. He reminds us of the passage where Jesus speaks of his coming: “When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was sick and in prison, you visited me.” He suggests, “Maybe he’s making us wait to open our eyes to see his coming in all kinds of small but marvelous ways, to see his coming in the face of the person sitting next to you, in the face of the person who irritated you, who tried your patience. Strengthen your hearts. Strengthen each other’s hearts. Waiting is something we have to do together.”

Afterward, as we take turns going forward to receive the elements of bread and wine, I hear Father Brian’s voice “The body of Christ the bread of heaven,” and Annie looks over at me and says: “Pizza!”

“Are we having pizza for dinner?” I ask. She nods. I notice she has been checking the time on her phone, apparently finding it difficult to wait. Meals are more eagerly anticipated than almost any other thing that happens at Holy Family, the most cherished center of gathering for many. Clergy, staff, interns, and Circle congregants wait with great anticipation to be fed.

Friendship Circle Hall Revisited: Wednesday Supper

Walking with Victoria to the Circle hall, I sit down next to her. We do not speak much but focus our energy on eating the delicious food. While Wednesday supper often consists of pizza or hot dogs or sandwiches, meals like this are celebrated. Tonight there

is ham and homemade mac and cheese and green beans and homemade rolls. There is whole milk to drink.

Each Wednesday volunteers from another Episcopal church in the diocese, a regional affiliation of Episcopal churches, come to serve dinner. There are twenty-two churches involved in this act of feeding, each church coming a couple of times a year. Some send only a few volunteers, and on other nights a large group packs into the tiny kitchen. The hall is noisy as the hungry try to get the attention of servers either for themselves or for another. Some near me eat very quickly, so that they can get seconds before their vans come, as well as get extras to take home for people they live with. Hungry congregants can be demanding in their desires for more food. They often try to circumvent the church rule of not taking or eating food on the vans. They also challenge the relational abilities of volunteers whose eating habits emerge from very different relationships to food and to eating. Those who come from “exquisite lives” are often disconcerted by the intense relationship to food that some of Atlanta’s poorest express without reserve in this church gathering.

On this evening congregants line up at the kitchen window for a second plate of the delicious meal. Victoria asks me to get her seconds. I ask her why she doesn’t go herself. She says she feels afraid, which is interesting to me since Victoria doesn’t usually exhibit fear. I wonder if she is afraid she will be turned down whereas she thinks I might have a better chance of getting her the food she wants. Seconds are usually given readily if food remains, and so I find her apprehension strange. I suggest that we walk up together. There are so many people filling the tables and aisles that it is difficult to make our way up to the kitchen. Victoria persists, clearing a way for us; “Scuse me! Scuse

me!” she calls out, clearing a path for us in a room crowded with people eating, hurrying to clean up their plates so they can go outside and smoke, asking about dessert and making their way to the drink table.

When it becomes clear that seconds are available, I leave Victoria in line. A little while later she returns to our seats with a different kind of mac and cheese, the box kind rather than homemade kind we had earlier. She expresses frustration, “She is mean. The lady serving the food is mean.” When I question this assessment, she explains, “Because she didn’t want to give me the smooth kind of mac and cheese we had before.” I suggest that maybe the servers ran out of the first kind of food we had. Victoria disagrees; she takes it personally. I realize that there probably was no explanation given her for this change in the food offered for seconds. The tiny kitchen is one of the spaces in the church where Circle participants are almost never allowed, and they often negotiate for food through a small window through which meals are served. Volunteers may also come around to the tables to serve food or dessert; in this case congregants often raise their hands or call out to get the attention of a server, even if they are busy with another. Those who bring and serve the meal often eat together when they are finished; sometimes they interact with staff and very occasionally with other congregants. There is a clear dividing line between the space of the kitchen and the food hall where everyone meets.

The Sanctuary Revisited: Saturday Night Light

Once a month the sanctuary turns into a worship, dance, and performance hall on a Saturday evening, an occasion eagerly anticipated. “Are you coming to Saturday Night Light?” I am asked again and again. A worship band from an Episcopal church in the

suburbs leads the service and brings a meal. One November evening, I arrive to find the band playing a brief pre-worship concert. The assembly is singing the 1960's hit song by The Temptations: "My Girl." Once the service officially begins, the songs are a different genre: "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" and "This Little Light of Mine" and "I've Got Peace Like a River" among others. Accompanied by a band, the assembly sings with an energy rarely exhibited at any other time: people dance in the aisles, rock their bodies, and clap their hands.

During the second half of the service, soloists perform, as in noonday prayer, except that many more are present. On this particular Saturday in November, I note two unusual musical offerings. Lloyd sings, "I Love to Tell the Story." Although he often contributes to noonday singing, this is his first Saturday solo. "Were you nervous singing in front of all those people?" I ask him. "No, I don't get nervous anymore," he tells me. A shy person, Lloyd often appears uneasy interacting with others, but he loves to sing in front of a Holy Family congregation.

Then Omar goes forward to sing the American national anthem. Many of the songs sung at Holy Family are sung off-key or include surprising key changes; but they are usually sung with confidence, a steadiness of the soloist's voice, that invites those assembled to trust the performer. When Omar begins to sing, his voice shakes, and I wonder if he will be able to finish. Then, all around me I hear other people sing with him. Soon all of us are singing the national anthem to complete Omar's solo. In spite of the fact that Omar misses phrases and switches words around, we manage to follow. Rallying to help Omar, the congregation displays great pleasure in singing together.

After a few surprise solos, we close the evening with group favorites. We sway in time to one song. Some people dance in the aisles to another, seeking out partners to dance with. Father Brian, sitting in the back tonight, urges all of us to do the motions. Unlike the encouragement to stand up during Sunday or Wednesday services, more congregants respond to this urging. They try to find some part of their body to move or shake. Rocking or clapping is, apparently, easier than standing still for many here.

Making Room for Disability Difference

I offer this “loitering with intent” through the weeklong liturgy of Holy Family, marked by particular encounters and aesthetics, to create a map of different interactions that become possible over time and space at Holy Family. Following Berger’s logic of attending to difference through more expansive maps of liturgical participation, I show how those unable to fully follow a Sunday service of Eucharist find and create alternate forms of participation. In this way congregants draw attention to the significance of multiple points and centers of liturgical gathering across the landscape of Holy Family.

Disability scholars often illumine the “normal” as an imagined embodiment, a metaphorical and symbolic space for human life that is too cramped to contain the actual differences of those who seek to occupy it. Normalcy, as the hypothetical middle of a bell curve, or the average on a chart of human ability, compels different kinds of lives to squeeze together into impossibly small ideals for what it means to live together as humans. Those who cannot pass as “normal” are often identified as deviants, occupying marginal spaces on the feared peripheries of centers and at the ends of a spectrum, falling

outside of desirable embodiment and relationships.⁹² But disability scholars also argue that the confining experiences of normal space can be transformed for all of us. With the help of those who through their differences draw desire outward, we can move from a center of “normalcy” to the edges where manifest difference necessarily requires more room for embodied minds.⁹³ A reorientation of the normalized body stretches out the imagined and inhabited spaces within which humans live and move and have their being. In this way of imagining the relationship of disability difference to embodied space, a recognition of those who occupy less conventional forms of embodiment is necessary for the amplification of spaces within which to be human.

I resonate with this description and its alternative of confinement. As a person who is often able to squeeze herself into a recognized space called “normal,” I persist in trying to conform to conventional expectations for how I should behave, or what I should wear, or how I should pray, or what I should be able to do in order to be worthy of love and respect. I condition the possibilities through which I am in relationship with others, and therefore, I have trouble loosening my mind from prescriptions for the significance of my life. Yet, when I look to those whose ways of being cannot be accommodated in more typical embodied relations, I recognize the inadequacy of such ideals for myself. In doing so, I come to desire and trust a greater range of spaces, relations, and interactions within which to experience the divine, myself, and others.

⁹² See, for example, Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁹³ See, for example, Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 185–196. Garland-Thomson argues that starees, those regularly stared at, can, as visual activists, arouse our wonder and curiosity in order to engage us and move us to desire and political action.

In the space of Holy Family, disability difference rearranges liturgical desire, drawing it outside the confines through which worship of God might be imagined as an able-minded activity. In my own experience as a researcher, I observe these subtle transformations within myself as I spend time in different spaces. When week after week, I share a seat at the entryway to the parking lot with Max, I recognize the possibilities of his associative way of making meaning and conversation as well as the importance of connections that can take place in the flexibility of outdoor space. I recognize and value my own associative ways of making sense of the world around me. Because of this freedom, I look forward to stopping by the entryway rather than viewing it as a detour. Max and others help me relate more easily to the non-sequential responses that congregants offer to sermons and prayers or to questions I pose. In another example, when the community that gathers for SNL unabashedly encourages dancing and holding hands, I gradually lose my sense of awkwardness. At such interactions, I come to celebrate this rare, monthly form of connection at Holy Family, even when I regard some of the song lyrics as strange or silly. I desire to be gathered with others.

To rearrange desire, the spaces of Holy Family must be capacious enough to allow different relations to exist. Such room is made for difference by first gathering difference to itself. This difference, once gathered, cannot be contained by the more formal center of the Sunday sanctuary. This necessarily amplifies the ways through which congregants are gathered and gain access to one another and to a church they identify with in varied ways. At Holy Family, the spaces are interconnected, and congregants move relatively easily between them. The same person may move from yoga to bingo to smoking circle to noonday prayer, completing none of these activities but

participating in each to some degree. Some congregants prefer certain spaces to others, their movements and choices, at least for a time, predictable. People try on a certain space and then find it difficult to sustain. For example, one of the artists, Tanya, attempts gardening for a time and then returns to art because she tells me it fits her better. She still gardens occasionally but chooses art as her primary weekday occupation.

Such a variety of spaces over the time of a week and month encourage differing forms of participation. Joshua utters a passionate prayer in the greenhouse unlike the prayers he offers inside the sanctuary. Omar and Victoria sing songs during Saturday Night Light and noonday prayer that would be deemed by some as inappropriate during Wednesday or Sunday services. Each space encourages and inhibits certain kinds of interaction. Many spaces do not accompany one central ritual as the work of the people gathered under the sign of Divine Love; rather, they remain essential to the possibility of gathering difference. The space at Holy family unfolds in relation to that difference.

One way to interpret these interconnected dots on a map of Holy Family is to understand them as separate but equal. On the one hand, different spaces allow for different kinds of relations, aesthetics, and activities. Each person can enter the church by finding a mode of participation in one of the spaces that they are unable to achieve in another; no one person is equally at home in each of them. Such a map encourages a fit between different human persons with different modes and abilities of engaging one another and the divine. On the other hand, such alternatives may encourage practices of segregationist charity, by which diverse people are welcomed without being invited to transform the primary symbols, ostensibly marked around the sanctuary—God, Christ, Spirit, trinity, holy, longsuffering, bread and wine, church, unity. Thus, Joshua prays a

greenhouse prayer that would not be welcome in the same way on Sunday morning. Wednesday volunteers can serve dinner without deeply engaging parishioners. They can return to their home parishes with their conventional and impoverished images of the poor and the mentally ill. They can leave without any real desire to change the political and social structures by which these people with mental illness, many of whom are poor and black, hunger. A Sunday congregant might never attend Tuesday or Thursday liturgies or Saturday Night Light and never gain access to the kinds of prayer and friendship that emerge from the weeklong liturgy. Divided spaces can encourage a long-suffering of poor persons with mental illness within a liturgy that nevertheless remains resistant to those differences. They can also become sources of miscommunication or frustration as when Victoria assumes that a woman in the kitchen does not like her as she is offered what she considers to be inferior food without any explanation of the change in menu.

Divided spaces also become evident when behaviors that are acceptable in one place are discouraged or openly rebuked in others. Thus the sitting together that shapes many relationships outside the sanctuary is allowed but discouraged at a number of points within the sanctuary. "Will everyone please stand (as you are able)?" the priest says again and again although he or she knows that many will not stand. While sitting is tolerated, the congregation is occasionally reminded of the importance of standing as a theological symbol, as Father Brian does when he speaks of standing as a symbol of resurrection without suggesting that remaining seated might also be theologically right and fitting. Other behaviors such as whispering, or wandering, or walking in and out at certain times during the liturgy are sometimes tolerated and are at other times restrained by a leader in

the community when they are viewed as too disruptive or irritating. Sometimes these behaviors are modified through a verbal request to stop talking, or through a lay leader trying to calm or remove someone from a space.

Yet I want to argue for the promise of disability difference manifesting rather than dividing the spaces of the church, unfolding multiple access points for those who are willing to recognize and, with help, navigate them. At times space clearly divides persons at Holy Family; but it also unfolds differences, revealing relationships that frequently surprise me in relation to other contexts. For example, Lloyd is often shy when engaged in one-on-one conversations outside the sanctuary, but with great confidence he sings before us all, proud of the sound of his voice.

I am arguing that liturgy is the ongoing “work of the people” in the presence of Divine Love, rather than something a group of people do in a particular place at a particular time. Christian liturgy, therefore, emerges as a relation across spaces that manifest the differences of those who gather; it emerges through relationships that help to map the community’s pleasures and struggles to be together.

Betcher is concerned with how the city becomes a spacious place that shelters all forms of human life without dividing some from others. Despite the limitations of square footage and other resources at Holy Family, its decentered liturgy maps one approach to sheltering and making space for those with different mental abilities. Almost every inch of space is made available and is entrusted to those who gather. Those who unfold church space likewise multiply its meanings. The church library becomes a health clinic and a beauty salon simultaneously. Both weekday and Sunday congregants often refer to the significance of church space as “safe space” or “refuge.” At Holy Family, if a space is to

feel safe, it usually entails multiple spaces and a non-coercive relationship between them. If I am to be gathered into the difference that is Holy Family, I must not be expected to occupy any one space in relation to another. Entrustment, generosity, and forbearance require room for people to be together and alone, in conversation and on the move, bringing the polyphony of their faith and life backgrounds into the church as well as their different mental abilities.

These spaces are sacred refuges not because they are divisively set-apart, but because they remain porous to the people who gather and speak into them. If we take seriously Berger's attention to permeable, ecclesial topographies, or Betcher's desire for in-Spirited and response-able crip/topographies, the question remains: To what degree do these different spaces at Holy Family touch each other, inviting recognition of the differences that each space manifests? At Holy Family, the pleats of a church can unfold, in-Spirited outward, making room for different ways of talking, sitting, standing, praying, lamenting, and sharing joys and concerns. But, how does the unfolding of difference hold together within a common liturgy, rather than multiply it in order to divide the work and importance of some persons from others? How does Max come to be recognized as the greeter that he is if the entrance is not considered part of the space that counts as liturgical? How is the greenhouse also imagined as a house of prayer? How does the Saturday sanctuary, envisioned as a dance hall, also carry the weight of sacred space, as it does when there is a Sunday service of Holy Eucharist? (And there are members of the Sunday service who cannot see Saturday SNL as real liturgy.) How is Wanita's folding chair in the parking lot recognized as an important place for recalling a holy meal her mother fed her along with the Scripture that continues to sustain her? Liturgical power

lines often highlight the activities of some, recognize them, and obscure the participation of others. For example, when the prayer book is opened for noonday prayer, only then does prayer officially “begin.”

Rogation Sunday: Liturgy on the Move

I imagine an unfolding rather than dividing liturgy as a process by which a tightly clasped hand, relaxes and opens, fingers unfurling, pointing in all directions and then folds again, fingers touching back to the palm. Berger uses another metaphor, imagining public ecclesial space, as “a hinge” that opens out to other spaces, an invitation to liturgy on the move. As I reflect on this unfolding and unfurling of church space, an example from Holy Family’s own liturgy comes to mind. I offer it here as a form of recognition and interconnection that highlights the possibilities of Christian liturgies to name, honor, and nurture a variety of human and other life forms within interconnected spaces.

On a Saturday in June I receive an e-mail about a special service:

This Sunday, May 25 we will mark the ‘rogation days’ which proceed Ascension Day next week. Traditionally, rogation days are times of prayer and fasting when a community asks for God’s protection of its land and natural resources. Because we have a magnificent garden and a special garden ministry, we will mark this day by a procession around the grounds and a blessing of the garden and gardeners. We will gather by the large tree near the side entrance (by [the Avenue]) and process around to the greenhouse. Please join us to give thanks for our garden ministry and ask for God’s protection. Holy Eucharist will follow in the sanctuary.

By the time I arrive on Sunday, the word has spread that we will gather outside today. We assemble near the smoking benches under the oak tree. Mother Daria lays out the logistics for our travel together around the space of the church: the gardeners will lead us, carrying watering cans, and there will be birdseed to scatter along the sidewalk.

Mother Daria will sprinkle water on us from a pail she carries, dipping a tree branch in the water. Then, without the usual hymnbooks in front of us, she will teach us a short song we can sing as we move.

We set off walking along the sidewalk that marks Holy Family's land, so that Belinda in her wheelchair can move with us. A large group, we get separated from one another. I am in the middle group, separated from my husband. I keep walking and try to sing even though I can hear that the group behind us is on a different syllable of the same song, creating a polyphony in the sound of our movement. We arrive near the garden and wait for the third and largest group led by Belinda in her wheelchair to arrive. On this sweltering day, we sweat profusely; it feels like work, but it is also an occasion when we watch out for one another in ways that we rarely do inside the sanctuary. When everyone arrives, the gospel is read, and Mother Daria prays over the garden. She invites the gardeners to stand in the center of our gathering and the rest of us to lay hands on them as they center us. She prays for them by name, recalling even those who are absent today.

During this procession, my mind wanders as the bodies of some congregants often do. I ponder the risks of trying out a new path for the liturgy and what it takes for a group like ours to move together around the entire space of the church. What I find most significant about this movement is that it gathers and incorporates into itself a number of the sacred spaces that are part of Holy Family's weeklong liturgy, spaces made sacred by the people who entrust themselves to one another in different ways across the week-long liturgy.

During the typical Sunday liturgy, the gardeners bring vegetables to the altar as part of the people's offering. After the service, congregants can choose a small bag of

fresh vegetables to take to their homes. I am always moved by the beautiful basket of fresh produce, a small representation of the gardeners' work and friendship. In comparison with the Sunday offering, Rogation Sunday is a more unusual unfolding and touching of spaces, as the service moves us out to the garden to bless and touch the work of some, who are less often recognized as leaders of the community. Liturgy on the move, such as this one, does not make differences in abilities easier to navigate. In fact, it is more difficult for some to traverse the uneven sidewalks than to sit in the cool of the sanctuary. It does, however, reveal our differing paces and our mutual reliance on one another for moving a communal liturgy through time and space. In this way, it is a liturgy that generates a sense of "social flesh," a sense of trust and obligation that does not assume each person has the same abilities as another. It reminds me of the reason Tanya gives for the importance of recreational outings beyond the landscape of Holy Family: "It gets us out and about and makes us more mindful about people who need the help getting off and on the train during [a field trip], or who need help walking or stuff like that, and it gives us different scenery. There are people who are a little bit slower, and you don't have to focus on them as much when you're here doing your own thing." She qualifies this, "You do, kind of, but it's more obvious when you're boarding a train, or (pauses), I don't know. It's hard to explain . . . It's good to help people try to stay together."

Tanya refers to what happens when Holy Family moves outside of this small plot of land and into the space of the city—a topic I consider in Chapter 5, when I examine the complex relationships between the city and the church. Still, her reflections are helpful for interpreting the work of an unconventional celebration like Rogation Day. When the liturgy loiters with intent on what may be considered the peripheries of Holy

Family, it traces complex lines of folding and unfolding difference within common prayer. Drawing on an old tradition, it marks a new path, encircling the church. When people with and without disabilities gather to be church together, they invite new maps of what counts as liturgy, disturbing any isolation of a central sanctuary from other sanctuaries created by relationships around the church grounds. At the same time, Sunday and Wednesday services are more attuned to the relationships that inform the services when they acknowledge the spaces of the week-long liturgy. In this way, the word “sanctuary” itself is decentered, marking the beauty of safe spaces in which those who gather feel free to share their lives with one another in prayer, jokes, songs, and games.

Liturgy assumes the possibility of some relation between those who gather to worship God together as the church. Such connections require ample space/s for trust to emerge and for the beauty of the differences of those who gather to be revealed. They also require the artistries of those who negotiate differences and draw attention to the assumed peripheries of communal life. To the work of these social artistries I now turn.

Chapter 2 – Weaving: Aesthetics of Interdependence

“If now every one is so essentially connected with that which is the inner kernel of our own life, how can we avoid feeling this connection, and embracing all, without distinction of disposition or mental capacity, with heartfelt liking and affection? . . . Why do you see things singly that are not single and do not work by themselves? The reason of one and the disposition of another have as strong a mutual influence as if they were in one and the same subject.”

“Finally, the piety of each individual, whereby he is rooted in the greater unity, is a whole by itself. It is a rounded whole, based on his peculiarity, on what you call his character, of which it forms one side. Religion thus fashions itself with endless variety, down even to the single personality.”

Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*⁹⁴

“If something is to happen you have to come unprepared, unarmed; but you don’t come with nothing. You’ve got to bring something that adorns you even if it doesn’t arm you. Just a very small phrase, the noise of a small phrase if it is one, just the spirit of some phrasing, the soft racket of a small accompaniment. You’ve got to be adorned with the smallest augmentation.”

Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*⁹⁵

One February morning in the art studios, I stand beside Edgar, a faithful Friendship Circle participant. Sitting at his loom, he shows me how the shuttle fits through the open spaces he calls “the warp.” He ponders aloud the multiple meanings of “warp.” It’s a funny word, he says. Warp can also mean stubborn. And the sun warps things. He takes pleasure in following a strange thread of divergent meanings. (Later he will do the same with the word “shuttle,” creating laughter in the room with a joke about Henry Kissinger and his shuttle diplomacy.)

⁹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 76–77, 51.

⁹⁵ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 75.

Mr. Edgar's musings have triggered my thinking about the multiple meanings of warp. When I get home, I search the web. The online Free Merriam-Webster dictionary tells me that "a full definition of warp" means:

- 1 a: a series of yarns extended lengthwise in a loom and crossed by the weft
b: foundation, base <the warp of the economic structure is agriculture—
American Guide Series: North Carolina>
- 2 : a rope for warping or mooring a ship or boat
- 3 [²warp]
a: a twist or curve that has developed in something originally flat or
straight <a warp in a door panel>
b: a mental aberration.⁹⁶

The warp appears as structure and anchor as well as deviation or abnormality. Using these two definitions, and following the path of Edgar's free associations, I reflect on how the warp of perceived mental aberration affects the warp of the liturgical structure. If disability is gathered into Christian liturgy, then it must twist and curve the standards of participation and nonparticipation of individuals. The challenge is to identify forms for holding together a community that are warped or idiosyncratic in their departure from the formal expectations of communal gathering.

In order to identify communal forms that mark belonging through a flexible and improvised liturgical pattern, I will employ the idea of an "art form" rather than the idea of a "practice," which is often used to describe Christian liturgy and community. In this chapter, I build on an understanding of art as texts, objects, or performances by individuals or groups that assume the possibility of a relation or connection with another reader, viewer, or audience. I draw on theologians who find religious significance in public and popular arts as those texts, objects, and performances that represent what is

⁹⁶ "Warp," *Merriam-Webster Online*, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/warp>.

“real” and simultaneously elicit questions about human perceptions of reality. I extend this understanding of art to apply to liturgy itself, broadly conceived as a life shared by an assembly of those who worship God together. Interpreted as an art, liturgy offers an alternative imaginary as it represents, assumes, and questions current social and political arrangements of human relationships by anticipating an arrangement of the world as God desires it. I then apply the idea of “art form” to the activity of small groups within a liturgy, who embody such imagination by rearranging perceptions of a homogenous communal body of individuals able to worship God in the same way as others do. I describe “liturgical art forms” as those performative artistry of social interaction, improvised by congregants, that call into question standards of participation and nonparticipation in the liturgy as a whole. Using the metaphor of “weaving,” I evoke art forms as a means by which congregants create more flexible and adaptive relational patterns of belonging that are not premised on conformity to one liturgical practice or norm. As they participate in art forms that hold a community of difference together, congregants implicitly raise questions about what social arrangements define Christian liturgy. Thus, such relational art forms anticipate alternate forms of communal belonging and interrogate any liturgy premised on ableist assumptions about what counts as participation in the work of a church that gathers to meet God together.

An Art Form for Difference

I begin with a reflection on the vital significance of shared forms of communication as well as the work of deviation from common forms. In her collection of essays, *Artful*, the novelist and literary critic Ali Smith explores the concept of “form,”

making sense of the work it does for art. Smith imagines the hostility that might occur between different forms or between form and formlessness, until there is a word, in the beginning, that traces a relationship, a new form for holding:

Until, that is, God, or some such artist, starts throwing weight around. Form, from the Latin *forma*, meaning shape. Shape, a mould; something that holds or shapes; a species or kind; a pattern or type; a way of being; order, regularity, system. It once meant beauty but now that particular meaning's obsolete. It means style and arrangement, structural unity in music, literature, painting etc.; ceremony; behavior; condition of fitness or efficiency. It means the inherent nature of an object, that which in the essence of a thing consists. It means a long seat, or a bench, or a school class, and also the shape a hare makes in the grass with its body for a bed. It's versatile. It holds, it moulds us, it identifies us, it shows us how to be, it gives us a blueprint in life and art, it's about essentiality, and several of us can sit on it at once.⁹⁷

Forms are pleasing to us, and we desire different forms to work our minds differently and to offer different means of identification.

Smith reminds her readers that the forms we rely on to mold us, offering a shared benchmark for identification, also require deviation. While form is a matter of rules and expectations, it also frequently bends those rules, and emerges through dialogue and crossover between forms: "Through such dialogue and argument, form, the shaper and moulder, acts like the other thing called mould, endlessly breeds forms from form."⁹⁸ Moving creatively through deviation, forms have an inherent affinity to the apparent edges to which they respond. Art forms often take shape in response to sharp edges of difference that can wound us but also from border spaces where the magical resides.⁹⁹ The warp that anchors and the warp of aberration are both necessary for good art to work with our minds, as any good artist intends.

⁹⁷ Ali Smith, *Artful*, reprint edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 65–66.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

Smith's analogy can be applied to the mold of Holy Family: when God throws weight around the edges of community, giving fleshly form to a local assembly and against the sharp contours of difference that ability and race and wealth create, there must be forms for different embodied minds to gather under the sign of love. Not always recognized as liturgical forms, these unconventional shapes take their cues from the edges of those shaping the gathering. Love, refusing any coercive uniform pattern, weaves the perceived periphery into the warp of community through forms of their own co-creation.

In the first chapter, I argued that in order for difference to be gathered, liturgical space itself amplifies and unfolds in relation to disability difference. A plurality of spaces for gathering provides multiple points of access to the relationships that constitute Christian worship. Such access assumes that human difference is vital to a liturgical gathering rather than superfluous. In this chapter, I identify the art forms of interpersonal relationships that weave those who gather into a community across difference. Common prayer assumes (essential) forms in order to be common; and the commonality of prayer assumes a worshipper's bodies and abilities. How then to figure those who are unable to participate in the same way in common prayer? How to think of their presence, their belonging, their connectedness or disconnectedness from the other worshippers? During my time as a researcher, the metaphor and image of "weaving," became central to my understanding of how a community of difference is held together across persistent hierarchies and divisions—without ignoring the differing abilities, statuses, and resources of members.

Weave Us Together in Unity and Love

There is a beloved song sung once a month at Saturday Night Light. Its high point, a moment of emotional release in the vocal sounds and faces of those who sing, is the chorus: “Weave, weave, weave us together, weave us together in unity and love.”¹⁰⁰ One of the gardeners, Joshua, first sings this song to me at a plant sale. We are talking about the upcoming Saturday Night Light when faltering, a tentative smile on his face, he tries to sing this song alone. I later recognize the melody at SNL when some people dance in the aisles, and the rest of us hold hands and sway back and forth in rhythmic time. Congregants move their bodies to this chorus with a force of participation rarely found at other moments of communal gathering. During the after-service dinner, another community member, Alexander, tells me how much he enjoys this service. He was really disappointed last week when he didn’t get “to weave.” “My roommate just doesn’t understand that I can’t weave alone in my apartment,” he jokes.

In a Friendship Circle newsletter, a staff person employs the concept of “weaving” to publicly honor the memory of a relationship between two Circle artists. The story, entitled “Woven Together,” recounts an unconventional kind of love story:

Grace Jones, long red curls wild like in a fairy tale, suffering from schizophrenia, the effects of homelessness and medical neglect, the champion of 83-year-old artist, Mr. Cornelius. He, quiet and undemanding, smiling, his eyes cast down, could easily have been disengaged but Grace took him under her wing, encouraging, praising, and cajoling, seeing that he was noticed and provided for in and out of the studio, his seat belt fastened, his meat cut up. Her New York accent resounding across the Parish Hall: “Mr. Cornelius needs more bread,” “Get Mr. Cornelius some tea,”—and woe betide a driver ready to load up a van before Mr. Cornelius was finished eating.

Grace died last August. We miss her dearly. Mr. Cornelius is still painting and weaving. One of his works stands in the sanctuary, part of Holy Family’s banner, a weaving by several of the Friendship Circle artists. We are all

¹⁰⁰ Rosemary Crow, “Weave,” in *Chalice Hymnal*, ed. Daniel B. Merrick (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995), hymn number 495.

woven together—unintentionally, but here we all are, together. Some sent to the Friendship Circle by our personal care homes, some sent by a less discernible hand, all woven together in unexpected mutuality.

Weaving, the author observes, is often unintentional or unexpected when it takes a concrete form: something happens between Grace and Mr. Cornelius, an augmentation that makes more space for both within the church's liturgy.

In the last chapter, I mapped Holy Family as a place that makes space for differences by multiplying the spaces of its week-long liturgy. At the same time, I pointed to the dangers of divided spaces, arranged in a hierarchy of value, the edges of differing assumptions about ability that segregate one from another rather than unfold in relationship to one another. Across these power lines, community members, with very different backgrounds and resources, claim and perform a belonging to Holy Family as community. They improvise forms through which they weave themselves and others into the fabric of community. The weaving is both active and passive as the stories at the beginning of the chapter reflect. Alexander comes to the church in order to weave because he is not able to weave alone. Joshua holds hands with others and beseeches God, "Weave us together in love," implying that the church is unable to weave without a divine accomplice. The staff person describes the weaving as something that inevitably happens to those who gather as they spend time together. Weaving entails and assumes both ability and inability, both agency and passivity, confusing these categories without dissolving them.

If weaving is an embodied art of holding community, one of the rules of this form is clear: weaving happens *with* and *through* particular others—not so much in the shape of a gift, one *to* or *for* another, but in the complex pattern of artful relationships. I could

argue that Grace helped Mr. Cornelius, or that Mr. Cornelius allowed Grace to be his advocate, but I read their story as one in which she participated in Holy Family through a desire to watch out for him; in turn, his engagement was altered by her presence. His desires and needs drew attention in a different way than if she were not around. Their presences interpolated one another. Now Grace is gone, and Mr. Cornelius continues to be woven into the community with and through others. He was not a dependent of Grace; rather, while she lived, they created something together for the community. Weaving depends on who is beside whom and what this accompaniment creates for good or for ill.

Disability organizations like L'Arche, an international network of communities with intellectually disabled persons as core members, emphasize accompaniment as necessity for communities of difference. Jean Vanier, Roman Catholic priest and founder of L'Arche, describes the power of accompaniment for each one of us. To find one's way along a "path to freedom" through which persons, disabled and nondisabled, grow into their own vocation requires another's proximity: "One of the most important factors for inner liberation is how we are accompanied. We must ask ourselves: Who is walking with me?"¹⁰¹ Vanier writes of accompaniment as an intentional relationship and a mutual exchange: the accompanied and the accompanier give and receive from one another as they journey together, growing one another into the truth of the sacredness of human life, which is always both verity and unfathomable mystery. The person who accompanies us is one who "can stand beside us on the road to freedom, who loves us and understands our life." Vanier names those who often fulfill this role—a parent, a therapist, a teacher, a friend—again evoking intentional relationships over time as necessary for the freedom to

¹⁰¹ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, second edition (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 129.

love ourselves and others.¹⁰² While Vanier emphasizes the profound importance of intentional accompaniment as mutual gift, I perceive that accompaniment at Holy Family emerges through another form: fluctuating, elusive, emerging for a time only to disappear again, and less a gift than a shared creation that arises from occupying a particular space and time together.

At Holy Family, some congregants benefit from intentional accompaniment as part of their everyday lives, but mentoring and advocacy are also privileges that not everyone's circumstances allow for in the same ways. Within the liturgy of Holy Family, I observe that less organized and stable forms of accompaniment are equally important and more readily available. Forms of belonging are improvised and shift among different persons. They often involve more than two. Two or three people happen to be sitting on a bench; together they shape the meaning of a moment or gathering for those who are beside them. Their sitting together may be intentional or unintentional.

I become aware of this pattern when I intentionally choose to occupy different spaces in the sanctuary. I experience conventional liturgical forms (such as scripture, prayer, Eucharist, meal) differently depending on the people with whom I am navigating my own participation. The same prayer prayed next to people who are exhausted or bored or in pain, sounds and signifies differently than if I am next to an excited or attentive person, or if I happen to sit beside a person intent on filling the small space between us with commentary, regardless of the authorial voice of the one presiding over the liturgy. My co-participants and I shape the liturgy through our divergent responses to each other and to the forms at hand; together we improvise access to the standard liturgical forms

¹⁰² Ibid., 128.

through our interaction. In this way, even a conventional liturgical form is constantly morphing through relationship to those who sit or stand nearby.

For example, when I sit next to Annie on the far left side of the sanctuary, she is more likely to sing some of the hymns because I am near. I help her navigate them, my finger running across the page, so that she can follow words she struggles to read at the pace of Holy Family's liturgical time. Annie almost never stands, and so if I am to hear her voice, and she is to hear mine, I must sit to experience the service with her even if many around us are standing according to the official liturgical form. Annie sings with me for a time and then turns away from the hymn and back to her portfolio of poems and drawings. Turning, she invites me into her devotional form, and so I spend part of the service reading the rhythmic prayers she continuously writes in notebooks she carries everywhere. Our communal worship involves helping her spell the words of her prayers. While singing, I acknowledge the portfolio of human and animal faces that also accompanies her.¹⁰³ Through singing, lining hymns, whispering, drawing, and spelling we shape one another's experiences of the liturgy. We both distract and focus one another.

Liturgical theologians Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff remind us: "sacraments aren't things we possess; rather they are relational events and personal encounters among people and God. These encounters are always embodied."¹⁰⁴ Sacramental encounters rely on the premise of incarnation, the possibility of bodily encounter within the assembly. If, as Eiesland argues, "A body, perhaps especially a disabled body, is not a space one

¹⁰³ A therapist once encouraged Annie to write, and there is now rarely a space or time, other than meals and bingo, when she is not engaging in one of these activities; worship services are no exception.

¹⁰⁴ Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 4.

occupies alone,” the challenge is to account for how bodies encounter one another, incorporating others into their own sense of flesh, without losing their particularity.¹⁰⁵ “This alternative understanding of embodiment,” argues Eiesland, “evokes embodiment as a social accomplishment, achieved through attentiveness to the needs, limits, and bounty of the body in relation to others.”¹⁰⁶ Confusing clear categories of autonomy or dependence, sacramental encounters illumine the art form of one beside another.

For example, Roy shows up for yoga every Tuesday but initially chooses not to participate directly in the movement and breathing that joins the encircled group together. Rather, he sits in a pew near the yoga circle and frequently distracts the group with stories from his childhood that sound irrelevant to the postures the group is assuming. On the periphery, he is woven into the circle by the yoga teacher, Laura, as she engages his stories and often brings them to a conclusion. As she weaves him into our common yoga practice, she taps into his vivid imagination. Laura suggests that we imagine stirring custard, as we move our arms in a great circular motion in front of us. Roy joins in by changing the imagined custard to applesauce. Roy brings up sawing wood, and Laura uses that image to guide our stretching motions. She explains that these concrete images help our brains communicate with our bodies so that we understand what we are supposed to do. While Roy’s presence often interrupts us, distracting us for a time, he inevitably morphs the form of yoga for us; through Roy and Laura’s co-creation we move and breathe yoga into a form that fits this community.

On a morning that Roy misses yoga, we worry about him and are grateful when he rushes in, breathlessly, halfway through the session. Apologizing for his lateness, he

¹⁰⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 41–43.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

sits faithfully beside the circle, both participant and nonparticipant, as important to the group as any of us who sit within it. After many months on the periphery, Roy explicitly joins the circle, sitting inside it although he still participates in body movements and breathing intermittently.

Artistries in the yoga circle also include Marvin, a blind participant, who often worries aloud that he is not able to follow the verbal commands because he cannot see the motions we all make together. He asks Laura to repeat phrases, which she finds difficult because she wants to create silent pauses for the circle to meditate within. One day, Marvin occupies a chair next to Laura to make way for a person joining the group halfway through the session. He discovers that sitting beside her, closer to her voice and her body movements, alters his own participation and, therefore, hers, enabling her to instruct less than when he sits further away from her. Rearranging the relationships in the circle rearranges the shape that easy yoga takes at Holy Family. Marvin beside Laura, and Laura close to Roy artfully make space for a different form of chair yoga.

The philosopher Eve Sedgwick reminds us of the importance of prepositions and stresses the possibilities of the preposition *beside*, conjuring what work this word can do for our perception, in place of the *behind* or *before* of most interpretation:

Beside is an interesting preposition also because there is nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking; noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

Holy Family's art forms evoke the liturgical possibilities of "beside" and "with" and "through." They involve individual abilities but are not premised on a similar capacity in each individual. The proclaimed, capitalized "We" of the liturgical participation assumes a unity that is impossible for Holy Family or any church community to achieve. The "I" of Grace or Mr. Cornelius are able and unable to be part of the "We" in different ways. Between this "We" and "I" occurs the small "we" of Grace and Cornelius or the "we" of Laura and Roy and Marvin, or the "we" of Annie and me. This small artful motif warps the community at a certain point in time with the "we" of the way each constellation of social interactions weaves itself into the Friendship Circle liturgy. This "we" becomes an art form because of its functions in the community, the individualism and communalism it disables as well as the individual differences it recognizes and the community it enables.

The "we" that shapes liturgical form is difficult to recognize because "We" tend to speak of the diverse gifts of community as distributed across individuals: Grace has certain gifts and Mr. Cornelius has others. As gifted givers, they each offer something to God and to each other. Truthful from a certain vantage point, such language does not render how Grace's activities are elicited, contained, and recognized within the responses, resonances, smiles and silences of Mr. Cornelius. He is implicated in what she can and cannot do. When she dies, his presence and participation is rearranged and reinterpreted through the others who now participate in Holy Family through him. There is no one-to-one correlation with such gift giving, where some are able to give and others not, but a pattern of co-creation within community. Through a theological lens, I might

identify God as the One beside us, who makes room for the smaller configurations of persons that improvise the access that good liturgy requires.

Christian theology often interprets good human interactions in terms of charitable dualisms. Givers and receivers are divided, even if the givers also discover something in return. “I came to give but I received so much” is the sentiment of a phrase I hear from newcomers to Holy Family. Such a way of dividing human participation resides within Holy Family’s own liturgy: congregants are often encouraged to give thanks for those who give to the community. Such thanksgiving explicitly recognizes the gifts of those who are financially and physically able to sustain the liturgy through liturgical leadership, making food, financial support, and volunteer work. Givers also have mental capacities that enable their giving. The ability to give is highlighted in liturgical forms that name God as the one who has given so much for us that we want to offer something in return (even if what we return to God is already God’s). Such descriptions of human interaction divide some from others: recognized forms of participation render implicit judgments about the merits of different contributions to liturgical form.

The Work of Art and Theological Imagination

The arts, Anthony Pinn argues, are valuable to religion and to theology in part because some forms of artistic expression evade the modes of judgment and discipline with which we divide some forms of embodied life from others. He highlights particular visual art forms, such as abstract expressionism, outsider art, and pop art, as “an important way of viewing and exploring intersections between experience and representation, including exchanges between the body (material and discursive) and the

social body.” He argues that such art possesses the possibility to interrogate existing social structures while not abstracting the human body from modes of participation in the art that is created, “uncovering and bringing into question modalities of interaction and relationship” through which we derive the meaning of embodied life.¹⁰⁸

Occurring at the intersection of embodied experience and the representation of the body, such artistic expression can help theology question the fundamental structures of reality and to communicate new meaning and possibilities.¹⁰⁹ Pinn argues that certain art forms “require of viewers a surrender of the safety of visual comprehension” because they cannot be understood through the eye alone, which “allows distance and disconnection.”¹¹⁰ Such art forms make no sense without the viewer altering his/her relationship to what is communicated; correlatively, they compel the viewer to seek an alternate sense for what is not easily understood within shared discourse.¹¹¹ They are both interrogative and connective, creatively disregarding the boundaries we put around human bodies and possibilities.

Such art forms, from Pinn’s perspective, do what liturgy often fails to do because they invite and create more flexibility and fluidity for complex experiences of embodiment, tracing them without forcing them into one mold.¹¹² For Pinn, religious embodiment tends to sharpen the edges (“the structures and frameworks”) that divide or reduce the complex experiences of embodied life.¹¹³ Such edges are unavoidable because of religious desire to intentionally norm those who participate within religious traditions,

¹⁰⁸ Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 24–25.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

even if we interpret these forms as divinely intended toward human goodness and freedom. We elevate certain humans as more worthy of participation than others: some as able to give or receive as others cannot; some as dependent on the autonomy of others. For Pinn, art is theological because it can help theologians ask questions and imagine alternative arrangements of bodies in time and space insofar as an “artist seeks to give new dimension to reality as encounter by the observer” and at the the same time “also pushes the boundaries of what is real about reality, and what is the nature and meaning of relationship between humans and the world.”¹¹⁴

Eschatological Imagination and the Art of a Liturgy

While Pinn thinks theologically through popular art forms, Saliers writes of good Christian liturgy itself as holding the possibility of such an interrogative art form—the art of receiving God’s future for the world in an “otherwise way.” According to Saliers, “Liturgy is a common art of the people of God in which the community brings the depth of emotion of our lives to the ethos of God. In these acts we discover who we are, but also and primarily, we discover who God is in this art.”¹¹⁵ This is possible, he argues, in part because of the depth and breadth of liturgical forms that assume and require a spectrum of emotional affect, all of the varied postures of a real human life in discovery of the “mixed texture of the world.”¹¹⁶ An adequate liturgy provides a form for the complexity of human experience to take shape as enacted prayer, as we remember the whole of ourselves and the whole of our world to God, both the beauty and the terror.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁵ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 27.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 24–25.

Liturgical forms require complex embodiment through multiple forms of prayer: praising, thanking, blessing, invoking, beseeching, lamenting, confessing, and interceding.¹¹⁸ This diversity of prayer forms “*wait for us*” to bring the breadth and depth of what we experience, sharpening and bridging the edges of human pathos and divine ethos. Liturgy as prayer is an art form through which we “receive [our] own mystery back.”¹¹⁹

In this way, Saliers argues that liturgy itself has the potential to counter the dominant perception of the world and its content, raising questions about the adequacy of the language we have for describing our own lives and the divine. The art of the assembly is revelatory when it animates the full “emotional range” of human life—from “ecstatic praise” to “daily struggle” without dividing some possibilities from others.¹²⁰ Therefore, it requires both discipline and time “to become an artful symbol of the church in communion and dialogue with God.”¹²¹ The art of liturgy also occurs through limit. It creates the possibilities that we know and experience more than we can sing, say, know, lament, and confess on our own. At the limits of our individual abilities, the art of the (communal) liturgy takes shape.¹²²

With Pinn and Saliers then, we might ask how the art of Holy Family’s liturgy resists dividing some from others and represents the full range of what it means to be human through disability. To do so, it must represent the real limits and inabilities of all who gather as well as the real possibilities of connection and interdependence. If the art of the liturgy receives God’s future through its ability to evoke love and knowledge

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 199.

¹²¹ Ibid., 211.

¹²² Ibid., 201.

through limit, then I look to the forms through which inabilities appear and are blurred or reconfigured. Rather than new gifts and abilities, a new ableism within the liturgy, I look for a different frame for describing ecclesial relationships and for reconfiguring the ideals of liturgical ableism. I look for “art forms” that embody an alternative liturgical imagination about what forms of participation and nonparticipation in community mean.

Artistries of Social Interaction and the Weaving of Community

These interdependent art forms do not dispel the normative habits through which Holy Family orchestrates community life. They keep visible, audible, and palpable the differences within community, while at the same time transforming the possibilities for participation and exclusion. Watching two people walk together, leaning on one another, or playing bingo through the other’s presence suggests an alternate response to assumed liturgical capacity. It reforms a church that often assumes capacities either on the level of individuals or on the level of the community as a whole. To mark this an art form, rather than as a reciprocal gift between two people, or as the intentional relationship between a dependent person and an independent one, is to emphasize what is created through relationships in the community. Such new creations become possible within particular, shifting configurations of people, threads of lives coming together and then apart. Such patterns would be difficult to prescribe ahead of time or to develop a formula for achieving. They emerge from this community’s life together as congregants improvise forms that weave each life into another’s. Such art forms, I would argue, have theological significance for a community where God’s presence and transforming love are often claimed through sermon, song, and in conversation.

I think, for example, of Timothy, whom I perceive as a difficult individual and with whom a number of community members struggle from time to time. I could describe him as unresponsive and unaware of those around him, contrarian, and frequently oblivious to the flow of communal activity. I could venture that he does not give much to this community—a nonparticipant in the liturgical life of Holy Family except that he is always present. During my time at Holy Family, I find him one of the most difficult people to interpret or understand, opaque in his intentions and forms of interaction. If I were creating an ideal liturgy, it is unlikely I would choose Timothy's presence within this community.

But I cannot discount him in my narrative of Holy Family because several other people in the community alter my sense of him. Through them, I come to recognize his presence in the ongoing creation of Holy Family. Timothy often shuffles around with a pair of enormous headphones over his ears, isolating himself from others through sound. On a particular day, I find him sitting next to Victoria. He has placed his headphones over her ears. She is moving her body to his music, so she can't hear me when I greet her.

What is she listening to? I ask Timothy because she can't hear me and because I am taken by her absorption within the music.

She doesn't know, he tells me, and he is laughing with pleasure at the musical mystery he has created for her. She begins to move, dancing to the sounds I cannot hear, and in order to communicate with her, I dance too, following her gestures to music I also cannot hear.

Now I got you both dancing, he is smiling, immensely pleased by his work of moving us together.

Timothy does not become an easier person for me to grasp but somehow through Victoria, I have access to Timothy, or Victoria beside Timothy is no longer able to hear me and I must speak through him to find her, or together Timothy creates the occasion for dancing through which Victoria and I communicate. It seems inconsequential, I know. Such a moment in a parking lot, waiting for a van—the form is so brief it can hardly be captured within any liturgical rubric. It is an improvised form, an uncanny accompaniment. Still, it alters my perception of Timothy, and my understanding of his relationship through Victoria to Holy Family.

At another moment I find Timothy with Kayla. She has enlisted his help in making her art project, so that he hovers nearby to prepare the materials she is using. He comes when she calls out to him.

I need you to cut the brown, she tells him, pointing to the color of tile she needs.

What do you need me to cut? he asks, shuffling over to her.

Make it look like this, she holds up another piece as an example for him.

I'm going to try to do that, he tells her, willing to work with her.

I offer him my seat so he can sit next to her and assist her in the creation of her art. I am surprised by his sudden attentiveness, his willingness to do a menial task for Kayla, a task she is literally able to do but has no desire to complete on her own.

What makes Timothy behave this way, we might ask. Are Victoria or Kayla the cause of Timothy's participation? Do they give him something to do and enable his flourishing at these moments? This interpretation is possible but also simplifies the complexity of the arrangement. Sedgwick reminds us that the great difficulty in acknowledging the affects of who is beside whom is that we desire to determine the

world through cause and effect.¹²³ Rather than getting behind Timothy's action, we can reformulate the question: What happens through Timothy when certain people are beside him? Timothy next to Victoria or near Kayla at these particular times and places alters the colors and textures of Holy Family, weaving Timothy into the fabric of community at some moments, but also allowing him to isolate himself among the community at others. Timothy does not become an easier, more generous person, but he nonetheless co-creates the fleshly forms of access that are essential to Holy Family.

The art program at Holy Family has rooms designating different kinds of art forms—woodworking, weaving, painting, glass mosaic, drawing, and ceramics. Similarly, I describe different artistries of interpersonal connection that I witness at Holy Family in order to draw attention to their styles and genres. Varieties of each kind depend on the configurations of people through whom and among whom they are created. Each form bridges the edges of a difference in a liturgy that anticipates gifts, abilities, and desires that congregants often fail to exhibit. The forms do not reconcile or unify those differences. They do not erase edges, but foster relational encounters through the deviations that occur. At the same time the deviations take form, creating a warp, a tether, albeit fragile, that invites the incorporation of persons for whom more traditional forms fail or unfold into other forms.

In many ways all three of the art forms I describe in this chapter respond to the edges of verbal communication, to the way mental disability warps more standard forms of liturgical communication including text, sermon, dialogue, prayer, and confession. Each of these standard verbal and aural forms contains aesthetic assumptions about fitting

¹²³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

modes of participation. While these assumptions are well-suited to some embodied minds, they are frequently tested by the responses of the psychiatrically disabled. For example, during a sermon, a listener may not grasp or show any interest in the content. He or she grows bored and fidgety, or wants to speak into the sermon, adding his or her own voice or story to a form which finds that voice off topic, a distraction from the function of the form. Or, in a dialogue between congregants, a form which assumes the possibility of sharing and mutuality, balance and/or reciprocity may be difficult to achieve: a congregant might overwhelm the conversation with his inability to stop talking, or alternately appear unable in her silence to propel the conversation forward, exhibiting little or no response to questions asked. As gaps occur between anticipated forms and embodied minds, artistry of interpersonal connection emerge.

Arts of Touch and Gesture

On Sunday mornings, those who read hymns, prayers, and creeds and participate fully in the explicit liturgy of the community and those who ostensibly cannot read are set apart from each other. Every Sunday I watch congregants refuse to engage the two to three books we use to worship. I watch others begin with the texts and then close them, apparently giving up or growing disinterested. Still others keep the books open without singing or reading. There is often someone shouting out, “What page? what page?” as she or he tries to keep up.

At the same time, other gestures and movements are unique to this liturgy. In moments where written and spoken communication sometimes fail to connect congregants, people often reach out to touch each other, massaging a back or touching an

arm or the top of a head, or reaching out to hold another congregant's hand for a brief period of time. One Sunday, early on in my research, worshiping next to Victoria, here is the way I describe my participation in the liturgy:

As we sing the first hymn "Jesus lives! Thy terrors now" both people on either side of me bow their heads and cradle their heads in their hands, seemingly tuning everything out around them. Then a man sitting behind us reaches over and touches Victoria on the hand, stroking her hand. She looks up and reaches back her hand and takes his hand in hers, holding it for a minute. Then she offers her hand to the other two men sitting beside him, holding each person's hand for a brief while. Pete, sitting at the end [of the pew] catches my eye, watching Victoria, and smiles at me, waving his hand. I wave back. He waves at me several more times during the service, a big smile on his face. . . . Victoria will also perform her hand ritual with several others. At one point without any particular prompting that I can see, she will reach over to Shane on the other side of me as he is huddled over, and grab his hand and shake it. On her way down the aisle, taking the offering, she will touch the shoulder of another man bowed over, and touch this same man again on the way up to take communion, causing him to stand up suddenly and get in line for communion (out of turn).

As she is touched by and touches particular people she knows in the congregation, I observe Victoria weaving them into the liturgy at moments when they seemed least engaged. The people she touches respond to her with warmth and energy. Her hands touching their hands and shoulders create an alternate form of connection other than the unison of voices reading the creed and the prayers together.

Waving is another form of weaving. Parishioners frequently, persistently, wave to particular others during the service and on their way up to take communion or for prayers of healing, waving and then waiting for a reciprocal gesture of acknowledgement. If there is no response, they may wave again. Forest often sits sideways in his pew so he can keep one eye on the front of the sanctuary and one eye on the back of the church, keeping watch as congregants enter the sanctuary. While he greets almost everyone by name, particular people inspire him to traverse the length of the church to wave them into the

service or to grasp their hand or touch fist to fist or elbow to elbow. Forest does not prefer sustained conversation, does not look anyone in the eye for long, and often chooses some physical distance from those around him; yet, he also uses gesture and touch to make contact with those around him. Forest frequently waves and calls out to congregants who seem unresponsive to anyone else around them until they acknowledge him in some way, even when his persistence irritates them. One day, as I sit next to Albie, another person whom I often find it difficult to engage on my own, I am grateful for Forest, as he rushes back the aisle to claim Albie's importance to this space and to claim me as well. Forest gestures each of us into this space by saying our names and by filling the silent spaces between Albie and me with gestures.

On another evening, during Saturday Night Lights, I observe that Jack and Andie have placed their friend, Terry, between them in the pew. Terry has been struggling with his medications and with severe anxiety ever since I began my fieldwork at the church. He often requires the close physical presence of particular people with whom he works in the garden, if he is to sit and participate in services or other community activities. He often appears physically weak and has fallen down several times. Jack and Andie put their arms around Terry and pat his back from time to time. Andie shares her hymnbook with him and makes sure he can follow what is happening in the service. With Terry between them, Jack and Andie's own postures change within liturgical space; rather than facing toward the altar and pulpit the whole time, they often center their worship on Terry, watching his face and movements for signs of engagement or discomfort. Watching Jack, Andie, and Terry together I think about how their gestures and postures create an alternate vision of "family" in a church where many members do not attend

with their families and may have little to no contact with their blood relatives. I recall Andie's description of coming to church as coming "from a dark place to where I wake up in the morning, and there are things I want to do and people I want to see." Over time, Jack and Andie will both slip out from the regular pattern of interaction that is Holy Family due to illness, intense physical pain, hospitalization, and their ongoing struggles with substance abuse. They will require particular other congregants who weave them back into this community. Yet, for almost a year of my time at Holy Family, they significantly affect the fragile yet resilient warp within which Terry and others participate within community.

Shaping the configuration of community, the arts of touch and gesture are not embraced by everyone who is present in the same way. Some congregants maintain a safe physical distance from others and move away if someone gets too close or tries to touch them. Such refusal of touch is also acceptable and does not reflect negatively on the person who desires not to participate through this form. Such responses may also vary from day to day. I learn this early on when a woman named Miriam, one of the gentlest people at Holy Family, eagerly gestures for me to sit down next to her one morning and eagerly engages me in conversation. The next day when I seek to replicate this gesture, she moves one seat away to create distance between us. She is not upset with me, but this morning requires a different mode of interaction than the previous. I gradually follow such subtle movements toward and away from others, finding assurance in their honest arrangements.

Conflict and irritability are also patterns within Holy Family's daily life, as people get in each other's space in ways that feel disturbing or threatening. A man walks around

shouting “You bitch!” to someone we cannot see, and a path opens around, giving him space to move; yet, the community also accepts his need to act out even when they maintain a safe distance from his anger. The subtle navigation of shared space, through touch, often widens the circle so that there is more space for those who sometimes need to remain at some distance from others.

At times explicit liturgical forms acknowledge and incorporate this art form of touch and gesture, enunciating its importance within the community. On a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening, the passing of the peace takes place after confession and forgiveness of sins, which many do not read or say. Yet, the nonreaders or the ones who could not find the page in time, the silent ones during confession, enthusiastically take time to stand and walk, or to sit and wait for those who seek them in order to shake a hand or bump an elbow. Where the spoken confession fails to establish the relatedness of the community, the physical gestures and movements of the peace do.

The bumping of elbows, too, becomes an art form of interpersonal communication during my time at Holy Family. One evening Father Brian announces that because many people are sick, we will not shake hands so as not to spread germs among us and suggests that we bump elbows. He offers this as a temporary solution to the perils of flu season, but some congregants take to the gesture with great enthusiasm, so that a year later, some still offer me their elbows, forcing me to bend my arms akimbo as we awkwardly touch bodies in a way that often makes us both smile. A form of touch to prevent the spreading of flu, morphs, takes on another shape within the liturgy, and becomes an acceptable means of offering peace to another and of spreading laughter mid-service. Over time the elbow bump is replaced at times by the fist bump, which also

becomes an acceptable gesture through which peace is spread. Thus, the elbow bump crosses forms and occasionally morphs from an art of touch and gesture to an art of jokes and laughter, another creative form of weaving within Holy Family's liturgy.

Arts of Jokes and Laughter

Sedgwick reminds us: "The jokes that stick in people's minds are the ones they don't quite get."¹²⁴ My awareness of laughter as a form of weaving people into community also begins during Sunday morning services when I notice laughter that sounds disproportionate to the verbal form that occasions it. While congregants mention to me how much they enjoy the priest's sermons, I notice that many become restless during this portion of the service, getting up to leave the sanctuary for a time. I also observe that certain congregants seek out opportunities to laugh during a sermon, joining its challenging form to their embodied participation in it. The preacher tells a joke, or makes a comment that isn't quite a joke, and these parishioners burst out laughing. If two or three laugh together, their laughter is contagious. Even if my mind cannot grasp the joke, I find myself joining in the congregational laughter, feeling the reverberations of human sound around the sanctuary. The jovial vibrations make the room resonate with the breath of people all around me. Such moments feel life-giving and energizing to me, and I observe a similar reaction in those around me. We wake up together! In such moments I reconnect with those from whom I often feel separated due to differing abilities: whereas my mind easily grasps and fits within conventional liturgical forms, with their cognitive assumptions, theirs cannot. When I speak or pray through a particular

¹²⁴ Ibid., 9.

form, they are silent. Yet laughter defies this liturgical boundary. Such laughter usually begins when one or two people seize the opportunity for participation in the sermon, and their responses spread to the rest of us. Even those who do not laugh smile at those who enjoy participation in a sermon. One's laughter is an invitation to another.

The philosopher Lauren Berlant argues that the joke is an erotic form, one that desires another to accept and find pleasure in what is offered. Like sex, she argues, the joke can go badly and fail to achieve the desire and pleasure it intends, but it is a hopeful genre, desiring connection with another as it intends mutual pleasure.¹²⁵ Like Berlant, the disability activist and comedian Alan Shain emphasizes the invitational quality of comedy. "Using the arts to effect equality," disability comedy woos a listener to cross bridges of stigma. Meanwhile, the comedian rearranges the meaning of disability, inviting listeners to reconsider their ableist assumptions.¹²⁶ At Holy Family, the power and intimacy of a joke is often shaped as much by psychiatrically disabled listeners as the one who intends a witty provocation. The listeners rearrange meaning in order to connect bodily with others, claiming what is spoken as a joke (or sometimes ignoring what is spoken, if it fails to connect), transforming its auditory possibilities within common prayer.

After I notice the effects of laughter in the service, I start noticing jokes in other places. I observe that some congregants use humor, especially when other forms of small talk or communication become tenuous. Wallace and Joshua, for example, encourage

¹²⁵ Lauren Berlant, "Sex in the Event of Happiness" (Lecture, "Strange Relations": Studies in Sexualities Graduate Student Conference, Emory University, January 24, 2013). This summary is reconstructed from the author's notes.

¹²⁶ Alan Shain, "Comment from the Field: Perspectives on Comedy and Performance as Radical Disability Activism," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013): 337.

each other's laughter, and they laugh especially heartily when Jack, their fellow gardener in the church gardening program, teases them. I am surprised at how something Jack says might cause both of them to burst forth in laughter that (from my vantage point) far exceeds the occasion that generated it. Such laughter, like much comedy, makes use of disproportion. It becomes something they share as their bodies shake together, an exuberant sound echoing over the church grounds. Smiles open up their faces, all of Joshua's few teeth showing. I do not find Jack's jokes as funny as they do, but I watch their faces and cannot help but laugh too at the pleasure of watching them enjoy themselves so much. Their laughing bodies become a connective tissue that Jack and I share, even if we are not laughing in the same way they are. While they are laughing, I am trying to think of other funny things I might say to make them laugh again. I want to be a part of their connection.

Improvised forms of laughter also create connections as part of easy yoga where the power of formal and informal laughter merge together, bridging differences in physical and mental ability among us and rousing tired, medicated bodies and minds together. Laura often invites us to fake our laughter as we breathe out all of our stress and anxiety emphatically together: Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! The fake laughter invariably leads to real laughter—we sound ridiculous to ourselves and to each other—and to a sense of cohesion as a group. Rather than looking down at our laps or at our own limbs as we stretch, we smile at one another as we listen to the strange sounds lingering among us.

This artistry of connective laughter parallels another form of witty pleasure that frames Wallace and Joshua's experiences of church together, and my participation in liturgy through them. Wallace and Joshua comment to one another with huge smiles after

the sermon, “That was deep!” “Yeah, that was deep!” One time I probe, “What was deep?” trying to get behind the commentary, but they refuse my logic. “The sermon,” Wallace responds, in a tone that suggests how self-evident his answer is: What is wrong with my mind? He circles around a question he cannot or will not answer to show me what makes my inquiry irrelevant. I am not catching the function of the form, trying to elicit facts and information behind an art of relatedness where communion is at stake. Later, returning from receiving communion from the priest, Wallace and Joshua again share the pleasure of the experience with one another, “That was tasty!” “Yeah, that was real tasty!” Just as their laughter with Jack near the garden shifts the contours of my morning at the Friendship Circle, their enthusiastic commentary on the Holy Eucharist occasions a different sense of my own worship through and with them that day. They create a new connection for me to the dry wafer I just consumed, to the words “The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.” Likewise, responses to the sermon, exhorting on the significance of testimony, shift as they share their impression and thus enjoyment of its profundity with me.

Arts of Silence and Imagination

In the first chapter, I introduced “holy loitering” as a form of interaction that characterizes Holy Family and involves an intentional being with others, rather than doing for them. I suggest how difficult a form it is for many nondisabled newcomers to the Holy Family community, who are accustomed to more active and goal-oriented forms of community building. “Loitering with intent” is awkward and strangely unproductive to those who desire to help and serve others in quantifiable ways or to receive something

measurable in return. I admit that even after years of loitering at Holy Family, I find that shared silences, during which congregants rarely acknowledge one another, often make me uncomfortable even though I can see that many others take them as a matter of course. While these silences are customary to many congregants, those who sit silently also invariably seek an entry point into dialogue and relationships yet find this entry difficult if not impossible to sustain. There is a struggle for forms of communication that both bridge difference through interaction and that also respect side-by-side silence as its own form of legitimate communication.

I talk to one of the seminary students, Cassie, a couple of months into her year-long internship at Holy Family. Like other interns, she initially finds it difficult to loiter among Holy Family rather than assuming a particular role or task. She finds the church community overwhelming, in part because she misses the welcoming banter she associates with many churches' forms of affirmation and belonging. Finding the silences difficult and wanting to be sensitive to her role as a newcomer, she worries about being intrusive, as she learns to know other congregants: "In trying to form relationships with them [congregants from group homes], I didn't want to come across as inauthentic, just like popping up and saying, 'Hey, be my friend! Tell me about yourself. Tell me about your life!'" Over time, the visits to Holy Family that initially feel so difficult and disingenuous become one of the high points of her week. In part, she attributes this change to the discovery of a form that allows her to communicate and to respect those who welcome her in unconventional ways. She starts giving manicures, using touch to create pleasure for people, and then also, simultaneously, finds verbal forms easier while engaging through touch. She becomes more comfortable with silence and with engaging

experiences of reality that are not her own. She comes to appreciate the genres through which people at Holy Family communicate with each other and develop strategies of communication across differing, and daily fluctuating, mental abilities.

When I ask about building bridges across the differences of congregants' lives, the priest's wife, Hannah, a quiet, beloved figure in this community, tells me a story that helps to illustrate these arts of connection across perceived barriers of communication:

One day I sat down and two guys were talking, and they were just having the best time, and I just sat down with them. I realized their conversation, what they were saying . . . one would talk and then give pause for the other to talk, and what was said by one person had nothing to do with what was said [by the other]. It wasn't a conversation, but they were just talking and laughing and giving each other time to speak, and like, one would say, "I just sometimes hide things and I can't remember where they are." And the other person would say, "That meal over there . . . I just love the spaghetti." They were just talking but not connecting at all. So I found myself just enjoying being there because it was so pleasant and we were laughing and talking. Like . . . like it would not be if one or the other of them weren't there, and you were just sitting there by yourself. It was community but it wasn't connecting. And I just sort of chimed in by saying, "Well, that's sort of like squirrels. I wonder if they ever find . . ." and they just went on to other topics that had nothing to do with the sentence before.

For Hannah this form of conversation has stayed with her as a particular image of what it means to be a church community across and through difference at Holy Family. She laughs as she tells me this. Her story is not one of pity for people who cannot communicate in the ways she is most familiar with, but of the surprise of finding herself drawn into a new way of sharing life together. People at Holy Family often talk about their lives in more typical ways as well, Hannah is quick to point out, but there is often a need for other forms of communication and connection to create bridges across the differences of mental ability and logic.

In another example of the arts of silence and conversation, Donna, a woman from the neighborhood, only attends Holy Family on Wednesday evenings in order to sit

outside at a picnic bench with another woman, Martha, who can no longer participate in an entire Wednesday evening service. At one time, Martha became increasingly agitated within church services and would disrupt the community by shouting; she would insist that the priest stop preaching or make other derogatory comments. While many forms of disruption are tolerated if not always welcomed, this one tested the patience and abilities of both the leadership and the community. Now Martha is only able to come if Donna is also present, and Donna only attends church if Martha is there too.

Donna first met Martha at Holy Family, and she describes to me what she and Martha do outside the church while the rest of us are inside the sanctuary, singing and praying. There are always four topics of conversation—cigarettes, food, Martha's family, and her schizophrenia. "So do you still think of it as worship when you're outside?" I ask Donna, knowing that she considers Holy Family "her church." "Oh sure, sure, sure," she responds, "You know, we're just doing our thing, and it's . . . God knows where we are." Donna often brings Martha into the sanctuary just to receive communion and then takes her out again, aware that the voices in Martha's head might make it hard for her to sit still and listen to a sermon or participate in the service even if she wants to be in or near the church. (Donna offers an explanation for why Martha has trouble participating as others do: "Nothing keeps the voices quiet, you know, we just try to keep the voices laughing. But the way she [Martha] quiets the voices is she speaks out, and says "I'm hungry, Father Brian. Hurry up!") When Donna and Martha walk to the front of the church to take Eucharist, holding hands as they go, they create for this church some other vision of what it means to go forward both to receive and to become the body of Christ. Together

they are a reminder of another part of the church's liturgy, taking place outside the sanctuary at the picnic benches.

One of the deacons tells me another story about an encounter between a man named Albie, who has a particular reputation for silence and for sitting alone, and an intern, Ben. She recalls a chess game Albie improvises with Ben, when Ben finally catches on to the art of a game on Albie's own terms. The deacon describes it this way:

You know it's awkward to have individual interactions with people. Albie was playing with a chess board, and Ben wanted to play with him, so he (Ben) said, "Can I set up the board, the normal way?" and Ben made his opening move, and Albie made his opening move, and it came into being that Albie would just kind of move (a chess piece) in a way that didn't have anything to do with the rules of chess. Ben was going along with it, trying to figure out what he (Albie) was trying to do, so he finally ended up . . . Albie took almost all of Ben's pieces off the board, and the change that Ben described from "we're going to have a game" to "oh I'm gonna try to figure out what's going on with him, what does he want with this?"

In the interpretation of the deacon, the form of the game morphs from a way to pass time together to a form of communication between them. In the end, a third person helps to configure the meaning of the game: "So somebody came up to say 'oh you're playing chess, who won?' and Albie smiled (and gestured to himself)."

Perhaps the whole point of the game is that Albie wants to win a game of chess on his own terms, but Albie also initiates a repartee by which the two can play and in which the intern, the newcomer, to the community does not control the game in a "normal way." Ben is not the teacher of a game Albie cannot play. Rather than either of them telling the other how to play, Albie moves pieces around a board, allowing a nonverbal dialogue on the board to unfold between them.

As in the game between Ben and Albie, improvising artistries of communication often involves different senses of reality and normality. For example, the artist Kayla

often experiences her possibilities in the world in a way that differs from those around her. Driving back in the art van to church one day, she announces that she is going to Paris on the weekend. Most of us know that Kayla, unlike some of the volunteers who spend time at Holy Family, has no means to travel to France for a weekend getaway. Rather than contradicting her, the van driver and others help her to imagine what her weekend in Paris might be like. What will she eat? What will she drink? What will she do there? Kayla's desire to visit Paris is affirmed and becomes an occasion for communal interaction whereas we might otherwise have sat on the van in silence.

While many times, different senses of reality are negotiated in uncontentious ways, one person's truth can be very upsetting to another person's equilibrium, a snag or a tear in the fabric of community. Sometimes this happens when one is speaking angrily with a voice or voices in his head in a way that unravels other interactions in the community. At other times, tensions occur on the level of trust and belief, and test the good faith between friends. I recall a morning when Kayla announces to a group of us at morning coffee that she and one of her husbands own two houses, a mall in LA, and a movie theater. A conflict ensues. Rose, who often accompanies Kayla in song and art, shakes her head in disbelief. She stops Kayla: she has never heard any of this before! Kayla shrugs and retorts: Rose doesn't know that much about her. Rose keeps shaking her head in disbelief while a small group of us listen in to this conflict unfolding between them. I feel anxious about this rift since Rose and Kayla so often weave one another into community. I ponder an intervention but decide against it. Kayla invites Rose out to LA to see the mall she owns; Rose shakes her head, refusing to accept Kayla's claims. Neither of them wants to relinquish their position. Finally, as the tension thickens, Kayla

says with both urgency and flippancy: “Well, what would you do if you had a hundred dollars?! Would you stick with it?” This question about money, the apparent heart of both the initial story and the ensuing argument, is now put to all of us bluntly as a rhetorical question. It makes everyone else at the table begin to laugh. Annie and Miss Carla and Rose and Kayla laugh and laugh together. I too join in the laughter through their enjoyment. I then ponder the artwork of the joke as a resolution to the rising tension and as an imaginative bridge in the arts of conversation.

As I perceive it, Kayla has used this “joke” to turn something that was becoming confrontational (contesting truths about familial wealth), to return the friendly banter to a place where she and Rose and the rest of us can imagine a common vantage point: the indisputable fact that we all need money and would welcome an opportunity to travel or to own a piece of property or to better our material lives if we could. Kayla’s story about her family’s wealth, the mall, and the movie theater in LA align with an opportunity grasped, one that in her sense of reality, at that moment, she had to stick with and could not walk away from; none of us would have if we were in her shoes, her comment implies. We may not agree with her sense of reality, but she jokes us into the sense of her stories and reestablishes communication with Rose. Rose in turn brings Kayla back into a more typical conversation with us, leaving the LA property behind. At least, this interpretation is my fragile attempt to get “behind” the interaction and to analyze my own participation in it. (It is not a Holy Family form of interaction to offer such interpretations). What I know with certainty is that Rose and Kayla allow this joke to soften the spaces between them and all of us.

Sometimes contested interpretations of reality are not so easily resolved, lingering and disrupting artistry of social interaction at Holy Family. I think, for example, of a rift between Wallace and Joshua that persists for several months and alters profoundly their participation in life at Holy Family. Such conflicts affect not only their participation but also the weaving into community of people like me, who have come to experience their art forms as essential to my own worship at Holy Family. I continue to interact with both of them individually but miss what is possible when they improvise access to community together.

Very occasionally, a form of social interaction becomes abusive to one of those participating in it, and a congregant is then asked to stay away from Holy Family for a time. Roy, for example, remembers a harmful relationship with another congregant, Jason, who deceptively extracted money from him. When staff at Holy Family discovered what was happening, Jason was asked not to return to Holy Family. While his departure made Holy Family a safer space for Roy, Jason was also missed by others at Holy Family whose participation was altered by his absence. Often, when someone is asked to leave for a time, there are conditions given and possibilities for a return to community. Jason does return during my research but only attends for a short time before leaving again.

Weaving as a Slow, Non-linear Form of Participation

By illustrating the arts of touch and gesture, of jokes and laughter, and of silence and imagination at Holy Family, I have attempted to describe the multiple forms through which those who gather weave one another into community and, therefore, belong to a church with and through one another. It is common to speak of belonging to a community

as a linear sequence of events; you weren't a part of the community and then you are taken into it. You were once excluded but now you are included; or, you were part of the church and then are no longer welcome. You came to give something to the community but found you needed help instead. You were an active member and then something happens in your life to change your desire to participate.

Holy Family troubles this linear logic of belonging by its practices of weaving, through which inviting and being a part of one's own and another's belonging is an ongoing art that happens over time, again and again, in different ways. It is a continuous work of incorporation that also entails intermittent departures or distance from the community. Weaving assumes that death and loss, illness and difference, stigma and obliviousness, medications and relationships, continuously affect forms of participation; the forms of communal participation must, therefore, persistently respond to the possibility of change and loss, a topic I will discuss further in chapter four when I describe the art form of naming. Weaving through art forms allows different kinds of participation and nonparticipation to exist alongside one another. The art forms do not displace the sermon, the hymn, the celebration of Holy Eucharist, or the conventional expectations that visitors bring to their relationships with Holy Family members; rather, they come alongside able-minded tradition, revealing the belonging of those who might otherwise be relegated to the edges without a bridge into the heart of community. Through these arts, community members consent to share time and space with one another even when interactions are difficult or confusing.

Mason, a Circle participant, describes these emerging relationships of difference at Holy Family as a gradual shift in perception:

Slowly, slowly, slowly, I'm learning to respect everybody, you know, you can't say my condition, my mental health is better or worse than anyone else's. I don't want to do that or look down or look up at anyone. I look at these people; they've been medicated, they're being medicated heavily, been on medication a long time, 'cause some of these long-term medications cause people to have certain involuntary movements and embodiment, and some of them never had much education, any skills, or any real profession as far as working, but I want to encourage them and encourage myself to continue to live and to have hope for the future. You never know when things may change, when things may get better than I am right now, and I never want to go give up hope. I want to encourage people like me never to give up hope, one person no better than another, we're all human beings, we're people, we're persons, whatever, and we may have limitation, but we're not incapable of doing anything because we have a mental health condition.

Weaving, following Mason's relational logic, is slow and persistently hopeful; no one is incapable and no one is worth more than another. This truth, often hidden, must take creative shape within the community's liturgy. Thus, art forms of touch and gesture, jokes and laughter, silence and imagination carve out the possibility for two or more to sit on a bench together. They weave a loosely held web of relationships with respect for difference together. Each relies on relationships of one beside another so that when we speak of Holy Family as the church, each pew or section of a sanctuary matters, each table in a fellowship hall has its resonance and web of relationships.

Liturgy as Workshop in the Creative City

Saliers evokes liturgy as an eschatological art through the expansive nature of prayer forms—all of the gestures and postures and emotions required to remember the world to God and God to each of us. Liturgy is the ongoing prayer and word of Christ, enlivened by the Spirit through all of us together in the world.¹²⁷ We not only pray as God prays in us, but we become a prayer as we enact our hope in divine love for the

¹²⁷ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 27.

entirety of creation. We can take up Saliers's invocation of liturgy as embodied and performed prayer to imagine laughter and the touch of a hand to a head, or the bump of an elbow, or two or three bodies sitting near one another in silence, or sharing an imagined reality with another, as forms through which Holy Family remembers all of human life as sacred before God. Alongside liturgy as embodied prayer, I want to offer two other metaphors that help us imagine the holy work of these art forms: the church as workshop and the liturgy as holy play. Both metaphors help to name the arts of Holy Family as essential to its liturgy rather than a sentimental supplement to those actions recognized as Christian worship. These metaphors remind us that worship is not right words about God, nor a set of actions we accomplish for God, but a set of relationships through which humans might encounter together both the beauty and the creativity, as well as the strangeness, of divine love.

In *On Liturgical Theology*, Roman Catholic theologian Aidan Kavanagh describes Church as a “workshop” for City, in which City serves as an icon for World in its modes of diversity and creativity. The divine is present through all of creation, and to participate in liturgy is to engage this creativity. Kavanagh argues that God gives liturgy in order for humans to make something new for the city through an altered relationship to discourse.¹²⁸ Because sacraments and rites are “primary language,” through which the church gathers, those who assemble come to engage divine presence and activity in the world in a different medium than in their everyday lives: “In the case of City and Church, the need to image in order to know gives rise to special sorts of discourse which are more necessary than optional. The discourse thickens meaning found in reality and then

¹²⁸ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 42–25.

increments that meaning with style.”¹²⁹ Because it relies on symbol and sense as much as verbal articulation, liturgy occasions different modes of relating and apprehending than the discourse of City readily occasions.

Because the assembly gathers not for information about God, as an object of human mental capacity, the liturgy invites encounter with God in a style that troubles discursive tendencies to imagine Christian liturgy as informational or educational rather than through relationship or encounter. While Kavanagh posits a traditional canon that shapes Christian liturgy, he also insists that liturgy is never first words about God; rather, it is the occasion for a communal entity to move and discover itself as a body. He compares the church to the human body that grows into a sense of its own self, as a small child might initially regard some of her own body parts as strangers and gradually grow into their sensation as she moves and discovers herself: “Analogously, a corporate entity such as a church might perhaps be said to grow itself into a sort of envelope of sensation which then forms its own peculiar self-image, its own real awareness of corporate identity which is its own fundamental principle of operation.”¹³⁰

Kavanagh insists that such embodied encounters with the divine will regularly bring a community to the edge of “chaos” and force that communal entity to make adjustments.¹³¹ Through such continual theological adjustments to the possibilities of chaos, a liturgical assembly gradually grows into an understanding of itself and its own norms of life and faith. Liturgy, he argues, should offer a new sense of normality, but it does this in a way that is more akin to the flow of music than to a classroom lesson:

¹²⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹³¹ Ibid., 74–76.

“Therefore Christians do not worship because they believe. They believe because the One in whose gift faith lies is regularly met in the act of communal worship—not because the assembly conjures up God, but because the initiative lies with the God who has promised to be there always.”¹³²

Ironically, Holy Family often seems to be the kind of congregation that Kavanagh dismisses as inadequate to a true vision of Christian liturgy: an “ecclesiastical boutique” or “a commune of friends whose main purpose is to get along with each other, a moral uplift society, a group dedicated to aesthetics or therapy, a sheepfold of the unsure, a home for the dull.”¹³³ Yet Holy Family gives a concrete shape to Kavanagh’s strange and sometime confusing descriptions of liturgy. At Holy Family, worship of God requires a community to encounter “the brink of chaos,” and make continual “adjustments” to its creativity in light of these “ecclesial transactions with reality.” Liturgy at Holy Family works through bodily connections, which grow into new sensations—gestures, jokes, silences, strange games and dialogues, different senses of reality—sensations that expand liturgical media in accord with the mental differences and diverse movements of the bodies who gather. The jokes, gesture, and silence may not be “about God” in any traditional sense, but they shape the possibility of relation and encounter within liturgy. Such relation and encounter with others is not optional to a liturgical gathering but fundamental to a community who gathers to encounter God *together*. Different senses of reality, that feel chaotic to some, force an adjustment, whether or not this adjustment is explicitly acknowledged. A church community whose liturgical tradition assumes “normal” individual abilities transacts with a reality that worships otherwise.

¹³² Ibid., 91.

¹³³ Ibid., 63.

Such artfulness, as Pinn reminds us, is interrogative, “a creative disregard.”¹³⁴ Might praise through the laughter occasioned by a bad joke offer as much to God as the beautiful prayers read aloud from the book? As Sedgwick reminds us, to put the question like this is to frame our relationships with the divine in the world in terms of cause and effect rather than the logic of what might happen when one is allowed to exist “beside” another. Creative disregard can also be a form of creative regard rather than a competition. We can put these interrelated forms another way. Alongside the beautiful prayer book prayers, the raucous laughter also rises so that a beautiful prayer for unity finds its resonance and disruption in the lure of a witty illustration, which unifies those who laugh their prayers with God.

Liturgy as Holy Play for a Sensible Community

The priest and liturgist Romano Guardini, who himself lived with mental illness in the form of depression most of his life,¹³⁵ provides us another metaphor for liturgy alongside that of prayer or creative work. The liturgy, he argues, can be seen as holy play because it refuses the logic of purpose, something we set out to achieve for God and for ourselves. Like Kavanagh, Guardini argues that liturgy is not primarily didactic. Good liturgy is purposeless, which is not to say it is unplanned or unstructured nor that it is ineffectual. Rather good Christian liturgy is beautiful because, according to Guardini, it cannot prescribe particular cures for certain ailments. It reveals human beauty when it

¹³⁴ Analyzing the work of a piece of photographic art by Lalla Essaydi, Pinn describes creative disregard as “those attitudes and sensibilities that run contrary to the normative workings of societal arrangements/regulations and are therefore considered problematic because they question what discourses of power and restrictions on life practices are meant to enforce.” Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*, 21.

¹³⁵ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1998), 7.

does not press humans into a particular shape or toward a foreknown action or end but, rather, allows those who pray to be their beloved selves for God.¹³⁶ The one who prays “with the aid of grace, is given the opportunity of realizing [her] fundamental essence, of really becoming according to [her] divine destiny” what she “should be and longs to be, a child of God.”¹³⁷ Guardini imagines the liturgical posture as a wandering through nature. Rather than a pursuit of the shortest route to a proposed destination, the spirit of good liturgy creates space for what may seem to us an idle or circuitous route.¹³⁸ Its humble gestures make room and give time for that which cannot be known or quantified ahead of time: how a community will make its own way through the songs, gestures, prayers, scriptures of the day, and what it may find along its way. When a liturgical assembly exhibits restraint, by allowing the beauty of each person to emerge, it serves as both a form of communal hospitality and a way of humility.

Guardini is concerned with how we become beautiful to one another without instrumentality or objectification, because the beauty of others and the created order often remain hidden from us.¹³⁹ Guardini imagines that if we take time to play, God will reveal this beauty to us, but he makes a qualification. For someone or something to be true to what or who they are, liturgical language must restrain its desires to improve us. In its restraint, it performs respect for that which it cannot know about the trajectory of any one human life.

The challenge of holy play at Holy Family is that one person’s form of access, a wave across the sanctuary in the middle of the Eucharistic prayer, affects another’s sense

¹³⁶ Ibid., 61–64.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 79.

of reverence. The creativity of Holy Family's liturgical art forms create not only connection but also real tension as different forms of prayer and play collide, and as traditional forms interface with improvised forms of access. When Wallace and Joshua or others access liturgical forms through their commentary, their voices might also obstruct another's access to the priest's voice. In this potential dissonance, Guardini's understanding of the interrelationship between holy play and restraint comes to bear. His invocation of "restraint" echoes a comment Father Brian makes when he reflects on how his own participation as priest at Holy Family has changed over the years. Even when he struggles to keep this premise in mind, he finds that any authoritarian rebuke of a perceived disruption is always more disruptive than the original activity; unkindness is the greatest disruption to a communal liturgy that seeks to remember God together as unconditional love. Thus, Holy Family's holy play also manifests the mark of kindness as a liturgical posture of restraint: that the most creative of art forms might flourish.

Weaving Traditional and Improvised Art Forms as Common Prayer

Both Kavanagh and Guardini write about liturgy as "workshop" and "holy play"; yet both emphasize the canons and structures passed down to the Church. The sacred and necessary givenness of the church's traditional forms hold diverse persons together in patterns across time and space. (Guardini describes Christian liturgy as "reminiscent of the stars, of their eternally fixed and even course, of their inflexible order, of their profound silence, and of the infinite space in which they are poised."¹⁴⁰) Neither imagines that improvised forms such as the jokes or the waving at Holy Family become

¹⁴⁰ Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 95.

essential to any liturgical media. Yet Holy Family creatively embodies the sense of their metaphors of workshop and holy play: its creative art forms illumine the necessity of a liturgical language; its communal performance requires interdependent persons rather than a recitation or reception of facts about God by a unified communal entity of autonomous beings.

In its practice of liturgical art forms, Holy Family is both unique and just like any other congregation. Individuals gather, and abilities to pray, play, and work together are always interpolated by the idiosyncratic presences of those who shape artful possibilities of connection and restraint. As one of the Holy Family gardeners laments to me one morning, in a tone of exasperation, when I ask him how he is doing, “I am doing fine. It’s everybody else . . .” He intimates that despite his own best intentions to have a good day, the struggles of those around him create and condition the possibilities of how fine he is able to be. His participation in Holy Family’s week-long liturgy is inextricably intertwined with theirs. The gardener’s experiences might be more intense at Holy Family, where moods can shift more quickly and the experiences of daily life through poverty and mental illness are more challenging than in many places; yet, his sentiments apply to any communal struggle.

Holy Family helps us to see that liturgical forms fundamentally require artistries of connection and communication among those who gather. They are necessary craft for any expansive prayer, or creative work, or holy play. The challenges of difference draw as much attention to the forms of communal interaction as to the explicit theologies of liturgical language. When Victoria, as an usher, jokes with a row of us who have no contributions for the offering plate—“Y’all ain’t got any money?”—how does one

understand the theological meaning of offering? Do those who dig through their pockets to give a dime to the congregation assume a theological arrangement in which the poorest members must give some monetary contribution in order to belong to a church, or do those who give money raise questions about the meaning of such an act, as they insist on their rights to participation and interaction in the liturgy even if what they give has almost no monetary value for the church?

If, as Guardini, Kavanagh, and Saliers posit, liturgy is not about gathering to memorize or articulate a set of ideas about God but is about how those who encounter God become beautiful in their relationships with God and one another, then such artistry that improvise the belonging of one to another are not peripheral but essential to any liturgical gathering. The question remains: if such artistry are essential, to what extent can the traditional forms that hold communities across time and space weave the improvisations and creativity of art forms into their own formal senses of prayer, work, and holy play? Can those who assemble acknowledge God's presence in improvised forms of access to communal gathering, in the artistry of interpersonal connection, and in the differences of mental disabilities?

As I contemplate these complex questions, I allow my imagination to wander, assuming other possible realities at Holy Family, other arrangements of bodies in time and space that help those who gather to pay attention to the realities of human interdependence. I imagine a priest inviting us not to look to our bulletins as our guide for "everything we need," but to look and listen to those beside us who will guide us through the service and to rearrange ourselves if need be so that we have whom we need by our side. I imagine one of Annie's devotional prayers or pictures as a liturgical prompt

alongside a prayer book. I imagine the words spoken and read from a book always accompanied by a gesture or touch, or by objects and artworks from the Holy Family gardens and studios. Such concrete images, like the applesauce during easy yoga, hold the possibilities of traditional forms moving toward and creating with and through the body-minds of those who enact them. I imagine that those in the front of any space or meeting at Holy Family continually weave disabled voices into the formal sounds of those spaces, understanding the work that those voices do even if they trouble the conceptual coherence of a gathering.

This is one possible alternate reality that emerges as my mind follows the thread of Holy Family's art forms. Such explicit weaving of traditional and improvised forms requires practice. Such weaving may entail difficult work and play for many of our mental capacities. Alternate understandings of time would be required for peripheral artistries to inform liturgical language, a sense of time that, as Guardini reminds us, does not perceive a liturgical gathering as an efficient set of accomplishments or obligations. Such a sense of time requires an exploration of implicit and explicit theologies of liturgy as work and/or as pleasure. To these subjects, I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 – Disrupting: Aesthetics of Time and Work¹⁴¹

“The hill of Zion yields
a thousand sacred sweets
before we reach the heavenly fields,
before we reach the heavenly fields,
or walk the golden streets,
or walk the golden streets.”

Hymn sung by Holy Family congregants¹⁴²

“Suffering can be held by laughter which is neither joyful nor bitter: the loud belly laughter, with unmoved eyes, from North Carolina; the endless sense of the mundane hilarious of one who goes to Mass every day; the gravelly laugh roused by the whimsical poetry of the incongruous in one who has damaged lungs.”

Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work*¹⁴³

On Marcus’s last day at Holy Family as a full-time intern, we sit in the library to reflect on a year of service and vocational discernment.¹⁴⁴ He begins with an image of light: “I remember my early thoughts of this place was the amount of light that I saw—so much light—a great space of light, a thin place in the Celtic tradition.”

I ask Marcus what he means by light.

“Light being a place of immense growth, a great source of life, a place where, like we talk, we say ‘surely the presence’ in the song that everybody sings in Saturday Night Light . . . a close place between where God can be readily felt and is very present and all

¹⁴¹ Portions of this chapter and chapter 5 appear in my article, “Disabling Eschatology: Time for the Table of Our Common Pleasure,” *Liturgy* 31, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁴² Isaac Watts, “We’re Marching to Zion,” in *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal*, ed. Horace Clarence Boyer (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1993), hymn number 12.

¹⁴³ Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2011), 142.

¹⁴⁴ During the years I spent at Holy Family, each year there was a different full-time intern who participated in a formation program called the Episcopal Service Corps. Unlike other interns, Marcus and those like him, were at Holy Family for almost every service, program, and event. While they worked at Holy Family, they participated in an intentional community of other volunteers serving across metro Atlanta. Volunteers like Marcus attended staff meetings, drove vans, and became involved with almost every aspect of life at Holy Family.

of these other things, but it doesn't necessarily have to take on a spiritual vibe, it's just sort of a very highly positively energized place."

"Have you felt that during your year here? Would you say that your experience of the presence of God has changed here, during your year here?"

"Well, I think presence can be a continuous thing depending on how much we are willing to be present with that, obedience being a deep form of listening, that's what the monks in Boston told us, and being obedient to or listening very closely to what that presence is. But like any relationship, in any course in time, we change. And so I think that voice, that feeling, that presence has taken on different tempos, different levels of energy, different colors, and flavors, and textures over time, like the amount of myself that I'm putting in this place, it changes. Sometimes that's really wonderful and sometimes that's less wonderful, and sometimes it's scary, and sometimes it's remarkably joyful."

"It depends on a given week?"

"Yeah, on given circumstances, it's like watching baseball. I don't like baseball, but it's like periods of intense excitement, followed by long periods of nothing happening, and then suddenly something will pop up. That's the thing about this place, it's very unpredictable."

Later in the conversation, I ask him if there are words he associates with Holy Family. To "light" he adds the word "time."

"Time in what sense?" I ask.

"Time—I haven't figured that one out yet."

Marcus's focus on the word "time" resonates with something I have felt here, so I encourage his line of thought: "I often think of Holy Family, as moving at its own . . . there's a different sense of time in being here."

"Yeah, it's funny how much of a vacuum time holds. In the early months here with so much time ahead, it was like this slow-moving time, where you had the space. Time is like this space that you have, and so I had this long amount of space for a long time to figure things out and to be present and to lean back into the moment that I was in, and to be *here*. And in a way, that is very exhausting, just, I guess, the sense that time is such a long thing. This whole year has been enormously exhausting, I think, but we've also been kept very busy outside of here."

"I often think about life at personal care homes, these spaces of time where there is only the television . . . and I wonder about that sense of time that is part of the personal care home experience."

"Yeah, I wonder about that too. When I think about Roy and his years and how he, how Roy remembers these pinpricks of time . . . and then in general thinking about time as this thing where we always get caught in the moment-by-moment, but we also see time as this wonderful space that we have until we don't have time anymore, and to just be able to lean into that . . . it seems an odd thing. It seems meals are a good indicator of that, time being centered around meals, here and in the personal care home, and I wonder if that is part of why there is such enthusiasm around them, I guess, to be there and eating."

"That it marks time in a certain way? Meals as points of time in a day?"

“Yes. And for people who don’t participate in the programs, I often feel like time is a sad thing with them, and I don’t know how to engage that. Like Sharice will sit there and tell me she is doing nothing, and she doesn’t want to do nothing and that she has no interest in just coming here and leaving, coming here and leaving, and I just don’t know theologically or personally what that is or what that means, but it is challenging.”

Texture and the Feel of Liturgical Time

The challenge of Holy Family, from Marcus’s vantage point, comes from a time filled with light and energy, the possibility of growth, and through a time that is “slow-moving,” “a long space” to be traversed, “exhausting,” and for some a difficult experience of “doing nothing.” Holy Family is both luminous with divine presence and monotonous with an emptiness that the community struggles to fill for one another. There is a “mixed texture” to time that feels strange to Marcus and to me.

How does liturgical time feel, and why does this feeling matter? How is liturgical time navigated, and how is it disrupted? During its week-long liturgy, Holy Family draws attention to aesthetic dimensions of liturgical gathering that are often overlooked in more formal theological proclamations, mission statements, fundraising goals, or in the sermons and prayers of the community. In the prior two chapters, I evoked theology as a communal liturgical performance and invited readers to contemplate aesthetic dimensions of a gathering with disability difference at its heart. I explored a frame for difference, first by attending to liturgical space as it unfolds or divides, and second, by describing liturgical art forms that incorporate mental disability into traditional structures within the community. In this chapter, I explore the textures of time within Holy Family and

consider how different senses of time affect its liturgy. I focus on a level of repetition and disruption that is subtly negotiated across the time and space of the liturgy.

Holy Family is marked by constant disruptions, not only disruptions of expected liturgical forms but also interruptions of conversations and activities. Someone who is supposed to collect the offering disappears, and community members are searching for him during the passing of the peace. A woman is telling me a story, and I have to stop in order to acknowledge another who urgently demands my attention. A congregant wanders around the altar as the priest begins to speak, and another parishioner leads her back to a seat. A gardener pulls up all the onions, seeing them as weeds, and the morning is spent replanting. Yet the disruptions of individual responses and behaviors, while affecting the smooth flow of communal interaction and liturgical movement, are less disruptive than other subtler sensibilities about what can and should happen during Christian liturgy. Such textures brush up against assumptions about the intended results of liturgical time, as well as assumptions about the charitable work of the church.

In the first two chapters, I focused on how a church shares sacred space and forms of communal liturgy together in ways that take the differences of its congregants as essential to its relationships: a plurality of spaces and liturgical art forms reflect an understanding of divine love as creative and noncoercive with and through those who gather. In this chapter, I focus on another aspect of consent to a community of difference by exploring the tensions and insights that come when employed and unemployed, wealthy and poor, able-bodied and disabled share time together as a part of a week-long liturgy. I argue that consenting to shared time together as Holy Family requires an experience of time as pleasure rather than obligation, disrupting an approach to the “work

of the church” as accomplishing a set of objectives or worship practices for God or efficiently receiving God’s grace through a service of Holy Eucharist. If liturgy is the art of receiving God’s future by rearranging assumptions about a common good, then anticipating this common good requires enough time for shared pleasure.

How does it feel to share time with people who do not work, in any conventional sense of that word? How does it feel to gather with people whose jobs take up most of their time? To explore this question, I first offer a definition of textured time. I follow Eve Sedgwick’s definition of texture as “an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure.”¹⁴⁵ At such a level of perceptual data, it is difficult to discern passivity and agency, as textures wait for us even as we create them: “to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object.”¹⁴⁶ Sedgwick points to texture’s direct association with the sense of touch but also emphasizes its intersensory quality.¹⁴⁷ For example, I can often see the smoothness of the hymnbook I touch or hear the brush of a leg against a pew, and not only feel but also hear and taste the crunch of a communion wafer on a tongue. Such textures are never neutral but coexist intimately with the feelings that arise through them: “[T]he same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word ‘touching’; equally it’s internal to the word ‘feeling.’”¹⁴⁸ Sedgwick draws our attention to

¹⁴⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

spaces, objects, and texts as textured; they make us feel certain ways as we feel our way through them. And we make them feel the way they do through our relations with them.

While Sedgwick's emphasis is on the spatial dimensions of texture, I want to consider texture as an important dimension of liturgical time and its disruption at Holy Family. For example, while I might mark progress through a service by checking off items on my bulletin, anticipating how long each one might take, I can also sense the conclusion of the service in the taste of wafer and wine, which for many congregants prompts a feeling of anticipation about the meal to follow. Likewise, a liturgical season such as Lent or Advent corresponds to a calendar year but is also known through the feelings that each anticipates and evokes. The season of Advent anticipates a longing for Christ's coming. At Holy Family such time is primarily experienced through the joy and confusion associated with the many church outings that take place during the month of December.

As a researcher at Holy Family, I become most aware of the significance of texture, how time feels, during the liturgical season of Lent, when discourses of confession, sacrifice, and suffering brush up against other sensibilities that inform Holy Family's gathering. During Lent and Holy Week, in particular, communal senses of pleasure, time, and work, as interrelated phenomena, emerge as a disruptive texture to the anticipated liturgical feel of this season. I begin this chapter with two examples from the Lenten life of Holy Family. The first example also draws on the imaginative world of an artist with mental illness from outside Holy Family, whose work is used by a priest to elicit Lenten reflection during the weekly Sunday School that precedes Sunday service.

The Stations of the Cross of Mental Illness

At Holy Family, the liturgical time of Lent begins with an Ash Wednesday penitential service in which the community shares in a lengthy confession of sins as well as the marking of each participant's forehead with black ash. A priest or a deacon touches each forehead with a reminder of mortality: "From dust you are to dust you will return." We can see the touch of ash on each other's foreheads. The mark is a sign of a season that in many Christian churches is characterized by individual disciplines that invite God's transforming work through acts such as fasting or prayer as Christians remember Christ's journey to the cross. Holy Family observes the season of Lent not only in the songs and prayers of its services but during its weekly Sunday School gatherings in the library.

During one Lent, congregants use artwork by an artist and theologian from another congregation in order to imaginatively follow the dusty path of Jesus from his time of sentencing to the cross upon which he was executed. This artist and theologian, Mary Button, employs a traditional liturgical form, stations of the cross, to reflect on the social and ecclesial stigma of mental illness. While she draws Jesus in each of the traditional poses assumed as part of a stations of the cross (such as falling for the first time, meeting his mother, being stripped of his garments), Button also fills each station with a plethora of images, which she draws from stories of beauty and suffering that characterize first person narratives of mental illness. Alongside Jesus with his cross, Button layers biblical images with images from the writings of a psychiatrically disabled individual. By this transposing of images, disability testimony and Jesus' journey are juxtaposed and intertwined.

As an artist with mental illness, Button illustrates experiences such as mania, depression, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder as well as medicating practices that are violent to those who experience them. She recalls particular individuals with mental illness by writing their words on the cross and illustrating images from their writings. In doing so, Button hopes to engage the reluctance or refusal of many churches to acknowledge the experiences of those with mental illness in their midst, thereby contributing to the suffering of those with psychiatric disabilities.

During a half hour before each Holy Family Sunday Eucharist in Lent, a small group of congregants pass Button's artwork around the table. The priest invites all who gather in the library to imagine the story as it unfolds. "What do you think he is feeling at the moment?" she asks one morning, late into the Lenten season, as we all stare at station 9: "Jesus Falls for the Third Time." Jesus lies alone next to a large wooden cross with his eyes closed. In the background there are images drawn from the testimony of a man with mental illness who participated in torture practices during the Iraq war. Wallace points out the demons hovering around him, small colorful figures along the edges. I notice the soldiers.

"I'm sure he's very exhausted," Tanya empathizes with Jesus.

"He's probably taking a nap," Scott follows her train of thought.

"I'd take a nap," Rufus agrees.

"He's not sure he can handle to go anymore cause he's so tired," Tanya continues. She suggests he might be feeling insecure or not sure if he's going to make it.

"He's getting ready! Yeah, he's getting ready." Wallace is sure about this answer.

"He's trying to regroup to get energy," concurs Tanya.

Offering a suggested Scripture passage and the story of moral injury from the Iraq war, the priest wonders if Jesus is apprehensive about his crucifixion and wrestling with the evil that is to come. Hearing about moral injury makes Roy think of a time his mother smashed one of his toys. He wonders why she smashed the toy.

“He didn’t want to deal with it,” says Wallace bringing us back to Jesus, “There’s no way he wanted to deal with it. He’s had a hard week.”

“Do you think he was trying to avoid for a just a second what he was about to do? Do we ever try to avoid stuff that’s hard?” asks the priest, admitting that she avoids things all the time.

“I do!” Wallace laughs, resonating with the priest’s confession.¹⁴⁹ Wallace’s laughter reminds me of all the times in the past year that he has given up on activities that were once life-giving to him: his work in the garden; a class at the church; and more recently the art forms that he and his friend Joshua create together through their laughter and commentary. He drops out of his obligations and commitments at Holy Family due to fluctuations in his physical and mental health and due to abrupt changes in his desires and perceptions of his own abilities. In this, he is similar to many Holy Family congregants, who appear unable to fulfill communal roles with a conventional consistency.

As I listen to Wallace, Tanya, and others, I hear them have mercy on Jesus. They give him more time to carry his burden and to arrive at his destination; he might not be avoiding responsibility. He could be resting, gathering his thoughts, or getting ready for what comes next.

¹⁴⁹ I abridge this conversation from a longer time of reflection on the artwork, in order to highlight different interpretations given over the course of the class.

But Jesus and his cross are only one aspect of Button's stations. Alongside each cross are layers of images also drawn from the words of those with mental illness, a proliferation of detail that eludes our narrative control. The stations take place on a background that teems with vibrant patterns from the natural and human-made world. Kingfishers fly and mackerel swim behind a cross in the third station. Snowflakes crystallize around the fourth. "Look at the light bulbs!" Wallace notices the patterns in the eighth. While Jesus moves through a sequential narrative of suffering, forward toward death and resurrection, another meaning accrues to the stories he symbolizes through an intensity of detail behind him. In the most tragic of stories, the patterns grow darker and more abstract. On the first Sunday of Lent, the Holy Comforter group wonders over such strange designs: the brilliant fruit and the butterflies behind Jesus as Pilate condemns him to death. In a later Lenten gathering, it takes longer to notice the wings like fragile black lace behind the cross.

In her description of her artwork, Button explains how the patterns and colors of her art relate to her experiences of mental illness:

The 2015 Stations are deeply personal. After years of misdiagnoses, medication, side effects worse than the symptoms they were meant to treat, and the patronizing disdain of health care providers, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. It has been five-years since my diagnosis, and most days I'm overwhelmed by the sheer force of color in my life. Friends often comment on the bold colors present in my work, even in seemingly gloomy subject material. Because at the age of 25, with the help of talk therapy and mood stabilizers, it was like the color was switched back on. I began to experience the world in a profoundly new way . . .

The artwork in this series begins in an attempt to express some of the experiential quality of mania. As the colors darken, I hope to illuminate the darkness of depression as well as some of the implications for social justice presented by American society's mistreatment of those with mental illnesses. The narrative shape of the series comes from Kay Redfield Jamison's magisterial book *Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. It's this book that shepherded me through the first year after my diagnosis. It helped

me to understand the central point of this new series of work: people with mental illness experience the world in ways that illuminate great truths about the very nature of the human experience.¹⁵⁰

One of the themes Button highlights in her stations is that of the complicated feelings of invisibility that can be part of mental illness. “Do you think that Jesus feels invisible? Do you ever feel invisible?” asks the priest as we consider Jesus on the ground. Rufus claims that he just ignores those for whom he is invisible; he walks away from them. But Rufus loves to tell stories, and it is difficult for me to imagine him ignoring anyone. The topic of invisibility sprouts an idea in Rufus’s mind. “Look, Roy, I’m invisible!” He pretends to hide under the table, while the rest of us laugh at his joke. Roy plays along, “Come on up!” By Rufus’s third attempt to make the same joke, we ignore him, lest he draw the group off topic as he frequently does. The priest focuses our contemplation back on Jesus’ suffering and our own. Rufus’s silly game feels inappropriate and disruptive to the sorrow and reverence that liturgical time intends for us, and we subdue his strange pleasure into the background of our conversation.

The Pleasures of Washing Feet

Toward the end of Lent, during Holy Week, the congregation follows Jesus’s movements in another way as congregants wash one another’s feet. This Maundy Thursday, a friend and I arrive early for footwashing because I have missed instructions about an irregular time for this annual service. I apologize for making my friend leave work early, although many congregants are already gathered. Inside the sanctuary, Annie and Kirby page through his sketchbook. Roy talks to a visitor about the Lone Ranger.

¹⁵⁰ Mary Button, “Statement | Stations of the Cross: Mental Illness,” *MaryButton.com*, accessed February 7, 2016, <http://stations2015.com/statement/>.

Gradually, the sanctuary fills. Before we wash feet, scripture is read, and a sermon delivered. Mother Daria begins her homily with a confession. After telling us that we will take part in a ritual that makes people uncomfortable, she admits to the challenge of writing a sermon for this community.

You see, I had a sermon written for this evening that would have worked fine at most churches, but of course, Holy Family is not like most churches. My sermon was about how God invites us into vulnerability through this activity of footwashing. My sermon was all about how Jesus himself becomes vulnerable as he takes on his humble role in front of his friends and how Simon Peter risks the greatest vulnerability allowing the Son of God to wash his feet. So I had this sermon all figured out, and then I remembered the obvious. Holy Family has a foot clinic, and so each week, Holy Family engages in this very activity that most of the world finds so uncomfortable. So Maundy Thursday doesn't come once a year to Holy Family but once a week.

Acknowledging that the week-day liturgy alters the footwashing ritual, she continues:

But before I let you off the hook and shorten this sermon too much, there is something that even this beloved community can take away from this gospel text, and it lies in that moment when Simon Peter questions Jesus. Simon Peter says, "Lord are you going to wash my feet?" How do you think Simon Peter feels when Jesus kneels to wash his feet? Anyone?

She looks to the congregation for answers.

"Embarrassed," says Roy.

"Jesus told Simon Peter that he will understand things later," offers Kirby.

"Finding grace with God," suggests Ritchie.

"Wash . . . disciples' feet. Jesus's feet!" says Forest, eagerly raising his hand and then pausing to come up with an answer that weaves him into the moment.

Mother Daria acknowledges each one by calling their names and lends her own interpretation: "I think Simon Peter was surprised. Does anyone else here think he might have felt a little bit surprised?" Murmurs of agreement follow, and small ripples of dissent. She continues:

He was surprised that God was calling him to an activity that didn't seem fitting for God. It didn't seem like a holy activity at all . . . The lesson is that God surprises us even if we are as close to God as Simon Peter is to Jesus, even if we think we know God as well as we know our best friend. God still surprises us. God does this by inviting us to step into uncomfortable regions and for many, many, many Americans—American Christians—learning to be vulnerable in a society, where power and privilege and money are supremely valued, may be the main task at hand. But for folks here, who in many, many ways are comfortable with vulnerability, it may be something different.

She describes how we shape circles around ourselves, thickening the boundaries of the ways we imagine that God is present with us. One of our holy tasks is to keep those boundaries open and porous:

So I want to invite you into a mental exercise for a moment. Imagine you are standing inside a circle, and in this circle is where you feel comfortable and where you imagine God residing with you. But then God surprises you and calls to you from the other side of the circle, from outside the boundary, and she invites you into a life that you didn't consider, that you didn't imagine was holy. As we stand on the eve of Christ's crucifixion, we have all of Jesus's teachings before us and this is an opportunity to be surprised . . . and it may be different for each one of us the ways we need to grow.

She concludes by inviting us to imagine ourselves as characters in the gospel text and to remember how each person is invited to step outside of the circles of comfort she or he imagines as holy. As with most sermons at Holy Family, some people listen intently, some drift in and out of attention, and others give no sign of engagement.

After the sermon, Father Brian prepares us for footwashing: we are to hold each foot over the basin with the help of the person washing our feet. He is adamant: "Don't put your feet down in the basin; because there will be a lot of people's dirty feet water in that basin by the time we get through, and we don't want to share whatever we've got." Then he jests with some seriousness: "There are some things we don't want to share."

Two sets of three chairs, facing one another, frame the altar. A small group goes forward. Vestry member Jill and Deacon Elizabeth bend over Mr. Cornelius's slender

frame and wash his feet side by side. Jack and Andie, husband and wife, wash each other's feet, return to their seats, and then from time to time eagerly rush to the front to wash the feet of another. Albie shuffles down the aisle, a brightly colored necktie above the collar of an old dress shirt; he returns with a rare smile on his face. Jill invites Wallace and Joshua to join her; they decline her invitation. Quite a few congregants participate as onlookers. Debbie jumps up and goes forward, capri pants covering long johns, a stocking cap on her head. On the way back, she hugs Jack and embraces Erica. One of the deacons washes my feet. Next to me, Wesley, a gardener, washes my friend's feet. Back at my pew, I enjoy gestures of pleasure and affection spreading through the room. I wait for my friend to return.

After we leave the service, my friend tells me why it took him so long to return to his seat. Wesley, disregarding the priest's instructions, plunges my friend's feet into the basin and scrubs them vigorously. When it comes time to wash Wesley's feet, my friend does not feel right dribbling water in return and washes Wesley's feet in like manner. In the car, we laugh over the surprise of having one's feet so thoroughly washed during a ritual, the symbolic gesture taking a literal form. We laugh at the discomfort of disregarding the priest's clear instructions.

About a week later, a church intern and I visit Wesley's group home. Seventeen men live in this group home in a set of apartments, and six of them come to Holy Family on a regular basis. We are trying to make small talk across very different kinds of lives, having exhausted our initial set of greetings. It is an awkward, pleasant conversation, as many social exchanges at Holy Family are, punctuated by silences. Then I remember footwashing, and so I bring it up, searching out a common memory for us to share.

Wesley nods, recalling it with a smile: “Yeah, I *enjoyed* that!” he stretches out the syllables of the word *enjoy* so that the word lasts longer.

Disability Aesthetics and the Enjoyment of Church

Disability scholar Tobin Siebers offers one definition of aesthetics as “track[ing] the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies.”¹⁵¹ As I track the sensations of this Maundy Thursday, I am surprised by Wesley’s declaration of pleasure. Wesley’s experience of pleasure in touching one another’s feet is, on the face of it, in dissonance with the context of the darkest week of the Christian liturgical year and with the difficult circumstances of Wesley’s own life. Yet, I find that his response resonates with many interactions at Holy Family that might occur at any point in liturgical time.

A short time into my ethnographic research, I become aware of my own embodiment as a source of interest for the people I study and the pleasures of shared embodiment as a way to pass time. In a pew, a woman praises the colors of my manicure and invites me to admire her own. Another comments on the color of a dress I am wearing, stroking it, or expresses curiosity over my choice of shoes. When I discuss haircuts with another gentleman, he examines my hair, looking carefully for split ends. I begin to dress with Holy Family folks in mind, not necessarily with an eye to contemporary fashion but with a feel for what colors or patterns might evoke conversation. I enjoy the creativity with which some congregants adorn themselves: hats, beads, ties, wigs, vests, aprons, and unusual hairstyles. Loitering for research purposes, I

¹⁵¹ Siebers describes disabled bodies as essential to the work of modern art because of the sensations such bodies are able to evoke. Tobin Anthony Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1. Siebers is drawing on the work of Alexander Baumgarten (1954).

find that congregants rarely desire to go in depth about their day or week; instead, we admire together new items from the clothes closet, or sniff the bottle of lotion won at bingo. I run my hand along the inside of an artist's carved wooden bowl, praising its smooth surface. I admire a photograph. I read aloud or listen to a poem someone has written. We discuss the color of the sky, the cold air, or the plants in the church garden. We recall the tastes of items eaten for breakfast or discuss the menu for lunch. We remember or anticipate an outing—viewing the Christmas lights, riding the horses. On the van ride to a group home, passengers move to the rhythms of a favorite pop song. On the radio, the hip hop artist Tupac sings, “I wonder if heaven got a ghetto,” and from the back of the van Wallace shouts, “Turn it up!” and reticent Elena, who often sits alone, seconds his request with a rare smile.

Sometimes sensory pleasures are evident, and sometimes they are imagined. One Wednesday evening, in *Ordinary Time*, I arrive early. Victoria beckons to me. She shows me a bee sting on her leg. We talk about the Holy Family Thanksgiving dinner the following Wednesday evening. She tells me she is going to cook a meal and then tells me that she can't. I think about group homes and the fact that few Wednesday congregants will participate in preparing a meal or in hosting guests in their home spaces. A few will join family or friends, but many will eat food provided by their house managers.

Sitting in the sanctuary, before the official start of the communion service, Victoria imagines an elaborate dinner that we will cook together for Thanksgiving. She names each dish and with it her place as an African-American in this Southern city: mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, ham, turkey, chitlins, shrimp, and oxtails. With each new dish, she laughs with pleasure. It becomes a game. I protest at the excess,

and she adds more ingredients to our dinner. Gradually, we quiet down. Victoria, tucking her head inside her winter coat collar, falls into a deep sleep. She sleeps through most of the service, unaware of all the singing and movement around her. She isn't awake for the reading of scripture. She doesn't go forward to take communion. Whether her sleep results from a tiring day, boredom with the service, or the effects of heavy medications, I do not know. No one wakes her.¹⁵² At the end of the service, as the deacon gives a benediction and prays over our meal, Victoria lays her head on my shoulder, propping her body against me. She gives herself time to wake up before joining the line for Wednesday night supper.

These sensory experiences occur around the peripheries of the sanctuary, accumulating as we pass time, waiting for events to begin or end. They occur inside the sanctuary, during the time of a service, along the peripheries of the official liturgy: the prayers of the prayer book, the reading of scripture, the sermon, the creeds, the confession, the offering, and the Eucharistic prayer. Such textures often distract from the centers of instruction or proclamation. They may also appear inconsequential in light of the suffering some congregants bear. What difference can any textures of pleasure make when those who gather have been asked to carry so much and when their difficult journeys are not yet finished? As Brittany explains to me, she worries all the time. Even when she feels happy, she worries that she will be sad again. Even when she feels good about her life, she worries that, one day, she will try to take her own life again. Holy Family is by no means a happy ending to the problems that many community members

¹⁵² A staff member once said to me that it is the sign of a safe space when you feel comfortable enough to go to sleep, and sometimes it is enough for a church to be such a space.

face. It is a place where some take a break from the daily routines of personal care homes and rest for a time, but it does not resolve the burdens of past and future time.

When I ask Holy Family congregants to reflect on what makes this a church, they often talk about the prayer book services. They mention morning and noonday prayer and the Sunday and Wednesday Eucharist. They talk about singing and sermons and communion. Like Marcus, they sense God's presence here. They speak about a place of acceptance and non-judgment, a safe space where you can always ask for help. People who are not from a group home may reflect on how Holy Family is a real place and not a superficial one. They mean that you can come as you are without worrying about what you are wearing, without needing to impress others, without hiding your sufferings, and without pretending to comply with conventional norms of dress or interaction. While I do not disagree with these interpretations about the marks of Holy Family as a church, I also find significance in those marks which are not directly associated with ecclesial or Christian identity: these surfaces, interfaces, and vibrations; the pleasures of eating, tasting, touching, smelling, and hearing that *feel* like Holy Family. So how, we might ask, do these pleasures affect an understanding of liturgical time? How do they disrupt expectations for a time of worship and how do they transform it?

Discomfort and the Consent to Pleasure

A service of footwashing ends with a testimony to pleasure: *I enjoyed that!* A memory of a ritual creates a point of connection. Its pleasure rests at odd angles with the story about Jesus's act of footwashing that is often interpreted through a feeling of discomfort as feet are exposed and touched by friends and strangers. In many churches,

the ritual act assumes uneasiness, as the priest does when she writes a sermon on discomfort and vulnerability. Holy Family already disrupts the assumptions she brings to the ritual by making the vulnerability of exposed feet, the exposure of bodies, an every-week activity.

The exposure of (vulnerable) bodies is a regular rather than occasional part of human interaction at Holy Family. Less able to cover up the realities of bodies, the community frequently voices or manifests experiences of discomfort or distress. When I ask the question, “How are you?” my respondent might discuss vomiting, heartburn, fatigue, desire for food, frustration with a difficult roommate, or feelings of boredom or anger. Father Brian remarks on how such honesty makes being a priest at Holy Family different from many other churches: “vulnerability is just laying there on the surface. It is there in all other places, but [here] it isn’t covered over by nice cars, nice clothes, the masks of affluence. There is very little to be had to mask the vulnerability. Not to say we just throw our arms open and willingly expose vulnerabilities, but there's little choice, no resources for masking.”

The priest’s comments echo a theme in many disability theologies, which emphasize that people with disabilities call Christians to an openness to human and divine vulnerability.¹⁵³ Yet regularizing vulnerability at Holy Family does not remove discomfort from the fabric of community. Some are uncomfortable with others’ eating habits. They eat too much or too quickly. Some are uncomfortable when others move restlessly or talk to themselves or laugh during a time that feels especially reverent to

¹⁵³ For example, Thomas Reynolds’s constructive theology on the vulnerability of God invites Christian churches to become more comfortable with their own vulnerabilities and, thus, be more hospitable places for people with and without disabilities. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*.

others. Discomfort also comes when a communal intimacy elicits unexpected feelings. Andie describes the difficult process of coming from a sense of loneliness to the feeling of being desired by others in community: “It’s not easy being in touch with all these feelings; they rub me, they rub me.”

Using the image of a circle from Mother Daria’s sermon, discomfort reveals the contours and textures of a circle of comfort. To congregants’ surprise, they are often less comfortable than they thought with the bodily differences of others (a discomfort that is shared in different ways by congregants across differences in ability, race, gender, and wealth): the fungus on another’s feet, a congregant’s lack of teeth, someone talking too much, pants sliding down without a belt, the smell of urine or of unwashed clothing, a question that redirects a line of thought, or an ostensible lack of gratitude for another’s work.

Mother Daria, like the gospel writer she quotes in her sermon, assumes that it is God who works, probing and softening a circle of social consent on the level of bodily comfort, altering the textures and feelings of church life. Indeed, Holy Family illustrates that individual and shared circles of comfort can be stretched out and softened to include those we would not choose otherwise. Yet although discomfort powerfully reveals the bodily and religious assumptions that mark a line of difference or stigma, it is often the feeling of pleasure that makes porous certain boundaries of discomfort that some feel in the presence of others. Pleasure softens the edges of dividing lines, by which one might shut out another. It disrupts assumptions about difference from within a shared circle of comfort as congregants learn how to spend time with one another.

After all, Wesley is not alone in his expression of enjoyment; many congregants come to the service of footwashing anticipating pleasure. More generally, congregants from group homes come to Holy Family seeking to fill their time with a few small pleasures. The pleasure of good meals and laughter and brightly colored fingernails and new-to-them clothes from the clothes closet and a cigarette or two before and after church and the respect of people who have more money than they do. They seek the pleasure of hearing their own voices sounding in the sanctuary, offering commentary, queries, and prayers. These are all ways they choose to pass and share time.

Christian theologians often speak of joy as a deeper relation to God, to others, and to oneself than the surface textures of pleasure. If pleasure is the immediate, superficial feeling promised by a consumer culture, joy connects the human person to a deeper stream of divine love, to the deep emotions and affections that help a person bear the suffering of any human cross. Yet at Holy Family I observe moments when pleasure is far more attainable than joy, as pleasure affirms and roots a person, even for a temporary time, to the goodness of their own body and thus the possibility of embodied relationships with others. At Holy Family, many congregants share their joy easily and freely with others, but others frequently appear anxious and lonely; they do not often express joy in themselves or their lives. Yet, even when joy eludes, a pleasure in the taste of food and in other sensory experiences serves as a vital texture within which a community gathers and seeks respite together.

Through many congregants who speak of loss—the loss of families, of homes, of respect, of a name other than mental illness, or of the familiar workings of their own minds—such expectations for pleasure can disrupt liturgical discourse that names

pleasure as selfish and sacrifice or selfless obligation to another as a virtuous way to give one's time to God. At Holy Family, pleasure, rather than sacrifice, often softens the circles of social consent so that one finds a way to live with her discomfort through another, to come again and again, back to the smell, the sound, and the taste that disturbs and to find a way to still want to share time with another. How this sense of pleasure accompanies discomfort, disrupting the aversion that differences also bring, is a strange reality I find in Holy Family's assembly before God and with one another.

I am surprised, therefore, when a non-disabled member, a lay leader who works enthusiastically on behalf of this community, and professes her love for this congregation, confesses to me: "You know I'm doing this for me! I am selfish and self-centered; this isn't about me getting gold stars. It's about what I'm getting." She wants to be clear about the murkiness of her motivations. In her confession, I read an assumption that a sense of sacrificial obligation would be a better reason for being part of Holy Family than her pleasure in participating in the community. When I press her, she admits she doesn't think anyone who comes here is sacrificing themselves, although many of the volunteers work very, very hard. Everyone comes because there is something pleasing to them about being a part of this gathering. As another Circle congregant Mariah declares to me when I describe writing for those outside the congregation: "Tell people we're good people. We love the Lord, and we eat all the time. Three times a day!"

Most congregants go forward for communion, a few bringing the wafer, the body of Christ, back to crunch on it in the pew. But the true rush to a meal happens after the service is over and the doors of the church open to fried chicken or lasagna or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or hot dogs. Some congregants rush toward the priest at the

open door as if this were a football game and the priest or deacon a quarterback. During the last hymn, some may change seats to get into a better position near the doors; the benediction before the meal serves as a countdown for the after-service meal. A priest or other staff sometimes show dismay at such blatant lack of restraint. The impropriety of such desire, the rush for the pleasure of the meal, brushes up against anticipations of those of us who associate liturgical texture with a measured reverence and carefully moderated action.

This emphasis on pleasure may periodically disrupt those who lead the congregation with great efficiency, keenly aware of the passing of chronological time, as some congregants slow down a service to enjoy it more. Such theological textures become palpable and audible as some take their time to find a page, whispering to one another as they go, and as they take pleasure in their participation, slowing down the movement of a prayer or sermon towards its conclusion. Such textures are felt during the offering, as ushers from group homes pause as long as it takes if anyone exhibits a desire to give. The ushers wait even if that person searches for what feels like a long time, groping in one pocket and then another for a few coins or a lone penny, even if all they find is a button or a piece of lint. The ushers appear unruffled even when the change clatters to the floor, scatters, and must be scooped up again, without evident shame or embarrassment.

Across differences, shared pleasures, expected and surprising, stretch the circle: the pleasure of dropping change in the offering plate; the pleasure of dancing next to another person who is moving as awkwardly as you are; the pleasure of nurturing a plant in the garden; or the pleasure of making art side by side with another; the pleasure of

knowing all the words to the Lord's Prayer or of guessing the words a priest will say before she says them; or the odd pleasure of watching someone else enjoy their God-given body, rapping the large ring on their finger against the chair in front of them all the way through the sermon, or humming throughout a Sunday School discussion. Many people from group homes allow their pleasures to center them rather than assuming that God expects a sacrificial relationship to those around them.¹⁵⁴ At times, such differences raise hard questions about how a community spends its time. To understand such tensions in the experience of time, I turn again to an analysis of the Maundy Thursday footwashing.

A Sense of Time

My friend and I arrive at the church early on Maundy Thursday and account for thirty unanticipated minutes. Ahead of time, we calculate the amount of time we need to spend at a service, anticipating a further point in time when we will rest from our ecclesial obligations. Once the service begins, the priest's elaborate instructions assume that if we are able to remember what we are supposed to do (a challenge for many in the congregation), we can perform this ritual capably and efficiently, without a risk of harm to ourselves and without slipping or sharing diseases in the dirty water. Wesley, with his own plan for washing feet, seems unaware of the potential risks of washing feet, or a future point in time when this ritual must be finished. He is not anxious about the other people waiting for their feet to be washed, nor about those who are waiting for communion. He is not concerned that there is a long half service before we all go home,

¹⁵⁴ At the same time, Friendship Circle congregants are also likely to speak about hell, damnation, punishment, and graphic atonement theologies in ways that other congregants are not.

and that this is Holy Week, which means there is another service on Friday and one on Saturday as well. Wesley, like many Circle participants, assumes a sense of time that is both part of the texture of Holy Family and disrupts it.

Taking such time is assumed in the very way the community is assembled and the amount of time it takes to gather this group from the city. It begins on the way to the church as the vans pick up groups from different homes. This time of sitting next to other people, body next to body, in the back seat of a van is prelude and postlude for parish gatherings. There is much pleasure in these rides, but the time of waiting can be exhausting.

I often recall a church time whose duration I could not bear. On the way back from a special weekend art event, the art director drove around the city of Atlanta for five hours, dropping off participants at their homes all over the city. Unaccustomed to this ritual, at the end of a long weekend, I found my own way home after two hours; I gave up on this extended postlude to a weekend of wonderful comradeship. Even as a researcher, with a specific goal in mind for all the time I spend, it felt impossible not to begrudge the slow feel of a time in the van I did not anticipate. I wanted to get home to the pleasures I had been anticipating as a reward for my long weekend. Others were also tired but had no choice other than to wait their turn.

Relative newcomers to Holy Family describe to me the challenges of unstructured time, the waiting time before and after services, the time without goals or agendas or tasks. Friendship Circle participants sometimes describe this time to me as “same ole, same ole” highlighting the difficult repetition of days inside and outside Holy Family. They want something new to happen, something to surprise them. But paradoxically, the

surprises that come at Holy Family seem related to slow time and repetition, the same ole same ole of waiting and sitting together that constitutes as much time as the actual service, as the meal, as the outing, or as the program activity.

The intersections of time with pleasure and discomfort hinge on the intersections of disability with poverty and unemployment. In order for holy loitering¹⁵⁵ to be an ecclesial option, there must be people for whom time is not scarce. There must be people who have time before a service to flip through a sketchbook with a friend or tell the tales of the Lone Ranger. Those who arrive by cars (occasionally referred to as “the ABCs”) experience less of this time since they are able to arrive just as a service or event is beginning and to depart as soon as it is over, as long as they do not have church work to do. The resources and demands on their time make holy loitering difficult and, therefore, constrict their sense of church as a source of communal pleasure. Their time, like mine, is carefully measured out to make time for the many obligations and pleasures of busy lives.

But the feel of time at Holy Family not only disrupts the ABC’s, it also disrupts the day-to-day of personal care home routines: the walk to the store for snacks and the hours of watching television. When I ask many of the Friendship Circle members why they come to the church, they talk about “something to do.” The irony to newcomers from outside of the personal care system is that some of those who come to do something apparently do nothing. They sit side by side with other silent community members. They listen to others sing, watch others play bingo, and wait eagerly for meals to be given and for vans to come again and take them home. They work with time in a different way than those of us who live by points in time as a series of accomplishments. Both of these ways

¹⁵⁵ I introduce the concept of holy loitering in chapters 1 and 2.

of feeling and passing time have their frustrations and pleasures, but one sense of time can feel disruptive to another.

For example, one morning I walk out of my home to go for a quick jog and then get a jump on the tasks of the day when through the early darkness, I make out a familiar shape and movement. It is Roy! He is knocking on my neighbor's door, to no avail. Roy often tells a story about being given a ticket for using the bathroom in public, and I worry that he is in need again. I call to him. He crosses the street; he has been walking around the city this morning and needs a cup of coffee. He declines breakfast but sits for coffee with my husband and me. He looks at a travel guide we have on our coffee table. He tells us a funny story from the first time he visited Holy Family. He tells us some very disturbing stories from his childhood. (Roy lived part of his life in an asylum, which he freely describes as a "living hell.") Roy doesn't worry that he might be making us late for work or interrupting the schedule for the day. He will not be offended if we have to go, but he assumes that we are happy to be there too. At the end of a cup of coffee, he asks for a ride to McDonald's, four blocks away, because he is tired from walking. My husband is late now for his bus, so we all get into the car. Roy has trouble climbing into our small car, and without any evident embarrassment, he asks my husband to help him get his feet in.

The assumptions Roy makes about time could be interpreted as a mark of social obliviousness on his part, but the practice of loitering with intent also requires that other people assume you have time for them. This encounter becomes an important memory that Roy and I share. He enjoys reminding me again and again of this pinprick in time, a

measure of our knowledge of one another. Across the aisle in church, he calls my name, “Rebecca, remember that time I came to your house for coffee?”

One of the best illustrations of the way this assumption of time affects the community’s liturgy takes place at noonday prayer. The shortest of prayer book services can feel too long for first-time visitors who become anxious that Friendship Circle singers have lost their sense of time. I frequently observe a new intern’s furrowed brow and anxious glances around the room as soloists sing on and on with no hymnbook to measure the verses. I want to assure them that such fear is futile; no one at noonday prayer would jeopardize participation in the pleasure of the meal to follow.

One noonday, Rose and Kayla, sing a duet. Standing at the front, they invite a man sitting at the back to join them. “Come on up!” they gesture to him, insisting he belongs with them because he is singing with such enthusiasm from his pew. As he rises to their call, it becomes apparent that he is using a walker and moves very, very slowly. There is a pause as we all stare at him, and I wonder about the wisdom of the invitation. Then Rose improvises the liturgical time he needs, by changing up their song; she chooses another favorite song about walking, and they sing Charles and his walker up to the altar. After the original song is performed, Rose anticipates that Charles needs time to get to the back of the church before the prayer book prayer begins. Rose asks if he would like to walk back to the “sequence hymn,” which on Sundays accompanies the deacon’s procession down the aisle to read the gospel. The small choir chooses another walking song, “I want Jesus to walk with me,” as the man processes slowly back to his seat. Creatively, Rose and Kayla work with the time that disability assumes. Drawing on gospel traditions, these two black women also draw on other liturgical sensibilities and

styles that disrupt the white church time that is often given preference at Holy Family. In the meantime, they live into the texture of pleasure, reveling in their chance to sing three songs rather than one. Their act of making time for another is in no way sacrificial because it allows them to sing two more favorite numbers; nonetheless, it is generous in the grace with which they disregard any felt desires to hurry or postpone his role.

This sense of time disrupts, in part, because it finds itself in tension with other textures of time also present. The longer Wednesday and Sunday services move quickly when employed congregants take the lead. These employed members have a different aesthetic of time that corresponds to the scarcity of time and to a more able-minded efficiency. Such an approach to time is one with which I often approach the work of going to church. While Friendship Circle participants are not more virtuous and patient than others, their approaches to time, shaped in part by different relationships to work and to church, alter the feel of a communal gathering. Such different senses of time raise the question: What does it mean to do the work of the church together? What counts as work in God's time?

Responsibility and a Sense of Work

My friend comes from a full day of compensated work to this service of footwashing. He comes from a job that doesn't dirty his feet. Wesley comes to the service from a life where he does not have financially compensated work to an event that he has likely been anticipating all day. He comes from a world where feet are often in need of care. In the weekly foot clinic, nursing students volunteer to do the work of cutting nails,

applying lotion to feet, and painting the nails with bright colors. Here, during this special service, Wesley scrubs with vigor as if it were his volunteer work.

When I ask Holy Family folk, “what did you do today?” they will often say to me, “oh, I went to Holy Family” or “I went to school” (by which they mean another day program). Although no attendance is taken and no penalty given for missing a day or a week or a month (except perhaps losing a space on the van for a period of time if another wants the spot), the director tells me that some Circle participants will call to tell him they will miss a day. Some, like Kayla, lament this fact. Why does she have to get sick on a day when she is expected to be at Holy Family? She describes her activities at the art program as a vocation: “I think I am cut out for art . . . I tried other jobs but none of them worked out . . . God speaks to me through art.” By showing up for the week-long liturgy of services and programs, Kayla and others work at the task of occupying the church, filling it with the pleasures and discomforts of noise and friendship and silence and art, even if not many are doing anything anyone would call “work.” Some of them find this “work” exhausting.

Such unconventional work reveals that conventional forms of employment both sustain and disrupt the shared time of a community of difference. Many Sunday-only congregants work at daily jobs and help to keep the church doors open by supplying much needed financial resources. The church would not survive without this paid work, and staff desire more employed members to sustain the church’s budget. Sunday congregants also perform the more conventional “work” of serving on committees, supplying food for potlucks, and organizing special meals and events. This is hard work, and it is not always pleasurable, although congregants generally approach these

responsibilities with good cheer. Occasionally, regular Sunday members feel tired of the fact that they have to do all of the work of the church because other congregants are able to “do” so little. One lay leader thinks maybe she and others who perform most of the tasks of the church should be “asking people to do more [not only] in the service but serving meals and also picking up and cleaning up. Why aren’t people held more responsible? I sometimes think that we’re enabling, and we’re not expecting much.”

I see the differences in work load, and I agree that Circle participants could be entrusted with more work of the church, both liturgical leadership and also more logistical tasks. But sharing responsibility for such work would slow time at Holy Family in ways that also disrupt efficient patterns of church gathering. Some congregants enjoy helping with the tasks of church life, but this takes more of everyone’s time: some people move and think more slowly than others; some aren’t able to be as consistent as others. A committee meeting might take longer if someone who uses a different logic weighs in on church decisions. Sharing responsibility is also affected by the van schedule since those who ride the vans are not in charge of their own time. Entrusting responsibility makes more work for a small congregation. As one who carefully measures out time and covets each hour, I empathize with a fear that sharing the responsibilities of work increases church work, even as I agree with congregants that such changes are desperately needed. Many staff articulate a desire for more representation and shared responsibility in the tasks of community life, and I observe an increase in shared responsibility and lay leadership over my research time; but such changes happen slowly. Questions of representation remain a theological challenge to Holy Family’s life together as it claims the dignity of every human person as God’s claim upon the church. There is a struggle to

imagine and to honor that dignity through the kind of time, and thus the amount of work, required for shared leadership, particularly in a church with limited financial resources.

At the same time, Sunday members rarely spend time at the Friendship Circle because of their jobs. Many of them do not attend Wednesday services, which begin right after a long day of work and in the midst of rush hour traffic. Thus, the liturgical work of the week falls to staff and to Friendship Circle participants. Ostensibly, Circle participants come to receive free programs, free food, and free clothes from the clothing closet. They benefit from services they did not plan in a space provided for them. As such, they are recipients of charity. And yet, without the presence of people who have time to gather during the week without getting paid for it, the liturgy of Holy Family could not take the theological shape it does. The people who receive the most from the work of others also perform the work without which this congregation could not worship God the way it does. Such a sense of work, of those who come to the church to take time for pleasure, disrupts an understanding of the church's mission as accomplishing charitable work for the mentally ill and of liturgical time as accomplishing something important for God.

For example, on a tour with a potential donor, I note this visitor's discomfort upon catching sight of a group of Circle smokers, who are enjoying cigarettes during program hours. This wealthier woman from another congregation interrogates the tour guide, a nondisabled lay leader in the church. What is this group of people *doing*? The Holy Family guide assures her that these folks are just participating in the smoking social circle *now*, but that they also participate in other programs. You can't ride the vans without doing *something*. The guide quickly assesses that this woman, whose money is needed

for the work of the church, desires solid evidence that the church is *working* to help people with mental illness, a fact not evident to the visitor in a group of idle smokers.

Yet, later, when I speak with a parish nurse about the work of the church, she offers a different view: “The most wonderful unique thing is that people don’t have to have a goal; they can just come. That would be my story: you don’t have to produce a product, you just come.” She contrasts the work of a church from other kinds of programs for the mentally ill: “It validates that people are people, that they have rights and that they are loved because they’re human beings, and that they’re not being evaluated all the time. Yes, in society we do it [evaluate], but if you live with mental illness, people are objectively doing it all the time, so this [is] the least judgmental place I’ve been in.” For the nurse, this possibility exists because it is a church:

The whole God thing is what it makes it special. People come here, and they say everybody is made by God, and everybody is loved by God, no more no less, and if that’s my premise, then my definition of friendship isn’t as narrow. I do think it’s a faith thing. I do. I do think you see God in everybody and that’s where I come from and that is what I try to teach students . . . I think that it has changed the way they take care of people, wherever they work, it doesn’t necessarily change that they are going to come here and volunteer. (That’s my big goal. They’re all new in their careers and paying back debts.) That’s my premise. We’re all more human than otherwise.

The parish nurse worries about what might be lost if this sense of the church’s work ever changed: if Circle participants were expected to produce measurable outcomes from their time at Holy Family, or if a priest stopped understanding conservation of and participation in joy as the heart of ecclesial work. She wishes that the staff were able to stop worrying about running out of money for this work. She wishes the broader church would believe in this work and freely give.

The director of the Circle hopes that one day some unemployed congregants may no longer be able to do the work of Holy Family because they will have paid work. He wants them to recover so that Holy Family is no longer at the center of their daily activities and so that they can have meaningful lives outside the congregation and Friendship Circle. But the reality is that many congregants cannot work. They struggle even within the church to validate a life of poverty without regular employment. At the same time, by virtue of not working at conventional jobs, poor people with mental illness gather and work with the embodied pleasure at the heart of Holy Family's liturgical life.

A former member, now serving in another parish, writes about the strange shape of Holy Family's life before God, recalling how it hearkens to the work of monastic communities albeit in a different way:

The communion of the saints at the Church of the [Holy Family] consists of all those people who have, by twists of fate or acts of providence, been thrown together into the eccentric church-house on [Oakdale] Avenue, and who are gradually discovering, through the sustained practice of praying, working, and eating together, the presence of Christ in their midst. It is not a communion of personal preferences or liturgical tastes, theological like-mindedness or invisible cohesion; it is rather a communion of those who have been offered and who have accepted in the midst of their winding pilgrimages a real place of respite to eat and pray with fellow travelers.

And in this way, the Church of the [Holy Family] seems, somewhat ironically, like a parish lingering contentedly on the fringes of Christendom. Its members come because it is close and because it is there—simply because it leaves its doors unlocked and provides structure to the passage of time. They come without much autonomy and without great expectations. And by doing so they have formed a community whose dedication to the mundane movements of grace is both obsolete and visionary

The challenge of such an “obsolete and visionary” mode of church draws attention to a different sense of work, a sense of work that disrupts certain anticipations of liturgical time as a sacrifice for God. It accounts for the pleasures of a group that gathers, assuming

they have all the time in the world to do so even though many of them will only be at Holy Family for a short time.

The Work of the Church and the Distribution of Resources

A struggle to value the work of those who do not have jobs nor accomplish objective goals for the congregation reveals the disruptive texture of pleasure to Christian liturgical time in which feelings of work and pleasure are often divided. How then to acknowledge the work of pleasure without disregarding the real divisions and power differentials that exist, when some have compensated work and some live in poverty on meager disability incomes? How to value such idle work without making invisible the power structures and real inequalities that arise from the fact that some congregants will never have paying jobs and that some are seen as able to take on more responsibility for others, particularly as these dividing lines fall along power lines of disability and race?

These tensions are highlighted one day when I run into Margo in the hallway. She stands in front of the bulletin board and points to a large poster of smiling children with the words, "Outreach Ministry Supporting Orphans in Kenya." I recognize these children as ones that Holy Family prays for every Sunday. "Those are my friends," she explains. She tells me that there was a woman who came to church from Africa once, but she has never been to Africa. I ask why they are her friends. "I love kids no matter where they are in the world. Kids have helped me out." And after a pause, "I ain't got no kids. I look up to the Lord. You know why I look up to him? He knows how to handle things. That's why the Lord knows. He puts people in your way." She repeats that she doesn't have

kids, but that God has a plan. God knows. She implies that not having children of her own is part of God's plan, and she trusts this.

Margo moves quickly from talking about God's plans for her to talking about the current priest's plans to leave the congregation and how that might affect her life. The priest before this one would give out money. Now this priest doesn't give money. Maybe the next priest will be a nice man. "He'll be a good man, but I know people are going to ask him for money." She seems upset that the current priest, a beloved figure in the congregation, doesn't give out money for cigarettes, but she also feels conflicted about her own desire for help. She wants to know if I agree that people should not come here begging for money. "You're supposed to take care of that yourself!" she says, playing out the logic of why not to beg at church. "What would you do?"

"I don't know," I try to imagine her position. "I don't know what I would do if I didn't have money. I would probably ask for help." I also don't know what I would do if I were the priest; it's hard to imagine giving out money for more cigarettes to everyone who asks.

"He [the priest] pretty much puts his foot down," she concludes. "Cigarettes and money are problems!" She tries to figure out where I stand on these questions of church and the distribution of money for cigarettes or other goods. "You don't agree with it?"

As we stand there, negotiating the power to give and withhold money within the church, contemplating the vast wealth disparities that make such an inherently troubled negotiation necessary, we stare at the posters on the bulletin board of the smiling orphans in Kenya. Margo starts to talk about Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, now wrestling with another set of authority figures. She is still concerned with the persistent problem of

money and the conditions for trust. “Barack Obama—he’s gonna be gone soon . . . Hillary Clinton is a good lady. People should vote for her. Don’t you agree? She’s a good lady.” She follows this with a fear: “If the Democrats get elected, they are going to cut Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid. They think everyone should work, but some of us can’t work. We have mental illness, and we can’t work. I’m gonna vote for Hillary Clinton. She’ll take care of us.” I ask her if she means Republicans instead of Democrats since Hillary Clinton is a Democrat. Margo agrees, but she seems far less concerned about a clear distinction between political parties than that there be a politician with the power to affect change who understands her inability to hold a paying job.

Margo can do the work of prayer and holy play if praying entails standing before the poster of the children of the church’s charitable intentions, in order to regard their faces and greet them as friends. At least, during this period in her life, she is able to show up and do this brief task, taking a break from the intense anger she also describes feeling toward people and situations in her life. But the shape of her current devotion sometimes makes her feel that she is at the mercy of those who decide her fate in big and small ways—the God who might not give her children, the priest who might turn away her request for cigarettes, and the political authorities who might think she could work when she cannot. Margo’s struggle to trust reveals the way that wealth disparities affect the very heart of the church’s work and its struggle to be a place where congregants are able to trust one another. The value of compensated work outside the church deeply affects the church’s own textures of time, pleasure, and holy work.

When Father Brian describes what makes it hard to be a priest at Holy Family, he describes socioeconomic differences as the biggest challenge to becoming a church and

immediately speaks about his own money: “I have found it hard to be a priest here living with my own affluence in the presence of all the poverty, trying to sort that out, and I’m still trying to sort all that out because I haven’t abandoned my affluence.” Likewise, Lloyd describes the importance of worshipping God with other “people who don’t have much money like I do; my mental illness is not very, very severe but as far as being poor, I’m poor. Sometimes it’s hard to go to wealthy churches, see what they have, but then having a lot of money had never been important for me, but I’d like to have enough to live off.” The challenge of valuing the work of the unemployed is that this work is not valued more broadly and often fails to resonate in ways that are essential for a community seeking relationships of mutuality rather than ones built, theologically and communally, on patriarchy, paternalism, or ableism. If one’s time is not marketable, can God be trusted to provide for the future? Can the church and its leaders? Can the government? These questions are intertwined in Margo’s mind as strands that affect her feelings of hope or trust or shame as part of this community.

The subtle repetitions of Holy Family create complex patterns of church that emerge through slow time and alternate senses of work. Such textures divide and unfold liturgical spaces and make possible the art forms through which a community of difference assembles. At the same time, such a way of passing liturgical time feels strange and disorienting within larger social and ecclesial contexts. The productivity of paid workers, as well as the charitable sacrifices of individual Christians with the means to give money, create rival senses of work. If Holy Family is a way to rehabilitate or occupy the time of those who cannot (yet or ever) contribute to the substantive hard-working mission of the church and society, this is easier holy work to sell to donors.

Whose work and what kinds of relationships to time ensure the survival of a church for whom time is also the currency needed in order to provide the basic pleasures it offers?

Making Time for Communal Pleasure as the Work of the People

Christian liturgy invites our participation in symbolic time.¹⁵⁶ Liturgy is sometimes evoked as the work of/for the people, hearkening back to a set of meanings contained in the word's origin, *leitourgia*.¹⁵⁷ If liturgy is the work of people who consent to share space, form, and time together with and through God, such work involves entering an abnormal relationship to a linear sense of time. Again and again in liturgical time, Jesus is born, teaches and performs miracles, is betrayed and executed, rises, ascends, and sends the Spirit to comfort and advocate for a church trying to find its way through "Ordinary Time."¹⁵⁸ And then the church waits for Jesus's coming again: both as a child and as the one who comes at the end of time. Saliers describes this strange circling when he writes, "Christians mark the beginning of liturgical time by recalling the end of time. But beginning by remembering means that something has gone before: a witness, an intersection of images, a promise."¹⁵⁹ Such circling of liturgical time, like the layered collages of Mary Button's stations of the cross, produces liturgical textures as a way to feel the church's time together (the anticipation of Advent, the jubilation of Easter triumph). The liturgy is designed to feel, touch, taste, and sound differently at various

¹⁵⁶ For a brief introduction to a Christian liturgical calendar, a calendar that is reflected in Holy Family's patterns of worship, see James White's description of "the language of time." James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, third edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 47–80.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26. White construes this collective work to entail the vital participation of all worshippers: "To call a service 'liturgical' is to indicate that it was conceived so that all worshippers take an active part in offering their worship to God."

¹⁵⁸ Ordinary Time designates liturgical time that is not set apart for other major liturgical seasons such as Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

¹⁵⁹ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 217.

points in the service or liturgical year, but it also anticipates a feeling that will come later or earlier in another liturgical season.

Such textures may invite resonance between an individual life and liturgical time, as happens when Wallace sees a Jesus who gets tired, takes a break, gives up, and gets ready to go again. At the same time, liturgical time is often at odds with the way that mental illness or any human experience disrupts a liturgical season. Button writes of this when she describes the difficulty of attending church when she is depressed:

For me, the most horrifying aspect of my depression is the feeling of separation from Christ that it leaves in its wake. When I feel this way, going to church only makes the feeling of separation that much more painful. I worry that my depression is an offense to God, that my inability to pull myself out of my pity means that God hates me. I open my mouth to sing hymns of praise and the words turn to ash in my mouth. This isn't to say that churches should never sing praise hymns, that caring for those of us who live with chronic mental illness means to dwell in the darkness. Rather, we should live out the Scriptural understanding that there is time enough under heaven to tear and to mend.¹⁶⁰

The textures of her individual experience are often at odds with what liturgical time invites her to feel. Yet, they also manifest her hope for enough time for people with mental illness within a Christian way of keeping time.

At Holy Family, the disruption of disability often comes from the texture of a communal life pressing against liturgical time, as when the routine pleasures of Holy Family's life together feel at odds with the penitential or sorrowful feel of Lent and Holy Week, or when the exhausted bodies of worshippers challenge the claims of Easter triumph. Such varied moments of aesthetic disruption create a gap for theological reflection: is God requiring continued sacrifice and the dismantling of pride from people who live in situations of deprivation and stigma? Has Easter triumph come to the very

¹⁶⁰ Button, "Statement | Stations of the Cross."

poor? In such cases, I often find that the experiences of some at Holy Family disrupt liturgical language that feels inadequate to the lives of many who gather. For example, during another footwashing service a year later, a different priest speaks about Simon Peter and God's desire for us to give up our pride. "Are you okay?" Wallace whispers to me, apparently noticing the way I shift nervously in my seat. I am visibly uncomfortable with a sermon that asks some of the poorest people in the city to give up their pride and ask for help. In contrast, Wallace affirms the sermon with a refrain he reserves for a compelling delivery: "That's deep!" I can feel his enjoyment over the resounding conviction with which the preacher sounds her message. He does not look ashamed or remorseful. The sermon is "deep," but he does not feel compelled to wash feet as an antidote to pride. He appears to feel the sermon in a different way than I do, not as a set of ideas about God's demands but about the emphatic tone of a sermon as a point of connection between himself and the preacher, who preaches in a way he enjoys. The sermon is an experience rather than a set of assertions to be affirmed or denied.

Liturgy, Eschatology, and Crip Time

Christian liturgical time, circular in its movements, often anticipates an in-breaking of future time. As Saliers describes it, "The realized eschatology embedded in the liturgical action of the community at prayer in Jesus' name is not simply a recall of the 'fact' of a resurrection in the past. Rather it bespeaks and enacts the impossible possibility of the future becoming present."¹⁶¹ Disability scholars remind us that such "impossible possibility" is often evoked in Christian churches through the symbols of

¹⁶¹ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 68.

disabled bodies. Even in Holy Family's liturgy, the blind, the lame, and the chronically ill appear in texts as those whose bodily transformation is named to mark a future time when sorrows will cease, a time that is impossible to fully imagine. One of the Circle participants, Kayla, frequently evokes this eschatological time during noonday prayer when she fervently prays that God would "find a cure for all diseases."

The circular pattern of liturgical time, which waits for and assumes eschatological time, often coincides with what disability scholar Alison Kafer identifies as "curative time," a time that cannot imagine hope other than through intervention. In what Kafer calls "a curative imaginary," disability stands in the way of a linear narrative of human progress, a symbolic obstacle to what the human race might one day become.

As Kafer puts it, "The questions animating a curative temporality include: Were you born that way? How much longer do you have to live this way? How long before they invent a cure? How long will a cure take? How soon before you recover?"¹⁶² In Kafer's view, the harm is not that Kayla prays for a cure for all diseases, but that future hope, as essentially curative, reduces the possibilities of the present time.

Kafer contrasts "curative time" with "crip time" as she queries an assumption that there is time to find a cure but no time for disability accommodation and improvisation:

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. We can then understand the flexibility of crip time as being not only an accommodation to those who need 'more' time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27–28.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Kafer imagines crip time as bending time toward the textures of human life to create more time for disability so that all of us imagine more generous ways of inhabiting time.

Kafer's description of crip time reveals how assumptions about time affect the ways many of us construe good work. If work involves a measure of efficiency by which we know how much can be accomplished in a given amount of time, then crip time at Holy Family also serves as a disruption to the clear boundaries between "work time" and "leisure time" as well as a disruption to the feelings that paid work continually presses upon the worker with all that needs to be done.

A close examination of the texture of time at Holy Family reveals that if there is a felt sense of the in-breaking or bending of time, where minutes and days are not bound to a feeling of either scarcity or anxiety, it comes from turning back to the immediacy of the material pleasures of taste and touch and sound, the rocking of one's body back and forth in the pew, whatever feeling soothes or quiets a troubled or busy mind and enables one's being there with others in the first place. Time at Holy Family is frequently exhausting and also precious; this is evident whenever I witness the ways that congregants celebrate and insist on bodily pleasures. Such insistence turns the symbols of "the hungry" and the "the poor" and "the destitute" of liturgical discourse back to the experiences of the bodies who have known hunger and illness and poverty, sometimes disrupting a focus on the symbols themselves (the wafer, the splash of water) by pointing them to the sacred feelings of eating and scrubbing.¹⁶⁴ Even "the foot of the cross" becomes a place where

¹⁶⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, drawing on a passage from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, reminds us that for those who experience oppression "enfleshing freedom" often requires loving the parts of one's body that have been rejected or despised. She notes the significance of a ritual context for this form of solidarity with our embodied lives. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*. I also think of this act as claiming on the level of the body through pleasure that which has not been taken away.

Wallace and others imagine laying their bodies down and taking a nap, a symbolic space and narrative imagined in literal terms as time enough for respite on a long, hard journey.

One way of reading the demand for pleasure at Holy Family through the liturgical lens of Lent is to think of such desire as a childish narcissism facilitated by mental illness or a lack of discipline. But communal pleasures at Holy Family, while particular to each person, are not usually a turn away from a neighbor; when congregants consent to enjoying the material world with others at Holy Family, they do not turn away from another but root their bodies into a shared space with others. In this context, turning to one's own pleasures is also a turn to life with others.

The invitational mercy of this kind of work is harder for those of us, myself included, who tend to divide work from pleasure and who feel church time as an obligation eased by finding church people with similar financial resources to share private pleasures. To understand the church not only as a place of service for others or of growth within oneself, but also as a site of shared communal pleasure requires a different sense of time and work and a different memory of past and future deprivation. Bieler and Schottroff remind us that: "Practicing eschatological hope is an act of imagination . . . a sensual embodied activity and a sociopolitical practice. Imagination makes accessible to our minds an idea, a concept, an image, or a symbol as well as body knowledge, and a felt sense of something that would otherwise not be available to us."¹⁶⁵ Such imagination is an "artful practice of disruptive perception" which is "grounded in a practice of anamnetic empathy."¹⁶⁶ To imagine "the hungry" as present symbolically at an imagined eschatological meal, or to celebrate with those who know hunger and turn eagerly toward

¹⁶⁵ Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 23.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

a non-symbolic meal, are different ways of feeling God's presence and absence in the world. One of the greatest challenges of Holy Family is to imagine the in-breaking of ample time to share both the responsibility for work and the time for pleasure that such a community of difference requires. In order for this to be possible, Holy Family imagines that more employed people desire to stop and share communal pleasures with those who are unemployed, thus multiplying the time there is to bend and share among the faithful.

If liturgy is not measured through an ability to grasp a set of ideas about God, nor to accomplish a set of liturgical practices, but is grounded in the possibility and gift of human lives woven together through God, then liturgical time might be understood as ample time for those who gather to creatively trust one another with their time. The artistry of social interaction requires enough time for this creativity to emerge. I am arguing that the possibility of such relationships might require those who gather before God to inhabit time differently together. By claiming *crip time* as eschatological time—a sense of divine time that holds and disrupts carefully or anxiously measured time—congregants might sense the pleasures of slower time required for human difference. *Crip time* reminds a community of their memory of a future together not defined by the profits of paid work. Such “end times” are held and given by the One who turns back human time to the feelings of promise and pleasure. Thus, a week-long liturgy anticipates enough time to love and know ourselves and others and to name the God with whom we share the beauty of the world.

Chapter 4 – Naming: Aesthetics of Healing and Claiming

“What is it then that the mind loves when it ardently seeks to know itself while still unknown to itself? Here you have the mind seeking to know itself and all afire with this studious concern. So it is loving. But what is it loving? If itself, how, since it does not yet know itself and no one can love what he does not know? Has some report told the praises of its beauty, in the way we often hear about absent people?”

Augustine, *The Trinity*¹⁶⁷

“When she saw that this faraway love, who was close within her, was so far outside of her, she thought to herself that she would comfort her melancholy by imagining some figure of her love, by whom she was continually wounded in heart. And so she had an image painted which would represent the semblance of the king she loved, an image as close as possible to that which presented itself to her in her love for him and in the affection of the love which captured her. And by means of this image with her other habits, she dreamed of the king.”

Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*¹⁶⁸

“Give me the names for things, just give me their real names,
Not what we call them, but what
They call themselves when no one’s listening—
At midnight, the moon-plated hemlocks like unstruck bells,
God wandering aimlessly elsewhere.

Their names, their secret names.”

Charles Wright, “The Writing Life”¹⁶⁹

Christian theologians have long puzzled over the relationship between love and knowledge at the center of human/divine relationships. Such arguments reveal a conundrum. How do we know ourselves without knowing God? How can we love God without knowing God? But then how can we know what we do not love? Names for God propel a desire to know more about the one who is named and yet also reveal the

¹⁶⁷ Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, second edition (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 290.

¹⁶⁸ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 80.

¹⁶⁹ Charles Wright, *Appalachia: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 30.

inadequacy of human language for God. The act of naming both signifies the limits of knowledge and arouses desire for relationship with the divine.

In prior chapters, I have explored the relationships to liturgical space, form, and time that create vital conditions for a diverse group of people to gather and consent to a week-long liturgy together. In this chapter, I investigate another aspect of a communal liturgy that honors human difference: the arts of naming human and divine relationships. I begin with an exploration of names for human lives manifest at Holy Family rather than with the naming of God. I describe how arts of naming both fail and flourish within rituals of healing, healthcare, and friendship as each of these parts of Holy Family's liturgy elicit visions of a good human life. I suggest that the dissonance or resonance of names with persons who are known and loved through them are key to a theological aesthetics of a community of difference: the way it feels to share and create relationships across mental differences and power asymmetries. I conclude by arguing that the struggle to adequately name another at Holy Family is essential to Holy Family's love and knowledge of God.

Identifying Persons, Defining Mental Illness

I have been writing about an unusual church where a majority of the congregants have diagnoses of mental illness, and I have yet to define these illnesses. This omission is intentional; it represents an experience of Holy Family, a community where people are not known through their particular diagnoses nor do they often represent their lives as unusual. Mental illness marks this nonconventional community but fails to define it. It is

ever-present and elusive as community members live with psychiatric disability, each person manifesting that experience differently.

In attending to mental illness at Holy Family, I have used a disability studies approach, because I agree with the theoretical and activist premise that, as Margaret Price puts it, “minds are best understood in terms of variety and difference rather than deviations from an imagined norm.”¹⁷⁰ Using this approach to neurodiversity complicates the work of naming mental illness. As Price emphasizes in her introduction to *Mad at School*:

Who am I talking about? So far I’ve used a variety of terms to denote impairments of the mind, and I haven’t yet exhausted the list. Contemporary language available includes *psychiatric disability, mental illness, cognitive disability, intellectual disability, mental health service user (or consumer), neurodiversity, neuroatypical, psychiatric system survivor, crazy, and mad.*

In response to this cavalcade of terms, Price advocates an ethic of identification that negotiates the need for solidarity and diversity, “Although I use *mental disability* as my own term of choice, I continue to use others as needed, and my overall argument is for deployment of language in a way that operates as inclusively as possible, inviting coalition, while also attending to the specific texture of individual experiences.”¹⁷¹ While my own terms of choice in this dissertation differ from that of Price, for reasons I lay out in my introduction, I find that she helpfully articulates the work of good names, ones that facilitate coalition and community without reducing individual experiences.

Price reminds us that naming, as a culturally dynamic process, is always value laden. Claiming an identity can allow persons to build coalitions across remarkably diverse human experiences, but in the case of mental disability, as Price notes, common

¹⁷⁰ Price, *Mad at School*, 4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

terms “have explicitly foreclosed our status *as* persons.”¹⁷² Most names that designate categories of people have a preferred corollary. *Mental illness*, for example, “introduces a discourse of wellness/unwellness into the notion of madness; its complement is *mental health*, the term of choice for the medical community as well as insurance companies and social support services.”¹⁷³ Such terms, even when helpful to individuals and those caring for them, are never neutral and have effects on the lived texture of individual experience and the resources available or denied as social supports. To invoke one’s status as a person while also claiming the resources one needs for survival can be a struggle.¹⁷⁴ The patterns of identification we use for ourselves and others evoke and require a response; names establish relationships and frame our needs and desires. Using one frame, one name, might establish access to vital medical and social supports and, on the other hand, obscure important aspects of neurodiversity, mental disability, and humanity.

Psychological anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann also writes of the power of a name when she describes the two different approaches, biomedical and psychodynamic, that are often used to interpret and respond to mental illness in North American cultures.¹⁷⁵ As she analyzes different “moral instincts” that each approach fosters, she posits that “psychiatry is inevitably entangled with our deepest moral concerns: what makes a person human, what it means to suffer, what it means to be a good and caring person.”¹⁷⁶ Such moral concerns affect not only those who receive diagnoses but those involved in diagnosing and administering treatment:

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ T. M. Luhrmann, *Of Two Minds: An Anthropologist Looks at American Psychiatry* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 8.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 23.

One of the oldest ideas in human thought is that when you name something mysterious and out of control, you gain mastery over it. In magic and religion in cultures throughout history, to know the name for a tree or a person or a malicious spirit was to grasp its essence and so control it (unless you were too weak or impure, in which case uttering the sacred name might kill you). In medicine, of course, diagnosis gives a doctor control because it tells him how he might be able to help a patient. But something of the old magical echoes linger. To produce a name makes you feel that you have begun to master the reality of the problem and that there is, in fact, something there to master.¹⁷⁷

Luhrmann argues for the reality of madness and for taking seriously the suffering it causes many people¹⁷⁸ but also suggests that no name, medical or otherwise, is finally adequate to the complex reality it seeks to reflect. She reminds us that mental disorders are not isolatable phenomena in a body-mind but a cluster of diverse symptoms, feelings, and behaviors that are given common names.¹⁷⁹

The naming of psychiatric disability involves an individual person's embodied experiences; it also figures a set of relationships that are foreclosed or become possible through the patterns of identification brought to bear. Thus, in a community like Holy Family, I encounter congregants who insist on the importance of using "people first" language—"people with disabilities" or "people with mental illness"—so that "the person" might not disappear under the mantle of an illness or disability negatively associated with them. Distancing their person from their illness gestures toward the multi-faceted nature of their being, one that is never fully captured by disability. A divergent approach, one equally concerned with human dignity, emphasizes the explicit claiming of language such as "disabled" or "mad." This occupation recreates meanings associated with disability and madness, in turn creating activist coalitions. Such an

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 10–12.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 10, 34–35.

approach is wary of the dualisms involved in imagining people apart from vital aspects of the body-mind with which they inhabit the world and express their needs and desires. Rather than distancing oneself from a disability, one claims its centrality in experiencing the world and relationships, even when such experiences depart from ideals of health and well-being.

At Holy Family, as in other churches and communities, there is a struggle for names and body practices that attend to congregants' losses, desires, and dignity without also disappearing aspects of mental disability. How to name disability difference, attending to the coalition it creates, while also fostering other desires for solidarity implicit in a community of difference? How to attend to and respond to individual textures of loss and suffering that congregants experience without erasing the complexity of being? How not to regard another congregant as a pitiable thing, as one whose life I am so fortunate that I do not have? How to unfold the power dynamics that mental illness introduces into a community, naming this power without erasing the possibility of relationships across this difference? Inherent in a name is always a relationship. Who are you to me? Who am I with you? How am I to call you? How are we to speak about some of us?

Such forms of address are always multiple. There are proper names, such as birth names or surnames or nicknames. Miriam. Mr. Cornelius. Brian. These names become aligned with a second form of naming as roles and attributions accumulate. Brian is the *vicar*, so he becomes *Father Brian*. And, Father Brian is a *good preacher*. Miriam is a *kitchen helper* and a *Scripture reader*. Moving out from the individual to identifying groups of people, names serve to distinguish some groups of people from others. Miriam

helps in the kitchen without being called a *volunteer* because she is also a *Friendship Circle participant*. Kirby is not only an *artist*. He is *an artist with mental illness* and a *group home resident*. Neil is a *staff person with mental illness*, an *ABC* (arrives by car), is *married*, and is a *home-owner*.

Finally, there is also a naming that arises when one congregant asks another for help or names their struggles to God or desires before community. In addressing one another, Holy Family congregants rarely represent their lives as tragic, but the reality of loss lingers and leaves a motif of grief that alters the tone of community and elicits a desire for ecclesial response. If Holy Family's art forms hold and weave community together, they must also address the losses that congregants' name. Such petitions also require a set of names: On what basis do I ask for your help or regard or offer you mine? The desire to adequately name one's own life or experiences, to offer those to another, is part of the work of the people at Holy Family. At the same time receiving care requires certain conditions and forms of address, adequate names that facilitate trust rather than objectify members of the community. Such a complex task incorporates and assumes these various forms of naming.

Between Life and Death

On an April morning in the Easter season during my second year at Holy Family, Miriam and I sit together on a picnic bench. Everywhere the churchyard is in bloom. The gardeners are weeding and watering. Miriam tells me she was a mess when she first came to the church. She wasn't sure what she was living for. She feels that she is being cared for here. She gestures to the left side of her body. I imitate the gesture, as an inquiry,

wondering if she means it to specify something. She repeats the gesture, touching her side this time, to show me.

“I don’t feel a lot, but I feel it right here along the side. It didn’t take a lot. I thought it would, but it didn’t. I don’t know what it took, but it happened. I hope I don’t lose it. It’s special but not that special.”

“What makes you feel taken care of?”

“The people on the job; they talk to you, and they don’t just throw you away.”

“It’s a way of being talked to?”

She nods, “Then I look for my death. I keep seeing Rev. Flora bury me in the cemetery.” She has tears in her eyes.

“Did you tell her that?” I am concerned and want her to share her burden with the priest.

“I’m afraid it would be too heavy for her.” She goes on to explain, “It worries me: not to die—death doesn’t worry me—it’s like a nagging toothache, death and life, death and life.”

“It’s like feeling between them?” I am trying to understand.

“Yeah, it’s taking me one way or another. I can’t get any more emotions in. I hope I can get it together.”

I tell her that I observe her as a peaceful presence at Holy Family and am always impressed at what she brings to the community through her kindness. She looks surprised, but then she nods. She makes a comment about giving back. I assume she is talking about giving back to a community that cares for her, but she has another meaning in mind.

“Giving back to the Lord and let the Lord do what he wants to do. Sometimes it don’t turn out the way you think it should. I don’t know why he had to work it [this way].”

She describes her own physical abilities and limitations. She takes one or two steps and then sometimes she can’t move. She attributes this to God. “I walked around the building once but then he won’t let me go again.” And later, “My psychologist calls it stress. He sees it all over me.”

“What does he tell you to do?”

“He wants me to walk, to exercise.”

A week later, we return to this topic of living between life and death. This time Miriam emphasizes life rather than death. “You have to be grateful for life because life is given to you, given to all of us.”

“No matter how hard it is?”

“No matter how hard it is. We should appreciate it, and somehow put our arms around it, or put your arms around yourself and just be thankful.”

“How do you embrace life?”

Miriam wraps her arms around her body, reaching as far as she can. “You can’t get it all the way around there; you wish you could, but you can’t. Hug life, and love life.”

When Miriam describes her condition as “between life and death,” she describes an embodied experience. She stresses the importance of those who address her and recognize her life rather than “throwing her away.” She refers to multiple powers involved in this work of naming and loving and knowing this space she describes as

between life and death—the Lord, a psychologist, a priest, and staff members. In other conversations, she refers to housemates, fellow congregants, and family members. Each one plays a part in determining the experiences that congregants offer to or withhold from one another.

Like Miriam, Holy Family as a community occupies an interstitial space that assumes multiple frames for interpreting the losses and desires of congregants. Holy Family often describes its community through the general category of “mental illness” or “mental health challenge” or “mental health disorder.” At the same time, specific diagnoses are rarely given or known in regards to each individual congregant. Within a medical framework, staff and congregants often interpret themselves and one another through the lens of medications. Certain behaviors and losses may be attributed to a change in medications; if someone is acting in a way that is unusual for them, others might wonder if they stopped taking or changed their medications. Frequently in and out of hospitals, congregants compare hospitals and medical care as I compare grocery stores, evaluating the treatment they receive or the quality of food they get at each place. In addition to mental illness, many parishioners suffer from other serious health conditions. Most staff and congregants assume the importance of regular medical assistance and treatment in navigating day-to-day lives even as congregants also struggle and often fail to receive the medical attention and recognition they desire or require.

Holy Family also names loss and desire through the language of “recovery,” even when that term is understood in different ways. If Brittany refers to “recovery” as doing things that people without mental illness don’t think you can do, another congregant talks about his recovery as learning not to do things that are harmful to himself. When

congregants offer a recovery story, they narrate a transformation in lives and relationships as they learn to name and live with a mental health diagnosis. Naming and understanding one's mental illness is pivotal to such a narrative of transformation. Recovery language connects Holy Family to other day programs that many Circle participants attend on days when they are not at Holy Family. Although other programs are often referred to as "school" whereas Holy Family is "the church," implying different roles these institutions play in congregants' lives, the church like other kinds of mental health programs is understood to offer a kind of "therapy" through its programs.

Mason describes Holy Family as therapeutic when he tells me his story. He began coming to the church after he experienced some "issues with [his] mental health" and lost an apartment that he had lived in for more than ten years. He moved in with his family, and they recommended that he come to the church because they knew it had mental health programs. Now he participates in almost everything the church has to offer: arts, bingo, yoga, support groups for individuals with diagnoses of mental illness and addiction issues, Wednesday evening church services, social time with interns on Wednesdays, meals, morning prayer, and a NAMI Connections group. He argues that

the whole program is beneficial to me, because being bipolar you have a manic episode, and then you have a depression episode. And coming here after a manic episode, it somewhat prevented me from going into a depression by interacting with the people that [have] mental health issues. Even some of the staff deal with issues, and so that was good. And being involved in art programs, it's somewhat like a group therapy. To a certain extent, it keeps your mind occupied, rather than just sitting and dwelling on your problems and your issues. Last year I had a lot of trauma, you know. I had some events that took place that led up to me coming completely off my medication. And being bipolar, when you come off your medication, you really go into a manic state or high, that brings about euphoria and then it leads to confusions and that leads to hospitalization or institutionalization or incarceration, which this time, I went through the

incarceration problem.^[180] Before that it had been a long time, since the 80s, that I'd been hospitalized.

He goes on, "Over the years, I've been participating in mental health programs, group therapy, stress management, anger management, substance abuse programs and things like that, and dealing with the thought process, and being bipolar." As a person with bipolar disorder, he finds that "coming to Holy Family . . . it just gave me something to look forward to the days that I came here, to be active and be around people that can remind me that I could be worse or I could be better, but I'm just grateful that I'm alive. Some of the staff who have issues are actively working to provide services to people who do need help."

While mental illness and communal participation are often interpreted through language that is not explicitly religious or Christian, these frameworks are also used alongside ecclesial claims that emphasize the inherent equality in those who gather. Holy Family and its members refer to the transformation of loss through liturgical rhetoric: restoration of dignity, conferred through baptism and through the love of God; the relational obligations of children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ; and the unity of a community of people who share love and friendship with one another and with God. Likewise, congregants may refer to their losses as caused by mental illness, but they also attribute losses and challenges in their lives to the will of God. As Miriam remarks, God saw fit to work her life this way even if she doesn't understand why. Friendship Circle

¹⁸⁰ Some recent studies of mass incarceration emphasize that large numbers of people who are imprisoned have mental illness or mental disability. For further reflection on the troubled intersections of disability and incarceration, see Michael Rembis, "The New Asylums: Madness and Mass Incarceration in the Neoliberal Era," in *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, ed. Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 139–59. See also Nirmalla Erevelles, "Crippin' Jim Crow: Disability, Dis-Location, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," in *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, ed. Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 81–99.

participants are often willing to attribute their hardship and hopes to divine agency. At the same time, therapists, doctors, caseworkers, and caregivers are frequently cited as important agents in the navigation and interpretation of everyday obstacles and choices.

Such varied frames for naming human experience provide different tools and lenses for those who use them. While they are often used in complementary ways, competing references also create uneasy coalitions, particularly as one congregant names another's experience in relation to his or her own. Is this person I am speaking about: my brother, a patient, a client, the poor, crazy? Is he part of them or one of us? Is she low-functioning, or is she a gifted child of God? Am I a friend in mutuality or a staff person who enforces community expectations? Is she a priest who buries one of her beloved congregants, or a fundraiser who supports recovery of marginalized people with mental illness? Are Circle participants teachers who help to shape and guide the interns who learn from them, or are they a demanding crowd from whom church workers, as disciples of Christ, need to seek rest from time to time? This plurality of references provides a window into the multiplicity of roles assumed by those who come to the church, different frames for naming and knowing another's life. They mark the ongoing struggle of a community that resists practices of segregationist charity but is also embedded in systems that interpret poverty, blackness, and mental illness primarily in terms of lack or deficit, and poor people with mental illness as unfortunate, needy recipients of services.

Implied in a variety of overlapping discourses are also visions of what kinds of transformation a congregation desires for those who gather. Restoration of community, recovery from a mental illness, cure of a disease, and healing in response to suffering offer different paradigms for tracing the trajectory of a human life. Holy Family is a

coalition where the struggle for names is essential to its aesthetics of losing, healing, and claiming. This naming of a human life, its losses and its desire for well-being, shape the congregation's practices of naming, of knowing one another and the divine. Such names also frame a two-fold liturgical imperative: (1) to respond to the desire for a bodily transformation of loss and (2) to do so in a way that is not premised on hegemonic ideals of normalcy but rather embraces human difference.

Christian liturgies both invite and anticipate lament. Liturgical impulses that reach back deeply into the traditions and texts of the church encourage prayers to God for the transformation and alleviation of suffering. They offer patterns, gestures, and language for healing and anointing of those who are sick. In his meditation on human pathos and divine ethos, Saliers recalls a fifth century petition from St. James's liturgy: "Remember, Lord, those in old age and infirmity, those who are sick, ill, or troubled by unclean spirits, for their speedy healing and salvation by you, their God . . ." The prayer goes on to ask that God "disperse the scandals, abolish wars, end the divisions of the churches." Commenting on this prayer within the scope of the church's liturgical work, Saliers argues that "to pray with the people of God is to remember the world, to be in dialogue with God about the sufferings and yearnings of the whole inhabited world."¹⁸¹ The conundrum of a community, where loss is disproportionately experienced by some through experiences of mental illness, ableism, poverty, and racism, is that the naming of suffering and yearning can evoke pity or condescension. Petitions by and for some kinds of people both mark divisions and erase differences among a congregation.

¹⁸¹ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 35. Saliers quotes "Liturgy of St. James," from *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, second edition, ed. R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cumming (London: Collins, 1975), 60.

At the heart of Miriam's reflections on her own struggles is the thought that she might be "thrown away" by those who disregard her struggle to embrace her own life. Like Miriam, theologian Simone Weil reminds us of the difficult and powerful asymmetries inherent in situations of affliction. In Weil's terms, "the strong" are likely to perceive "the weak" as "things." Those who suffer often lose their relational identities as subjects or persons when beheld by those who fear or pity them. Claiming relationships of solidarity across differences of experience and asymmetries of power may appear practically impossible. Weil frames this impossibility as spiritual opportunity when she describes both "the preservation of true self-respect in affliction" as something "supernatural," and "love for our neighbor, being made of creative attention" as something "analogous to genius."¹⁸²

Absent the genius of creative attention that is true love of neighbor and the supernatural self-respect that is true love of oneself, to misname a human life is commonplace. Eiesland argues that a turn to pity or charity in response to disability has often resulted in the misnaming of disabled lives as either tragic or inspirational rather than ordinary.¹⁸³ She challenges her readers to attend to the creative means through which ordinary people "incorporate contingency and difficulty" into their lives and hold themselves together through relationships, technologies, and forms of expressions.¹⁸⁴ Such creative attention requires naming the human body as both "habitable and

¹⁸² Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 91–92.

¹⁸³ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 75. Bringing Eiesland and Weil into dialogue, we might say that to suffer is ordinary but to name and regard one who suffers rightly requires extraordinary love and struggle. Love of neighbor requires both obedience to God and renunciation of self for Weil and, for Eiesland, an intentional transformation of theological symbols including names and images for God.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

inhospitable—a body of plenty and privation.”¹⁸⁵ It also supposes communal practices by which ordinary people are enabled, through the support of others, to hold themselves together and to act out against discrimination. Creative attention names not only individuals but also coalitions that are both erotic and political, whose struggles involve desire for one another rather than pity or condescension.¹⁸⁶

As I consider modes of condescension and creative attention that inform the community of Holy Family, I investigate three aspects of Holy Family’s liturgy that explicitly invite the community to imagine transformation of body-minds: rituals of healing, healthcare, and friendship. Such rituals illustrate the struggle for adequate names for one another and for God that are essential to the work of those who worship God together.

Rituals of Healing

At a Thursday morning staff meeting in the vicar’s office, Father Brian opens the meeting with a collect, a prayer for the healing of the world. After the prayer, Eve asks, incredulously, “Healing of the world?” as if she’s overwhelmed with the thought of such an impossible task at the beginning of a staff meeting. “One germ at a time,” Father Brian jokes, and then more seriously, “It’s not all due to us.” After an update on the status of picnic tables and path maintenance, the staff name Friendship Circle participants who merit concern. One by one, names are offered to the staff circle for additional wisdom or more information: Edgar is in the hospital, Nicholas has a brain tumor, Tanya is looking fragile, Denny has been losing weight, Raymond has been acting inappropriately with the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 94–98.

nursing students and has been asked to stay away until he expresses desire to change this behavior. In many of the situations named, there is no further intervention suggested or intended, but rather an attention and regard for each one.

Such naming of community members is not only the work of the staff but also the regular work of the community. Holy Family's weekly liturgy differs from many other Episcopal churches in its regular emphasis on healing services and prayers as part of its weekly liturgy. Every other Wednesday, a liturgy of healing and anointing takes place. After scriptures are read and prayers for healing are spoken, two long lines form in front of the priest or a deacon or pastoral intern. Many congregants wait their turn to offer their concerns and to allow another to pray for and anoint them. Additionally, most Sundays, there are optional prayers for healing that take place in the back of the church after communion: a few congregants kneel at a wooden bench near the door during the service while another congregant faces them, hands resting on their shoulders, to pray for them.

As a researcher, I come to these rituals well aware of the criticism and suspicion that many disability scholars, activists, and theologians bring to the Christian church's rhetoric of healing. Many disabled persons remind us of their experiences of the violence of healing rituals: experiences of being publically prayed over again and again in the desire for eradication of disability; moments of being approached by strangers in public spaces, who desire to lay hands on a disabled body and pray for their bodily transformation; and language that imagines the healing of the whole world through metaphors of blindness, deafness, and brokenness transformed.

Snyder and Mitchell, reflecting on biblical motifs of healing, argue that Christian desires to imagine a body-mind healed and restored diverts attention from the more difficult work of imagining a world with adequate social supports:

the restoration of bodies to normative health through acts of faith healing ultimately devalues our commitments to the demands of embodiment overall. Miracles of the body (that is disability cures, the alleviation of chronic illness, resuscitation of the organism from non-being etc.) function as a form of *deus ex machina* in stories hard-pressed to resolve corporeal crisis in any other way.¹⁸⁷

Theologian Sharon Betcher emphasizes the bitter effects on those often targeted for such healings: “The Spirit and its healing efficacy? Believe me, most disabled persons have been exposed to the fervor of its promise and the bite of its rejection when our bodies proved heretically resistant to cure.”¹⁸⁸ Betcher also notes the trend in modern, liberal, Christian theologies to turn away from ideals of supernatural power to heal. Such theologies often turn these desires for ideal body-minds toward modern medicine: “While liberal theologies set aside supernaturalism, our close alliance with the miracle of modern medicine leaves us with a comparable anticipation of health as normalcy. But to wish me normal is no kindness, no generosity of spirit.”¹⁸⁹

Eiesland describes her own experiences with faith healing as more ambiguous. While she acknowledges the negative effects of many healing rituals, she also claims the power of laying on of hands “as restorative and redemptive. These physical mediations of God’s grace have often kept me related to my body at times when all of my impulses pushed me toward dissociating from the pain-wracked, uncomfortable beast.” She points

¹⁸⁷ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “‘Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance’: Disability and Redemption in Biblical Literature,” in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 178–179.

¹⁸⁸ Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 70.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

to a charismatic meeting when a group of nuns responded to her pain, alleviated her isolation, and revealed her “spiritual body” through the laying on of hands.¹⁹⁰ Thus, while Eiesland invites a critical stance toward the desires instantiated and expressed through healing liturgies, she also claims their potential in claiming persons as desirable within Christian communities. Healing rituals might also name belonging and intimacy within community and provide some relief from pain.

At Holy Family, the optional Wednesday healing ritual is heartily embraced. Many congregants from group homes go forward as do a good number of interns. In a liturgical community where congregants are often selective about which aspects of a liturgy they participate in, such ready response signals a compelling resonance between the formal gestures of the liturgy and the desires of congregants. I entertain multiple interpretations for such eager participation: the depth of concern that congregants experience for their own well-being or the well-being of those they love; their desire and faith in God as an agent of change in their lives; a moment when the official liturgy acknowledges the sacredness of touch and gesture that unofficially play out within this community at other times; and a unique Holy Family ritual that encourages one-on-one interactions and that invites each voice to narrate and name something about themselves into the formal liturgical space. Because this ritual of healing is simultaneously public and also very private, within the eyesight but out of the earshot of other congregants, or a researcher, I have limited access to the healing configurations that take place.

Then one Wednesday evening Wallace suggests that I go forward to participate in the healing and anointing ritual. While I intended to participate at some future time, I am

¹⁹⁰ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 117.

caught off guard. What should I bring to the front? When I equivocate, Wallace urges me on. I'll go if you go, he suggests. I ask if we can pray for other people, and he assures me that we can. He tells me he is going up to pray for his family. We stand one behind the other in a long line of congregants. While we wait, we have the opportunity to greet the people beside us in line who are waiting for Father Brian. A few of those who wait for prayer embrace one another.

As I get closer to the front, I can see Deacon Elizabeth place her hands directly on each person's head. In contrast, those who face Father Brian put their hands out, and he touches his hands to their hands or shoulders. He asks: "Anything special?" but the responses are inaudible. When I reach Deacon Elizabeth, I ask for prayer for a friend who has cancer. I haven't seen or talked to this friend in years; I have heard about her health struggles through a mutual friend. The deacon's prayer for me emphasizes healing in body, mind, and spirit both for me and for my friend and ends with a prayer for our joy.

Standing in front of Deacon Elizabeth, I imagine the intensity of this work: praying for each person one by one as a motley diversity of concerns and petitions are brought to the front. On another day, when I ask the deacon about her participation, she emphasizes the non-verbal communication rather than the spoken request: "Sometimes they don't even need to tell, it's just, when I make eye contact with someone in that setting, they are coming to me because they feel they need something, and they think I can help them access that. It seems like an enormous privilege to me."

Ginny, another congregant and a former psychiatric nurse who works for a disability advocacy organization, offers prayers for healing on Sundays after communion.

In her description, healing prayer forms an intercessory triangle that is mysterious and intimate to both persons involved in the effort.

It is a very private, a very confidential moment, but it's where I get to know people and where people get to know me, and where . . . I don't say, "oh my goodness what am I going to pray?" It's like we're in communication with God, and I can pray for things, and people say "oh, thank you!" so it's a very three-way thing. I'm there to pray because I believe prayer changes things. The person is there to pray because they believe prayer changes things. But half the time we neither one know what we want, or I don't know what they want.

"So there's a mysteriousness to it?"

"Yes, there's a mystery."

"This is something I can do. I think this is something a lot of people feel uncomfortable doing." She goes on to describe the language she uses to address those she is praying for: "Often when I'm praying for someone, I'm praying for my friend, my sister, or my brother, but it's very meaningful, and I have seen the depth of love for each other, love and trust in God that I don't see any place but that kneeling bench." Later she clarifies that she is not the healer. "People ask, 'Are you going to do healing this morning?'" and I say, "I am going to pray, and God is going to do the healing."

Knowing that Ginny advocates for people with disabilities, I bring up the ways that the disability activist community challenges religious and Christian discourses of healing. Ginny responds:

Well, let me make this personal. People will say to me of Belinda (the young disabled woman of whom she is a friend and guardian)—"What's wrong with her?" And my answer is: there is not a thing wrong with her. Not a single thing! Do I pray for healing for Belinda? No. I pray for blessing. I pray for continued health. And I have that struggle; my mom had cancer. Did I pray for healing? I, I remember saying to God, "I don't know, you know. You're in charge. I love her. I don't want her to hurt." You know. So all I can do is bring this concern. You know, I heard a sermon when I was in the nearly Pentecostal church: you know, that the Scripture doesn't say, "Now organize your prayer concerns. Get them organized. Make *sure* they're organized. Make *sure* they're legitimate. Then

prayerfully on your knees, in quiet, take them to God.” It says, “Casts your cares upon him!” which kind of means as you’re running, you’re throwing ‘em in God’s direction. (We both laugh). And so I do pray for healing if people ask for healing, you know, but often times I find that in the prayer I’m saying, “Lord we don’t know what healing means, but *you* do. So *whatever* that means, please grant it!” You know, who are we to say that having schizophrenia is a problem? Society has made it a problem. For my beautiful [son] it’s not schizophrenia. But we don’t see that he has a problem; we wouldn’t want him *any other way*, you know. I’m just so glad when he reached the point of his life of saying, “God made me this way, and God doesn’t make mistakes. I don’t understand, but isn’t that good enough?” So do I want Omar [a congregant] not to hear voices? It’s fine with me if he does, but I can ask God to keep him safe and to help him know when he’s being tempted to do things that aren’t safe.

In Ginny’s analysis, rituals of healing are about bringing fears and desires to God for God to sort out and to work with as God sees fit. Healing prayer is not about removing disability but plays a role in the “radical acceptance” that congregants claim for themselves and for others. In a highly organized formal liturgy, Ginny imagines healing prayers creating a safe space for potentially “disorganized” desires, desires that neither the petitioner nor the one who speaks a prayer knows fully what to do with. Such forms of healing suggest that to offer one’s anxieties and desires to God is not something that can be done alone but requires another’s voice, touch, breath, hope, and imagination.

Having taken up this discussion with those whose touch and words guide the healing prayers of this community, I also explore its perceived meanings with those who come forward for prayers and anointing. One morning at the art program I bring up Holy Family’s healing liturgy with two of the artists. Kayla tells me that when she goes forward to ask for prayers for healing, she prays for marriage for herself and for the whole world. She goes on to explain the role that marriage plays in healing: “You can be healing anything that needs healing. I chose to pray for not only myself but everybody needs it, like the world . . . everything would be better. I don’t know how they feel about

this, but this is my opinion: if everybody would get married and let marriage grow.

(Hmm, I make a surprised sound, pondering what it means to let marriage grow.) They don't know how to do it? I could tell them."

"So why would marriage make the world better?" I'm trying to understand.

"Because care more."

"Care more?"

Yes, care more. There's two in the house. One gets sick, the other one can pour the bread, pour the food. And it's a lot that each, that both of them could do together. They could clean up the house together and never get tired. They could go to the movies; that way one person ain't got no business sitting up in a movie by hisself. And if you get a partner to go with you, it's okay, but you never know what's going through their mind just as well as you know what's going through your mate's mind. But your mate is always a gender to you. Nobody knows like a mate know another mate.

"So it's about being known?"

"Yes, and loved," she concludes.

Rose, sitting next to Kayla, insists that marriage is more complicated than this:

"You can't just count on the marriage because lots of times, things change with the marriage."

"I pray for that too," Kayla interrupts.

Rose talks about the possibility for betrayal that exists in marriage but Kayla sticks to her position, "I need to have marriage because I need somebody that is strong there with me. I need some love from that person and give that person back love. I understand I can find another friend to do it, but another friend isn't going to get to the nitty gritty with you. (We both laugh.) You know what I'm talking about." Kayla goes on to explain, "They (friends) have their own life to live, and when you're married, the life is combined."

From a disability perspective, we might conclude that Kayla's dream of healing, while not a dream about her individual body-mind, nevertheless, assumes the power of normalcy. She imagines the best form of community, love, and social support through the socially supported structures of marriage. Kayla dreams of marriage, when marriage is a form of community that many at Holy Family do not currently participate in even as they desire romantic partnerships. At the same time, Kayla's description of marriage resonates with an ideal of companionship that the church names as its most important response to loss: supporting relationships that are life-giving to those who enter.

As I listen to Kayla and Rose debate and disagree about the healing efficacy of marriage, I find it appropriate that the healing prayer invites them to bring these disparate, even discordant desires and to name them to God with the help of another. I compare Kayla's desire for marriage to the way Rose describes healing at Holy Family during a different conversation: "If we get sick, we can be healed. Yes, we see lots of healing. When someone needs help by getting somewhere to stay, that's healing." She goes on to enumerate other examples of healing, such as when Beatrice brought a blind man, whose name she has forgotten, chocolate milk. "That's healing, that's helping that person out, that's giving a helping hand." Later in this conversation, she comes back to this topic of healing: "People come there with no clothes, no shoes, and they will go and get shoes and clothes from the clothes closet, for to go on people's feet, coats to go on their back, clothes to put on their body."

"And that's healing?"

"And that's healing. They are staying sick especially during winter, and that will keep them from getting sick."

Kayla and Rose map the church's work of healing through different kinds and levels of intimacy: caretaking and companionship. Kayla imagines the healing of the world as one in which each person is deeply known by the one with whom life, work, and play is equally shared. Rose imagines the church's participation in healing as its ability to discern what each one needs: clothes, food, chocolate milk, preventing sickness. Healing work charts a number of relationships that entails both helping (getting the chocolate milk) and dreaming (under what circumstances would everyone have a companion?). Bringing the two together, we might ask how the church's dream of intimacy and companionship informs its practices of helping those in need.

Rituals of Healthcare

One of the ways Holy Family desires to help those in need is to respond to the many urgent health needs that congregants experience. As a church, Holy Family is set apart not only by its rituals of healing but also by its healthcare practices: check-ups, health screenings, consultations, and educational workshops. Congregants value the fact that they can be seen and attended to by healthcare professionals during their time at Holy Family. Many are eager to dialogue with nursing students about their own health issues, whether or not they follow the advice set forth. While less overtly liturgical, these rituals are, nevertheless, shaped by an ecclesial space in which relationships between equals are assumed. Such relationships between Circle participants and those who offer medical advice take on a tone that is shaped by the possibilities of ecclesial rather than medical space. The parish nurse, for example, describes the church as a place where she can only make recommendations; she cannot prescribe medications. She is limited in

what she can do for congregants, but she also values a space where she can foster relationships of trust and respect based on a community of joy rather than self-improvement. Thus, she urges a congregant to see a medical doctor at a hospital for high blood pressure and also to write poetry again. Naming him as poet rather than patient opens up a different kind of space for attending to his healthcare needs and stresses. Likewise, she expresses pleasure in being known not only as a nurse but also “the nail lady”—the one who selects an assortment of nail polish for foot clinics and pedicures.

Such multiple frames for relationships can also cause tension. One afternoon, Lamar, a healthcare worker, stops me in the hallway to tell me about saving a church member from choking during lunch the previous day. After saving the congregant, he later went to document this event, describing what had just happened to “Patient [57].” In the process of writing, he suddenly stopped himself and wondered how he could write about a human being, whose life he had just saved in such a cold and detached way. Later he would explain that the church gives him a way of engaging people “human to human”—a kind of interaction he distinguishes from his former work in the hospital. In such human-to-human relationships, he plays both the serious role of helping to save lives at the church, but he is also an “entertainer” and “a clown.” He wants to become a better advocate for congregants and to fight against the neglect he worries they experience in their personal care homes. As he searches for other ways to name the people for whom he provides medical care, he also takes on other names and roles, keeping fluid the relationships that might ossify between medical expert and mentally ill patient. At the same time, he also names some of the people he sees as “doomed,” as those for whom there is no hope because of their mental capacities and poor health.

While Lamar describes his relationship with congregants through multiple roles and names, those who come to the church, particularly those who spend short amounts of time within the community, struggle to establish relationships beyond a medical model and to respond to the health concerns that clients face. For example, one group of nursing students lectures the community on topics related to health: good exercise, nutrition, and bedtime routines. Their advice for self-improvement assumes a level of autonomy that appears dissonant with the everyday worlds that many congregants negotiate. Many live in group homes with limited control over the food they consume, the kinds of shoes they wear, and the bedtime routines they choose within regulated communal spaces. Some of the pleasures that are essential to the passing of time each day—a walk to McDonalds or a walk to the corner store for chips and a soda—conflict with the ideals for healthy eating proposed by the students. One group implicitly names another as free agents of their own health and wellness without acknowledging the institutional structures within which patterns of eating, drinking, bathing, dressing and exercising are continually imagined and constrained.

While many Holy Family congregants struggle to retain the tips for healthy living offered by nursing students, students can also struggle to acquire the relational knowledge necessary for interaction with congregants. For example, one morning I notice a group of the nursing students standing together talking; only one of them sits down near Holy Family congregants. She clearly desires to interact with Circle participants but does not seem to know how to initiate such interaction. Engaging her in conversation, I discover this is the second part of her group's clinical rotation in mental health; their first took place at a psychiatric hospital. She comments on the differences between the two

settings. In the psychiatric hospital, people are in crisis and on more medication. At Holy Family she sees a lot more compassion for people. But here it is more difficult to get to know people. It was easier at the psychiatric institution where they had charts, and she could read people's diagnoses and ask them about particular things on these charts. However, she thinks that if they came more often, participants might recognize them, and it would be easier to interact. She imagines the medical tools of chart and diagnosis as social tools to facilitate interactions, but she also acknowledges that more time might produce a different, more adequate frame for dialogue.

I recall her comments some months later when another volunteer and long-time Holy Family church member also articulates a desire for knowledge of congregants' diagnoses. Unlike the nursing students, Melinda has considerable experience with mental illness, both as a parent and as a former nurse who enjoyed spending time with her schizophrenic patients. During home health visits, she was troubled by the very brief amounts of time other nurses spent with their mentally ill patients: just enough to take blood pressure, pulse, and give medication, but not enough to interact with them, or to ask about their housing situation, or to attend to other health concerns. In contrast she enjoyed spending time with her patients. She "always got along. Maybe it was that they sensed that I didn't fear them. A lot of people do fear people with mental illness."

She is also now a mother with a son who has mental illness and has struggled with the stigma her son experiences, keeping his mental illness a secret from her neighbors for a time for fear of their reactions. Nevertheless, even with her own intimate knowledge of and experience with psychiatric disability, she recalls a time when she was "flabbergasted" when she touched a Circle regular on the back, and he turned around and

“slugged” her. She has come to understand that he does not like to be touched except from the front; she attributes this to a diagnosis she did not know about at the time. She imagines that if she knew his diagnosis or the diagnoses of others, it might enhance communication across difference. As it unfolded, this congregant was suspended for a time for hitting her. He never apologized when he returned, but now they shake hands during the passing of the peace, which seems significant to her.

But Melinda also describes for me other ways that Holy Family allows its congregants to know one another and to tend to each other’s suffering through frames that do not rely on medical diagnoses as mediation. She describes her relationship with Henry, a congregant who often experiences intense anger. “I’m really having a hard time,” he might say when he comes to help her and another volunteer in the kitchen. When she asks him about his bad day, he describes the voices that talk to him all the time. He tells her that he gets tired of trying to argue with them because they want to do bad things, and he doesn’t want to do bad things, so it gets him down. He also tells her how voices “got to him” a couple of times and he had almost committed suicide. When he is upset, she and another long-time volunteer reassure him, make him a hot beverage, and he sits by himself in a corner of the dining hall for a time. By the end of the day he often says, “I’m feeling really great.” Melinda concludes this story by expressing a desire for more opportunities to exchange stories with congregants who come. Sometimes she feels that working in the kitchen limits the amount of time she has to hear these stories of struggle that congregants might otherwise share with her.

Melinda imagines that the challenge of relating well to one another at Holy Family church is affected by society as a whole. “We tend to look at people, and think

‘are you better than they are’ or ‘are you less than they are,’ and you have to fight that all the time.” She recalls the gradual communal acceptance of a trans woman who comes to the church, as well as more and more openness around members who not only have mental illness but are also gay. Holy Family is a place where congregants continually compare themselves to one another through a variety of different statuses both within and outside of mental illness. And yet, she claims, the church is a place where congregants are named and known in ways she has never experienced in other contexts. She describes it as “learning to love the smallest thing in people, you know, it may be that the constituent has a particularly nice dimple or some of them, they have a good smile, or the way that they come up, and say, ‘Hi Melinda’ (She imitates a particular voice.) It’s little things like that. It’s the only world where, where, little things like that mean *a lot*, at least to me. It’s very important.”

Melinda’s description resonates with other descriptions I have received of Holy Family—ones that name another congregant’s face or laugh or smile or tone of address or walk or irritating habit as essential to an image of what Holy Family is or does. The smallest bodily mark or gesture or the face of one is named as an image for the church as a whole. The power of such naming on a communal level resonates with the similar work of identifying that goes on in the easy yoga circle as we name together the different parts of our anatomy in order to become familiar with our body-minds. Invariably anatomical names give way to other more playful names: such as naming the spine as a slinky toy. Each name is meant to bring our attention both to the wonder and the pain of our bodies as we move and breathe. Just as attention to the small, repetitious movements of easy yoga are designed to help practitioners move more easily through their own bodies, so

attention to the small repetitious sounds and sights of community invite more fluid interaction than those prescribed through other kinds of roles and designations. Such names that require attention to our own bodies and to the bodies and gestures of others suggest a greater degree of intimacy and belonging than the sole knowledge of a proper name, which is often given upon introduction. At the same time such attributions (such as associating Wallace and Joshua with their remarkable, jubilant, raucous laughter among other descriptors of them) also evade the hierarchies and statuses of other designations such as titles (“volunteer”) or categorizations (“people with mental illness”) through which relationships can be circumscribed and negotiated.

Rituals of Friendship

One advent season I sit beside Daniella on the bus ride back from an outing to see the Christmas lights. We discuss the pleasures of the outing and of the Christmas season. Eventually, she talks about the house she lost, a three bedroom near downtown, with a backyard where she liked to sit outside and watch the squirrels and the birds. I imagine it might be hard to go from having your own house to living with a lot of other people. She says it was hard at first, and she used to stay upstairs most of the time, but now she comes downstairs more. “I have learned that to have friends you got to be a friend,” she said. She says that it has helped coming to Holy Family and to the program she goes to on Monday and Wednesdays. She likes coming to Holy Family better than the other program because of the art and because “more people here know my name and maybe I don’t know their names but I recognize their faces.”

Of all the rituals that Holy Family emphasizes as central to its response to the marginalizing effects of poverty and mental illness, informal liturgies of play, work, and friendship are central to its vision of healing. Such healing through friendship is intended both for the scars of stigma and for the prejudice of those who fear psychiatric disability. If Wednesday healing services open space and time to cast one's cares upon God with and through another, then naming loss or desire implies and requires a relationship, a condition for entrustment through which one can expect help or recognition from another. Not everyone is baptized or even a member of the church, yet those who come seek a relation to one another mediated through the church, a relationship that is not familial in a conventional sense but that nurtures a sense of interconnectedness and belonging. When congregants come from worlds where they are not claimed or cannot claim a relationship with others in conventional forms of family and friendship, Holy Family offers a common name. At times this common name feels sufficient to those who claim it; at times it feels inadequate.

Lillian, for example, describes the struggle of identifying with a church community as she once did with her own family. She begins by telling me that my name is the name of her sister. "I don't see my people," she remarks. Her people are scattered. She lived in the same house for thirty-two years until the house went into foreclosure. It was a house she shared with her mother and son. Her son was shot when he was twenty-two. Five years ago her mother died. When she lost the house, she lost pictures of her grandmother and her great grandmother and her great-great grandmother. It was hard but "God saw fit this way," she concludes. "I try not to live in the past." She begins to sing,

“One day at time.” And then concludes, “It’s hard to live without family and get used to being alone. It’s hard to know other people the way you know your family.”

Holy Family is a community where to know another’s name is both important and difficult work. Rev. Flora begins and ends each Sunday School class, asking us to say our names aloud to remind us that we are known and loved by God. Laura, the yoga teacher, begins each class insisting that we go around and say our names; she tests our memories, explaining that it is important that we remember each other’s names. But many know each other’s faces, while they also struggle with names. It is easier to remember the closing phrase of each yoga gathering, “*Namaste*, the light in me sees the light in you” than to keep track of the names of those who come and go from the circle. Yet even when community members forget each other’s names, even when congregants are irritated with or belittling to one another, they also know those who claim Holy Family as their community. Congregants name when a van-mate is missing or when someone has a doctor’s appointment and is absent from the circle at yoga. They claim a relatedness as an important condition for being able to ask for help from another person. While Holy Family cannot offer the bonds of marriage that Kayla imagines as healing, it does offer a set of relationships, through which congregants understand their responsibilities to one another.

Holy Family is regarded by some as a form of kinship in light of absent or faraway blood families. Tanya, for example, thinks of Holy Family as those who come to visit her when she’s sick in the hospital. They are the people you can call when you have a problem. She also wishes that it was possible to sleep at the church sometimes when you need a break from your home life. Another congregant wishes the church gave

driving lessons. Holy Family is also a place where many celebrate the holidays or mark a birthday or a graduation. In celebratory moments, conventionally familial moments, there is often a hope and expectation of recognition from and by others at the church. In some cases, to be church family is to provide a relational space that is not so complicated by past relationships.

This is true not only for Circle participants but also for some interns and nondisabled church members who have had difficult relationships with mental illness within their own families. Holy Family responds to their losses by offering a different set of close relationships within which to claim those who have psychiatric disabilities and to reimagine psychiatric disability itself. Ashon, for example, describes his strong reluctance to intern at Holy Family because of a challenging situation with his own mother who has mental illness. He did not want to engage mental illness because he was tired of dealing with it. But through the Wednesday evening rituals of hanging out with congregants, chatting and playing games, he discovered that his familial experiences aided him in developing life-giving friendships with Holy Family parishioners.

He describes a friendship with a woman who has mental illness at the church. He found her to be quiet, almost unapproachable until one day she was listening to the radio, and they discovered their common love of music. Now every Wednesday, when he comes, he seeks her out. "There's some days she wants to talk, and some days she don't, but I believe what started off this genuine friendship is that although we are different, we have a lot in common, so we based our friendship off the commonalities, and the commonalties were magnified. So whether or not she understands me when I talk, or I understand her when she talks, we have music in common, we laugh together, and we

play UNO.” The relationship has challenged him to “extend himself” to look for commonalities in those he sees through difference. Such relationships have also given him more confidence to talk to people he meets on the street.

These friendships have in turn informed his relationship with his mother. He has started to listen to and understand her better. He had been raised in a church tradition where his mother’s illness was viewed as a spiritual illness, where the demons had to be prayed out of her and “all this craziness.” He now claims healing through a church that claims mental illness as “a serious condition that needs to be evaluated by a licensed professional not by a reverend.” Because of his experience at Holy Family, he feels his mother shouldn’t be “ostracized and crucified again. She’s been crucified enough. This is a medical condition! So I’ve been offering: ‘Do you want to go to therapy? Do you want to go to counseling? Do you want to talk to someone? Maybe I’m not the person to talk to, but you need to talk to someone.’”¹⁹¹ He has encouraged her to leave her own church and to go to a place that is more welcoming and has more of the supports she needs.

Holy Family has also been important to him because it is a place where he spends time with other black men. At the university where he is a theology student, he often feels

¹⁹¹Ashon suggests that a medical model is preferable to other kinds of religious names, such as “demonic,” which might require a healing ritual (casting out demons). His story implies the destigmatizing power of naming something as “a serious medical condition,” which doctors rather than pastors have the requisite knowledge and authority to treat. I do not spend time in this dissertation exploring the religious name of “demonic possession” for mental illness in part because such a designation is not operative in Holy Family’s own way of naming mental illness or naming one another, although occasionally both demons and angels appear in a small number of narratives shared with me by congregants. In conversations at Holy Family, I heard a clear preference for a medical name rather than any association of evil in relationship to mental illness. At the same time, in this chapter I want to raise the question of the limits of medical models for naming human lives and suggest other ecclesial and religious designations that are important to the healing of hurt and claiming of one another assumed in Holy Family’s liturgy. For an overview of different frameworks for describing mental illness within histories of Christian theology and practice, see Heather H. Vacek, *Madness: American Protestant Responses to Mental Illness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Many Forms of Madness: A Family’s Struggle with Mental Illness and the Mental Health System* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

like an outsider, like he is not as desirable or adequate as his white counterparts. At Holy Family he encounters a sense of home and peace through a solidarity and camaraderie with the many black men who attend. He describes his relationship with those at Holy Family as a “brotherly or sisterly experience not as a ‘oh, this is them and this is us’ but as a unified sector.” It has also been an “eye-opener” for him “to see so many black men dealing with a mental illness.” He feels grateful for a place that is welcoming and open to them in a way they would not be welcomed in other church spaces. At the same time, Holy Family is also a place where racism results in forms of address that condescend or belittle black congregants in actions that have been upsetting to him. He recalls guest churches that come to serve meals “where you have a white superior who may be trying to give instructions or giving out food or whatever, talk down or talk at a parishioner at Holy Family.” He questions the origins of this condescension but believes it has to do with the intersections of race and mental illness.

Holy Family provides a place to claim and experience mental illness outside the intense context of immediate family. It creates coalition through common identification with those in very different circumstances. At the same time, it is also a place where intersections of black and disability identities result in misnaming; there are forms of address that belittle or condescend to those who struggle for respect. Unlike Ashon, Holy Family congregants are often more willing to talk about the challenges and power asymmetries of disability difference than to talk about the racism embedded in the poverty through which many congregants experience mental illness. Holy Family is thus both a site for black solidarity but also a location for wealthy white condescension and for obliviousness in regards to the effects of racism in situating manifestations and

experiences of psychiatric disability. Across these divides, rituals of friendship heal these inadequate names but do not eradicate them. They linger.

Another intern, Nikki recalls her own struggle to regard the dignity of persons with mental illness, especially in light of her past. Even as someone who spent part of her childhood on the streets and part of it in foster homes, she describes the prejudice she felt for the kinds of people who gather at Holy Family. When she first came to Holy Family,

there was just something here that uncovered something within myself. I was crying the entire time . . . it really took me back to what I was experiencing in my youth and some of the things I haven't dealt with. I think that's what made Holy Family one of my first options. I have two family members: we have a history of schizophrenia in our family and my little sister and my mother are both schizophrenic, and they might have a second diagnosis with paranoia, I'm not sure. But I know that upon finding out about that, I was kind of distant, and I did develop or already had a prejudice that I never really recognized.

“A prejudice?”

Toward the mentally and physically disabled. And which I didn't, it left me feeling really inhospitable and unopen, and it's been interesting how since I've been here, my level of engagement with people in general has changed, not just with marginalized communities but just like with people, I'm able to see past who are you to see who you actually are . . . I've stopped putting my own standard to people and this is how you should live. It was done to me, and this is where I am.

In contrast to putting up a standard for people that they cannot meet, Nikki names the goal of Holy Family as she understands it: “Here they're not made to live the life that we feel that they should live. We're just trying to help them live a more full and dignified life.” She sees this dignity in the hope that parishioners have for their own lives and the ways “they love on each other.” As part of the church leadership, she describes her own role in relationship to congregants who come to the church:

We're not here to fix people, but we're just here to listen to their stories and to affirm that they are beloved members of God's community and to lay power at their feet. We're not the ones in power, that they hold power; it's not often that they're reminded of that. I like that here there's no contrast between those that are

consumers of the services and those that are providing it, that we're all, we're all equally growing, no one's better than another, no one's able to give more than another, cause I don't think I've given as much as I've been gifted—really encouraging words and wisdom and it's just nice to be somewhere where you're not put in such a place where you constantly have to be a provider, like that you're not held to such a high standard that you can't meet it, that you're welcomed as you are, and I wasn't used to that.

Nikki's description of Holy Family reveals both the ideals of Holy Family as well as the kinds of ongoing transformation and struggle for language that is part of everyday interactions. The church offers her a set of relationships within which to overcome past prejudices but also leaves her still narrating this experience through multiple and sometimes competing frames—us and them, consumers and providers, children of God, those who are recognized as powerful and those who need to be reminded that that they hold power.

While it is common for Holy Family congregants to celebrate the bonds that emerge as they share liturgical space and time and form together, there is also a limit to what this community can do and be for each other. In this way Holy Family cannot play the roles that family members often play for one another. It cannot play the roles that Kayla imagines marriage playing in her life. When congregants leave the boundaries of the church for a long period of time they often lose track of one another. A parishioner moves or is moved by a family member to a new home or setting, and Holy Family no longer knows where they are. While a constant stream of newcomers brings fresh energy, insight, and friendship into community life, there are also constant waves of loss constituted through ever shifting relationships.

Brittany engages this when she describes both her enjoyment of and her frustration with the interns who come and go. Such newcomers are vital to the energy of

the community as their intense interest and enthusiasm is an important catalyst for fresh ideas, activities, and conversations. On the one hand, Brittany confirms Holy Family as important to her well-being because of its friendly, familial relationships, and yet she mourns the “different statuses” that people within the community occupy. “On the one hand, there are no doctors or therapists here. They actually educate you about your illness, which other places, they educate you but they don’t educate you enough. They treat you like children. But Holy Family they treat you as if you’re family or a good friend. They’d do anything to help you.”

But when I ask her what makes it hard to be a community here, she also talks about relationships, “I like that people are coming here to intern, but then it hurts when they leave. Because, you know, you kind of build, maybe not always a friendship, but you grow kind of fond of the person, so it kind of hurts when they leave. I don’t like when they do that!”

She laughs, and explains further:

I’m the type of person who kind of, I have a wall because I don’t want to get close to someone, and then they leave, and I never get to see them again. That’s one of my issues that I need to work with, and I don’t think the Holy Family is helping that much with that because they come and go, and they never come back. I don’t like how you may build a real friendship, but there are statuses, and when the person has a certain status, you can probably keep up with them, but it’s not the same as a true friendship where you could go and have dinner or lunch or hang out. It’s not that type of friendship. It’s more like I care about you, but we’re a different status, so that hurts.

She goes on to imagine occupying a position where she could maintain ongoing friendships with interns outside the boundaries of the church: “I feel like I could be in that place one day but it takes time.”

I ask her to talk about her conception of “status” and what values are behind it.

She responds:

for instance, it’s kind of like when a person is just there for interning, or something like that, and they can’t really have a real friendship with you or anything else like that. They can’t really hang out. It kind of hurts. I kind of look for people who are my age or maybe fun or something so I kind of want to keep in contact with them, but you can’t really if they’re . . . Facebook them or anything like that, but I guess it’s like a rule here, or everywhere, that you can’t be a real friend to the person who is a client here. And that goes everywhere.

I tease this out, “It’s interesting because it’s both a church and a community but you also feel you have this client status where you can’t have that kind of relationship.”

She acknowledges the boundaries of church space as the boundaries of some friendships: “I feel like the people I come to see, as long as I come here I get to see them, but if I don’t come here, I don’t get to see them.”

“So it’s a friendship that is very contingent on this place? Do you feel like other friendships you have are not as contingent on a particular place?”

“Probably . . . I have plenty of friends who are not connected to this place.” She points out that she might have a relationship outside the space with someone who has a mental illness but not with someone who does not.

Still even with this experience of different statuses, she wants to make sure I capture that:

this church is a real blessing to many people here. They get a different experience. People who don’t have a mental illness get a perspective of what we’re really like as people: that we have feelings and that we can love and that we’re human beings. And people with the mental illness here, we grow here together, even if we don’t really talk much, we still have an understanding that there’s love here and understanding . . . [this place] helps you more to cope with problems. I think I’ve changed over time because I’ve become more responsible.

“How does it help you to cope with your problems?”

“We go to community meetings on Thursdays, and you talk about your problems, and you can talk about anything that is of the here and now, how you’re feeling, and they’ll give you advice or make you feel like you’re not alone. I went from not being able to take care of myself to being able to take care of myself 100% on my own.”

“You live on your own right? And that was just being able to talk with people about what you were going through?”

“I think I just grew up on my own, but the coping skills help me manage staying on my own.”

“What is growing up? Is growing being responsible?”

“Yeah.”

“Cause you said that in another program they treat you like children, and I wonder what the differences are being treated like children or being treated like an adult.”

Like, for example, the other place they would . . . they basically gave out a paper and asked you what type of tropical fruits have you tried, and that was like for maybe third graders or something. I’m pretty sure, well, I guess not all of us, I guess I should be more considerate of the people here who may not know a lot, but I feel like that was an insult to my intelligence . . . Or coloring and stuff, which I guess coloring is fine, but I don’t want to do it cause I’ve done that.

“Being an adult is having options?”

“Yeah,” she laughs.

“About what you do and don’t want to do?”

“Yeah.”

Brittany cherishes Holy Family as a place where she is named as an adult and as a person worthy of true friendship; but she also continues to struggle with the statuses assigned to her through her mental illness and the ways these are performed within Holy Family’s week-long liturgy. To be named and regarded as a person rather than a client, or

an adult rather than a child is not something she takes for granted and that affects her perceptions of herself. To be named by another in the church as a friend is experienced as genuine for a time and as deception when other paradigms shift into focus.

The Struggle for Names and the Christian Church

Inserted into the Christian church the struggle for names is both personal and ecclesial. In evoking the rituals and rhetoric through which Holy Family responds to congregants' desire to name loss and yet embrace their lives, I have attempted to show the struggle for adequate names and lenses through which to view one's own experience, as well as another's. As a researcher, I observe the different discourses that congregants employ and note their own hesitations when describing relationships with others across power asymmetries.

It is possible to interpret this struggle as a failure of the community to claim the fullness of theological or liturgical language: a failure to manifest true spiritual friendship, or brotherly and sisterly love in Christ, or to demonstrate the bonds between children of God who are one body in Christ. Rather than interpreting such dissonance as a failure, I find it productive whenever it allows those who hesitate to pay "creative attention" to the powers and assumptions at play in any one frame. As Brittany notes, one cannot free oneself of condescension by employing the word "friend," or rid oneself of status by claiming the ideal of "unity"; rather, congregants must continue to imagine the conditions for entrustment that would allow true friendship, a life together, to be claimed. On the other hand, as Ashon and Nikki testify, the desire to call another friend might also facilitate a renaming of relationships outside the community—ways of regarding familial

relationships or encounters with strangers, certain irritations or prejudices associated with disability, illness, blackness, and poverty. In the failure of adequate names and in the simultaneous desire for better conditions through which to respond to loss, some relation that cannot yet be named or fully imagined is held in the contradictions. In the hesitations, and in the silences, a name is given and then retracted or replaced by another. How then might the struggle to name human lives relate to the church's work of naming God as part of its Christian worship?

“The challenge for the Christian is to engage one or more ‘names’ of God and to follow these images into the worlds they open,” Eiesland argues.¹⁹² Following a divine name into a world in order to explore that world is a theological task, according to Eiesland. It requires those whose experiences and frustrations illumine the terrain of inhospitable or habitable spaces for lament, petition, and praise. Certain names for God might open into violent landscapes for human life. For example, Eiesland argues that living with Jesus as the suffering servant or conquering lord has often created a difficult space for “disabled” to emerge as an adequate name for one who would follow that Christ. On the other hand, the disabled God, the wounded Christ, who returns to his disciples after his crucifixion, opens a more habitable world for people with disabilities. God incarnates hope as one who returns without pity or condescension to engage the losses experienced by friends in the aftermath of his crucifixion and resurrection.¹⁹³

One morning, I chat with Brittany and Andie as they weed a flowerbed at Holy Family. They ask about my teaching, and I describe to them my struggles to teach

¹⁹² Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 105.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 98–105.

Eiesland's *The Disabled God* to small group of undergraduates at the university where I am also a student. They resonate with the image and do not find it hard to follow.

"It's like the song, 'What If God Was One of Us,'" Andie suggests.

I agree, thinking of the lyrics of the 1995 hit by pop artist Joan Osborne: "What if God was one of us/ just a slob like one of us/ just a stranger on the bus/trying to make his way home?"¹⁹⁴

"I love that song!" Brittany chimes in. "Many people get mad all the time [about the song], but I like it. If Jesus walked the earth once, why he can't do it again?" Andie murmurs her agreement. Brittany goes on, "That song makes me cry every time. It makes me be kind to all the people on the bus," she adds and then repeats, "It makes me cry every time."

I think about how in this very short conversation, they have managed to illustrate Eiesland's argument, the argument that my students struggled with: the disabled God matters because a name for God, a symbol for the divine life, deeply affects our everyday religious practices and the ways we perceive ourselves and one another. Brittany's desire to be kind to people on the bus is summoned through a name for God.

Andie, Brittany, and I enjoy our common love of this song, as we think about the disabled God. Then Kayla comes over. Hearing the last part of our conversation, she joins in. "I know where Jesus is," she tells us. "Have you heard of Japan?" We look at her in surprise. She nods, confidently. She tells us that if she had plane tickets, she would take us there.

¹⁹⁴ Joan Osborne, *Relish*, Audio CD (Mercury, 2015).

We are at a loss for words. Then Brittany says, “Cool!” as if she is perfectly fine with the idea that Jesus is in Japan. Kayla continues our conversation by adding another song to our theological reflection: “Do you know the song ‘Jesus is on the mainline/ Tell him what you want’?” Later I ask Kayla why she thinks Jesus is in Japan. I know that she has a persistent interest in Japan, sometimes evoking it in her paintings. She says because they have a lot of problems in Japan. She heard they eat dirt there.

What if God was one of us? Brittany imagines a scenario in which we are able to see all the strangers on the bus as deserving of kindness and in which we are moved to tears by a God who chooses public transportation as her way of travel. I imagine a context in which Kayla follows the disabled Jesus to Japan and finds the Japanese to be other than the people with problems she has imagined. Holy Family reveals that even in the space and time of a liturgy that claims God’s infinite love for each one, it is difficult to manifest and articulate this reality. It is difficult to name and know a world where God is with everyone we meet. It is hard to imagine because we are often so strange to one another and to ourselves. It is much easier to pray for the poor and the disabled and the Japanese than to invoke the vivid array of individuals and relationships summoned through such phrases. Yet to claim God’s name intimately connected with such people compels a creative attention. Where God is named as present, those who worship this God pay attention and homage. When God is named in association with unlikely people and places, this name arouses curiosity. Who is the God who rides the bus? Who is this Jesus in Japan? Who is this One whose holy name evokes curiosity and compassion but resists pity and condescension?

At Holy Family multiple frames laid on top of one another blur an image of mental illness, of poverty, of church membership. The blurred image, the dissonant sounds that accompany them, hover beneath the dis-ease of some congregants in describing their relationships with others. Language betrays the inherent difficulties in imagining relationships across the divides of Holy Family. While at times such dissonance is ignored, there are moments in conversations and interactions when the inadequacy of terminology reminds those who attempt to speak through them that they require better words than those most immediately available. Such dissonance reminds us that the disabled God, or the mad God, who might also be the poor, black, queer, Asian God is not often named as such within the walls of Christian churches. If Christ is the one in solidarity with those who have mental illness, this God is not often in the pews, but on the bus, on the street, in the psychiatric ward, at McDonalds, in the corner store, and outside the group home. Christ rises elsewhere. Into the struggle to name God's location, imaging and relating to Christ though the peace of the Spirit marks a recognizable path of love to what is not yet known.

Meditating on the same New Testament Easter texts in which Eiesland discovers and names the disabled God, theologian Rowan Williams names this Christ a familiar Stranger. Christ as Friend, whose particular life opens up a new world for the Christian church, is never the possession of the disciples or of the church. The church is continually reminded of the strangeness of the Christ who comes again to speak the name of those who thought they already knew him but realize they do not. Jesus returns to the disciples after his resurrection as one who recedes from the grasp of any who would claim him:

The risen Jesus is strange and yet deeply familiar, a question to what we have known, loved and desired, and yet continuous with the friend we have known and

loved. His strangeness and his recognizability are both shocking, standing as they do in such inseparable connection. . . . The risen Jesus returns as a loved friend and brother, and at the same time holds us off: he shows the marks of familiar human pain, yet refuses to be only a consoling mirror-image of our suffering.¹⁹⁵

The Christ who appears in the gospel texts is a surprise to the disciples who believe they possess requisite knowledge of him. Coming to and receding from the church's grasp, the risen Jesus, the Disabled God, calls for the church to journey. Following the Stranger, those who seek Christ cannot escape the "consistent echo of disorientation and surprise" that hovers around these stories of Jesus's return to those who are his followers.¹⁹⁶ Or, as Wallace, joking, once put it to me during a church service, in his playful reformulation of a Eucharistic response: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ is gonna get you!"

Reading Holy Family through the Easter texts, in the company of Eiesland and Williams, we might say that human lives are often "got" or caught or found in the gaps and measures between the names, the terms, the tensions in what is articulated (a place of unity and belonging premised on the dignity of each one) and what is manifest among those who gather. Here there is a family that is not and cannot be family. Here there are friendships that nourish some and many that fall short of lasting relationships that work with "the nitty gritty" of love over time. Here there are adults that are claimed as children of God and addressed, condescendingly, like small children. There is also a patient who is not only a patient but a poet and a gardener. There is a medical expert who has mental illness and is a comedian. There is nurse who is a nail lady. There is a woman who lives constantly in the difficult feeling between death and life and still cherishes her life. In the

¹⁹⁵ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised edition (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 84.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

building and witness of this community, even imperfect names hold the hope for more and better words with which to name another. The dissonance between one name and another signs the persistent desires of congregants for a different understanding of themselves in relationship with themselves and others.

Between Death and Life: The Embrace of Many Names

In her study of liturgical language, liturgist Gail Ramshaw argues that “the hermeneutical method for the study of the liturgy is Yes-No-Yes. Because our words are sacred, we say YES to liturgical language. Because we revere the language as holy, we take off our shoes and kneel down.” But then we are struck by the humanness of this language that cannot contain God and are disillusioned by the meagerness and inadequacy of our sacred speech. This is the moment of “NO”—the pause in which we turn away from the limits of our words in a desire to forsake them. Finally, we affirm that we still receive life through the sacred speech we have been given. We affirm that these words can be “salvation for us” and can form a “faithful response to the admittedly hidden God.”¹⁹⁷

Such a pattern might also be used to discern the naming of relationships through Holy Family’s liturgy. Yes, we know what to call one another. No, we do not, cannot; our language is halting and impoverished. Yes, there is a third movement, the second Yes, the reaffirmation after the disillusionment. If God comes to Holy Family as the disabled church, this God must name and nurture desire not only through tension but also affirmation, claiming those who gather as intimately bound and related to one another. If

¹⁹⁷ Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language: Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech* (Akron, OH: Order of Saint Luke Pub., 2000), 32.

dissonant names sound confusion and desire, what is the sign that any name resonates with the relationships that arise among a group of people that gather in Jesus's name in the invocation of the Spirit?

Occasionally, at Holy Family, the liturgy invites such moments of illumination, not as single names, but performed by the community as a whole. One Wednesday evening, for example, on the celebration of the Eve of the Ascension, the church gathers to remember the life of Albert, a community member who recently died. Before the sermon, as is the Holy Family tradition, the priest gives an opportunity for congregants to share memories and stories about Albert. One young man begins by saying what a nice guy he was. Kayla remembers how he used to stroke her chin and teased her about having a beard. She says she is really going to miss him. Another man remembers that he was a great artist. Shonda recalls his classy dress and his classy smile. Deacon Mac appreciates that Albert could "trash talk" with him. Father Brian reflects on the kinds of suffering Albert had experienced and the ways he treated others with respect even when he was suffering. Hannah stands up and holds a colorful painting that Albert made of a small bird sitting on a barbed wire fence. The community breaks into a spontaneous round of applause for this work of art, a physical reminder of Albert's life and work. In the course of this service, Albert's life is named in many different ways, refusing one-dimensional portraits that might be summoned through names like "mental illness" or "program participant," or even "child of God."

If there are moments of dissonance that are part of Holy Family's frames for acknowledging relationships, then there are also resonant refrains when an accumulation of names begins to answer the question of how one will know when a name is adequate

to the person who is loved. Such moments more fully name the life of the person they symbolize and thus generate an experience of beauty within Holy Family as community. The performance of such names reflect the artistry of social interaction that give rise to them. They sound the desire of a community and of God for a person who might otherwise be thrown away.

Adequate names matter. They matter to the embrace of the beauty of human connection, even when those connections involve a struggle “between life and death.” They require many different relationships over time. They matter not only to the ones whose lives deserve many more words than poor or destitute or bipolar or client or constituent or staff or vicar or Us or Them; they also matter to the naming of God, who is addressed through language that connects God to and through God’s relatedness to the creation. Christians often name God—know God—as one who heals disability or illness, or as the one who loves the poor and destitute, or the one who reconciles black and white people, or as Salvation or Love. But the arts and struggle of naming at Holy Family reveal that God is only known and loved when those words themselves become flesh, again, so that the complex lives they symbolize become shape and sound and relation. For, if God is the One who loves the poor and destitute, then this God is only known when the lives of “the poor” and “the destitute” are not reduced to one-dimensional symbols of complex human experiences but when Christians begin to know the multifaceted people who elicit such depths of divine love. Words become flesh when there is sufficient time and ample space to know and love a human life in many different ways. Thus, the work of the people in a liturgy is not only to name God but to name well those with whom and about whom Christians pray.

Taking on the particularities of human flesh, such names both touch this God we name and reveal their own limits—especially when Christians pray for healing and transformation of the world. God’s name is not known or loved apart from the creative struggle for adequate human names. This struggle to find good names and live out creative relationships is the journey of those called to discern and name Christ’s presence among us. Such naming occurs through desire for another, rather than an illusion of control: a desire to know where God is and with whom God sits and how God heals and through whom God befriends those who hope and struggle to embrace their own lives.

Chapter 5 – Sending: Aesthetics of Belonging and Dwelling

“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine . . .
Everywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine . . .
Jesus gave it to me, I’m gonna let it shine . . .”

A favorite spiritual of Holy Family congregants

“There is a balance between knowing that we are shaped by a world that seems largely outside our grasp, and knowing that we, nevertheless, in some small measure, shape it. This balance we might call grace. It is very rare.”

Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World*¹⁹⁸

“Does this life-meal proclaim the death of Christ? Does this death-meal give life to the community? Does this community meal open toward needs beyond this circle? Is this table set next to other tables in the world? Is the thanksgiving food sent to the poor? Does thanksgiving over food open us toward reverence for all created things?”

Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*¹⁹⁹

Sending the Church, Empowering the People

One Sunday in early February, an Episcopal bishop comes to visit Holy Family. It is a morning of celebration: Andie’s baptism, Jack’s confirmation, and Belinda’s reception into the church. The community first gathers for a festive breakfast and conversation with the bishop and then reassembles in the sanctuary for the formal service.

Before the rituals of baptism and confirmation, there is a homily. The bishop begins this sermon with a question: “So why are you here this morning? Why did you come to church?”

“Praise the Lord. Praise Jesus!” a chorus of voices responds.

¹⁹⁸ Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 123.

¹⁹⁹ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 171.

The bishop offers another possible answer: “To be together. To not be alone, right? To be in a place where you have value and worth, where you are important to someone, where somebody loves you. Jesus loves you.”

“Jesus loves you.” Forest affirms.

Jesus loves you, but isn't it important that others love you? That's what it means to be a family. So today, we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. We're going to publically say that this person is now a member of our family. We will love them, give them value and worth, and think that they're important. And we'll miss them when they are not here for whatever reason. We will help them when they need help. We will gather together and give strength to one another.

The bishop goes on to describe the church as a place where people gather not only to be loved and to belong but also to be sent, to be light and salt for the world. He connects this to the ritual actions of the community that morning.

We're going to confirm somebody and that reminds us of our job as followers of Jesus. Confirmation is not about being together; it's about being sent. It's entering into apostolic ministry. The word apostle from the Greek has a very simple meaning. It means one who is sent. To be a Christian isn't just to come together to get good things for us. Coming to church isn't just about what you get. Coming to church is about what you give so you can give it away. And so if you listen to the words, our deacon will send us into the world. We come together to gather the light that is in this building, but our job is to take that light out into the world of darkness. And to be light to other people. Our job is take the light into the world where the darkness lives, so that some others can see that light. And so again, you are going to be sent, sent by me. I'm not just the bishop; I'm the successor of the apostle. I do what apostles do. I send people. That's what apostles do. They send people in the world. So today I'm charging you. If you find something that is good for you in coming to this church, ask yourself who you are going to give it to. Because what happens if you hold on to the light? And you hold it so tight you don't want to let it get away?

“You extinguish it,” Jack, the one to be confirmed, responds.

You extinguish it. Exactly! It's like putting a bushel over it so that no one can see the light, but if we do that, the light in us goes out. So that when we're trying our best to hold on to something, we're losing it. The truth of the gospel is that the light only grows if you are willing to take the risk to give it away. And it is a risk isn't it? It's scary . . . You put out your hands again, empty, and Jesus fills them with the light of his presence. You get the light again and again and again. This is

why we come back every week. To get more light so that we can give it away. You, you, you, and I are the light of the world. If the world is dark, it's not because there is not enough light; it's because we're hiding it in places like this and not sending the light into the places where it is needed. You and I, you and I, normal, ordinary people, or maybe we're not so normal, none of us is, but God has chosen us to be a light to the world.

Yes! There is chorus of affirmation to this word. At the end of the sermon, the bishop encourages us to look to the Spirit's work among us:

For just a second, turn around and look at the two banners at the back of the church. That's the Spirit of God. The tongues of fire from Pentecost and the Holy Spirit coming down. But what happens when that happens? Look at the rays of light. The Spirit is among you today. You are living light. That's you. Those rays of light. Take them out of this place. Make a difference. Change the world. Jesus did that with twelve disciples. Think what we could do if we all did that together.

This bishop's sermon has a rousing effect on the congregation. Although this occasion affords him a unique opportunity to speak about the power of liturgical sending, his invocation echoes a familiar pattern repeated within the weekly prayers and gestures of the sending of the congregation after communion. Embedded in these words and gestures is an assumption. To know and love God, a Christian community not only gathers together in a physical location but is also sent out to take whatever is found, revealed, and shared beyond the boundaries of a building and space to those who are not present.

The sermon on this celebratory Sunday punctuates the weekly petitions of the post-communion prayers that congregants say together at the end of every service before the dismissal:

Eternal God, heavenly Father,
 you have graciously accepted us as living members
 of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,
 and you have fed us with spiritual food
 in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.
 Send us now into the world in peace,

and grant us strength and courage
to love and serve you
with gladness and singleness of heart;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

or alternately,

Almighty and everliving God
we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food
of the most precious Body and Blood
of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ;
and for assuring us in these holy mysteries
that we are living members of the Body of your Son,
and heirs of your eternal kingdom.
And now, Father, send us out
to do the work you have given us to do,
to love and serve you
as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.
To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.²⁰⁰

The prayers imagine a similar trajectory to the one offered in the bishop's sermon: the community gathers to be nourished and claimed by God and other Christians before being sent to love and to serve others as "faithful witnesses" and as those capable of "gladness and singleness of heart."

At Holy Family the sending involves the ritual action of turning away from the focal point of the altar and toward the back doors of the sanctuary. The priest, the acolytes, and the deacon process to those doors and stand in front of them during the final hymn. As the community turns, following the procession, the doors are opened wide to reveal the world beyond. When the final hymn has ended, the deacon commands the community: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!" To which the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God!" The doors open onto the Holy Family gardens and the walkway that leads to communal meals. Just out of sight, beyond the beautiful flowers

²⁰⁰ *Book of Common Prayer*, 365–366.

and trees, are the vans that will soon take some congregants out of this neighborhood to other parts of the city.

Gathering is a faith that a community of difference can come together without violence or coercion; sending is a faith that a love of this difference can be carried back out into a segregated city to minister through love and service. As the bishop imagines it, there is a world in need of this church as it is sent in the lives of the those who gather. Mapping the sending of Holy Family congregants, we might ask: what is this world of “darkness” into which the love and service of the faithful witnesses brings light?

In this chapter, I describe the fragility of the church as it is sent and as each congregant is blessed to go forth in love and service. I argue that patterns of consent to one another within the time, space, and artistry of a week-long liturgy are troubled by coercive relationships and segregated spaces that are often revealed in the liturgical act of sending. In light of such coercion, I envision the amplifying and decentering of the pleasures and struggles of the church so as to imagine the vital consent to a life together outside the physical boundaries of the church.

To map the choreographies of sending, I discuss three destinations that are assumed as part of Holy Family’s liturgy: the sending of the church out into the surrounding neighborhood, the sending of congregants back to their own homes, and the sending of the parish out into other parishes. I have argued that difference decenters the gathering of Holy Family and highlights the interdependent art forms through which access to a common liturgy is improvised and belonging to a community of faith is manifest. Concordantly, I will argue in this chapter that difference interrogates both the autonomy of human persons and of parishes sent into the world—that is, the congregation

as a light to the world around it. As the gathering of difference occasions a more detailed map by which to orient within Holy Family's extended liturgy, so sending invites a different set of maps, tracing the possibilities and perils of belonging and dwelling together within a city where some congregants live in places where others do not go. Such maps suggest that a church is not sent from a liturgy into a world, but lives together a liturgy as a people who claim one another and manifest the beauty of their lives and their belonging to one another.

The Church Is Sent into the Neighborhood

Liturgical theologians often posit necessary relationships between the church and the world. The church is gathered from the world and sent back into the world to witness and transform it. God gives and sends the church on behalf of the world. As the Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann argues, the church is given "for the life of the world." According to Schmemmann, in Christian liturgy the sacraments reveal the meaning of the world as gift through adoration and joy: "the Eucharist is the entrance of the Church into the joy of its Lord. And to enter into that joy, so as to be a witness to it in the world, is indeed the very calling of the Church, its essential *leitourgia*, the sacrament by which it 'becomes what it is.'"²⁰¹ Thus, the church is a sacrament given for the life of the world to reveal the sacramental nature of all creation through the church's praise and adoration: the world is not an object to be used but a gift through which human life is given ultimate meaning. Thus, in Schmemmann's interpretation, to worship God as the church is the most profound public or political or social action that one could take. The

²⁰¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 26.

Eucharist—as joy and remembrance of the reality of the world—transforms human relationships. While Schmemmann resists dualities of sacred and profane in terms of elevating the church over the world, he nonetheless believes a clear distinction is possible: “The liturgy begins then as a real separation from the world.”²⁰² Such separation is important so that the church may be sent back into the world “as witnesses of this Light, as witnesses of this Spirit,” testifying to the possibilities of salvation and redemption which previously seemed “impossible.”²⁰³

Theologians like Bieler and Schottroff or Fulkerson trouble such clear distinctions or relations between church and world by speaking of what Fulkerson calls a “worldly church,” one whose sacramental nature is embedded and shaped within the often invisible and complicated histories of place.²⁰⁴ In their meditation on the sacredness of holy and ordinary meals, Bieler and Schottroff remind us of both the reality and imperative of “sacramental permeability.” The task of liturgical imagination is to see one thing as another or in relationship to another: “Sacramental worship embraces a permeability in which the bread we consume at our kitchen tables, the bread we steal from the poor, and the bread that is consecrated and consumed during Holy Communion are related.” Thus, the “celebration of the sacraments is a place full of conflict; it creates presence and absence, love and alienation, hunger and abundant life.”²⁰⁵

Fulkerson too warns about maps made with broad strokes that fail to account for the complicated relationships between congregations and the places that constitute them both diachronically and synchronically: “The very conviction of God’s redemptive

²⁰² Ibid., 27.

²⁰³ Ibid., 45–46.

²⁰⁴ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 6, 30–31.

²⁰⁵ Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 5.

presence tempts the theologian to map sense and order onto the worldly. The zeal to find good news can slip easily into the desire to smooth out the tangle called ‘community’, rendering it amenable to the correct theological categories.”²⁰⁶ In her mind a “theology for a worldly church” attends carefully to ambiguity, banality, and opacity in light of ordinary existence.²⁰⁷

One of the great ambiguities of Holy Family as a community and congregation is its permeable relationship to an ever-changing neighborhood. At one time, congregants from personal care homes came to the church because they lived in the neighborhood; congregants with mental illness were in the parish’s neighborhood and as such were welcomed into its worship life. But now, these same poor congregants with psychiatric disabilities are often strangers, persons out of place in a gentrifying neighborhood. The current neighbors, who walk by the church with their dogs or as part of daily exercise routines, often appear friendly and only occasionally display anxiety in the presence of those whose dress and behavior marks them as other. Yet, Holy Family staff members tell me that some neighbors associate Holy Family members with crimes, thus identifying them as a threat to the very neighborhood where some members once lived.

In the midst of this ambiguous relationship with those who live closest to the church, clergy often encourage Holy Family members to consider the ways they might love and serve their neighbors—with particular emphasis on those who live closest to the church, the neighborhood. How can the parish serve those who live in proximity to it? The thrust of such sermons is to empower each one who gathers; for each of us holds the light and has something we must give. Each one can minister to another, no matter our

²⁰⁶ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 6.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

income or social status. There is also the suggestion that the wealthier communities outside this parish need to receive good news from this particular community: the gospel of love in regard to every human life. As one priest put it, “There are people who do not know that they are called to love their neighbor as themselves. People who need to be saved from their lack of compassion. We need to invite them to Holy Family where they can experience a laboratory for the development of compassion and empathy.” Many of these invocations implicitly or explicitly assume the ability of each individual to transform their neighbors and neighborhood. They allude to a pattern in which God—through the church—infuses neighborhoods with love. In these neighborhoods, the poor and disabled have something to teach the able-bodied and wealthy.

Alongside the goals of theological transformation, there is also the desire that neighbors with incomes might come and share the financial responsibilities of sustaining this parish in ways that unemployed congregants cannot. Such desires are not stated explicitly in church services but often surface in vestry or other meetings. Holy Family staff members desire the support of the neighborhood—or those with incomes like those in the neighborhood—in order to have the resources it needs for Circle programs. Ostensibly, there is a relationship of potential mutuality that the neighborhood holds: the parish’s neighbors need the good news of Holy Family’s vision of community, and Holy Family needs more financial resources and support to enable this vision to flourish.

One afternoon, I explore these assumptions about the ambiguous relationships between parish, neighbors, and neighborhood with a retired Episcopal bishop, who frequently attends Holy Family. Abe and his wife, Esther, choose Holy Family for its

liveliness. Finding themselves bored or restless in other parishes, there is life within Holy Family's gathering that draws them in and keeps them coming back.

Over lunch one Sunday afternoon, we talk about the history of the parish. Abe describes how it was a "failing church" until group home congregants living nearby came to fill the pews at Holy Family and helped to keep its doors open. Poor, psychiatrically disabled congregants in the neighborhood were invited to share meals with members of the church. Gradually these congregants transformed the community into a parish that welcomes people with mental disabilities. Abe points to a pattern of similar developments in other congregations that are compelled to change in response to demographic shifts in neighborhoods. It is not that individual congregations desire to gather such difference intentionally but that neighborhoods "transition." When the demographics of a neighborhood change, the congregation is forced to change as well or close its doors. Esther wonders out loud what will happen to Holy Family as the neighborhood around the church transitions again, this time to a wealthier neighborhood. Will Holy Family change again?

Her comment reflects current demographic shifts spurred by the desire of middle and upper-income people to live in denser, urban neighborhoods, as well as municipal efforts to encourage this kind of development. One result of these shifts is that poor persons are displaced from their homes and neighborhoods, and, increasingly, pushed further and further from the center of the city. In the past ten years, group homes have moved further away from the parish's immediate neighborhood due to rising property values. During my time at Holy Family, the costs of housing in the surrounding neighborhoods—both rental rates and purchase prices—steadily rise. Echoing Esther's

fears, I can imagine a time when Holy Family as a church with poor people with mental illness ceases to exist.

The parish might then “transition” again to reflect the wealthier neighborhood or close its doors for good, as it almost did before group home residents helped bring it back to life. According to a new vicar, who is installed during the second year of my research, many of the neighbors she engages are friendly but not interested in attending church on a regular basis. When those who love and need this congregation live too far from it to be gathered, will there still be Holy Family congregants for this parish to send? Such trends suggest complex dynamics between parish and neighborhood. Those who live nearby might reconfigure the neighborhood so as to deprive the parish of those who are currently its salt and light, of the differences at the heart of its current communal identity. This is not to say that this community could not become a congregation elsewhere. Though, as group homes disperse to more affordable areas, they are not all in the same parts of the city; the logistics of gathering a community in one place may be impossible. Nor is it to suggest that the love of the Spirit is limited by affordable housing or by the physical location of any particular congregation. To recognize an ambiguous relationship to the neighborhood is to recognize the problems as well as the possibilities there are for the church in being sent “to love and serve” the neighbors.

A theology of sending thus requires sustained reflection on the particular persons sent and the possibility or impossibility of mutual relationships with those to whom they are sent. Rather than assuming that the church is able to transform the neighborhood, it asks what kinds of communal and economic arrangements might allow the church to sustain and foster its particular theological understanding: the significance of persons

with mental illness to its mission and its vision of community. A theology of sending traces the complex relationship between sending and dwelling, as it illumines the homes to which those “faithful witnesses” carry the good news they find within the parish.

The Church Is Sent Home

While configurations of sending emerge from shifting patterns between Holy Family and its immediate neighborhood, congregants are most literally sent to many neighborhoods across the city of Atlanta. While they do not live near one another, many of them face similar conditions in the homes to which they return. During the initial months of my research, one of the Holy Family interns collects stories about personal care homes from Circle regulars. He then assembles a list of common characteristics to help educate the vestry and others who come to the church without an understanding of the places from which people come and to which they return. While congregants rarely complain to me about the places where they live, the list helps to illustrate the challenging circumstances in which many of them abide.

Life in a Personal Care Home

Based on the Testimonials of Friendship Circle Participants

The quality and structure of life varies a great deal between personal care homes. That being said, the following is true of all personal care homes in which our participants live:

Living in a PC costs \$625 a month [] at the most inexpensive. Generally, but not always, this is paid for with Social Security Disability.

Everyone has a roommate. Some share a small single bedroom. And some folks have two or more roommates. But no one has his or her own room.

Three meals a day are provided. They are never highly nutritious. In some cases the meals are decently nutritious, but in many cases white bread, bologna, and potato chips are staple foods.

Almost always, residents rise early and go to bed early. I think it is mandatory to get up by 7 am or so, and often residents go to bed at 8 or 9 pm. In

at least one instance, a man had extreme difficulty sleeping because his roommate slept with the lights on and the TV on at full volume, but this situation seems rare.

Residents rarely come and go as they please. In many cases, the residents are forbidden to leave without permission, which is rarely given. In other cases, inability to pay for MARTA, lack of anything within walking distance and lack of anywhere to go, keep residents in the house or yard all the time.

Fighting, bickering and interpersonal drama arise frequently at most homes.

Some homes limit the number of showers residents can take.

Some homes will punish residents by not allowing them to leave, if a resident mentions looking for an alternative housing situation.

Most personal care homes (that we deal with) do not provide regular rides to the doctor, dentist or psychiatrist. Some PC homes charge \$15-\$25 for rides to a medical facility. Some other homes do provide rides free of charge.

Some residents become great friends with their housemates, and most develop at least some positive sense of community.

The most difficult questions and anguished conversations I witness at Holy Family are about the parish's relationship with group homes. This complex relationship often entails the kinds of power that group home owners and managers typically wield over the people who live there. While a few of the homes are understood to be supportive places to live, the majority are understood to be tolerable at best. Parish staff members often express the urgent need to advocate for better conditions for congregants. And yet, they also fear that their advocacy only serves to further isolate members from spaces where they might find help or have access to basic resources. If the church raises questions about conditions in group homes, the owners or managers of these homes may ask Holy Family to no longer gather congregants from their homes. Staff members refer to such occasions in the past when they discuss how best to advocate for congregants they suspect of receiving inadequate care.

In one of the most tragic events during my time at Holy Family, a group of congregants are sent home from the church because they are covered with bedbugs. For months the management at their group home attempts to rid the home of the bedbug

infestation to no avail. Eventually, the home is sold, and the congregants sent to new homes. Neil, director of the Circle, works to find places in new homes where living conditions will be better for congregants and where congregants will still be able to come to the church. In this process of attempting to locate good new homes for congregants, he is incensed when he realizes that these parishioners have already been “sold,” as he describes it, to other homes for a small referral price. A staff member at the closed home reports that the owner accepted around \$100 for each client to be referred or sent to another home. It is difficult to know what role (if any) the residents themselves played in these decisions about where they would move and with whom they would live; however, patterns of decision-making within group homes would suggest that residents were not given options. While most of these congregants eventually return to the church and express relative contentment with their new living situations, such practices reveal the frameworks through which poor people with mental illness can become commodities.

In an even more tragic occurrence, the Holy Family van arrives at a personal care home one day to pick up a group of long-term congregants, including Wallace, Joshua, and Victoria, only to find that they no longer live there. The story, as various congregants and staff recount it to me, begins with an act of hope. Two women from this home have found a better living situation. When they leave their personal care home, they are accused of stealing items from the home; the two women subsequently contact Adult Protective Services to report neglect at their previous home. Fearing closure by state authorities, management evacuates the premises and moves all remaining residents to a new city outside of metro Atlanta. The priest and other staff attempt to find the congregants. They talk to the manager who gives a general location. However, the

manager refuses to provide a specific address and instead promises that the congregants will return at some point. Eventually, the owner of the home is tracked down and arrested on twelve counts of abuse and neglect. She is accused of moving the residents from place to place and of leaving residents outside for a time without food or medication. Weeks after the arrest, the staff and others at the church have no way to contact congregants—who have been moved to new homes but do not have cell phones or other means of communication. They receive news that a number of congregants were malnourished, dehydrated, unable to speak coherently, and hospitalized before they were moved to other licensed homes. The priest contacts over fifteen different authorities involved in the case to try to find the congregants and visit them, but she is told that their location cannot be revealed to her unless congregants themselves contact the church. They can be given her information, but she cannot be given theirs.

In each of these situations, it is possible to locate the evil of such forms of abuse and coercions with those who run these homes, referring to the managers and owners as malevolent human beings who take advantage of vulnerable congregants. I frequently hear such references on the part of Holy Family staff in regards to some of the group home situations; they are justifiably outraged at the ways congregants are mistreated. Yet, to locate evil on the level of personal care home owners and managers is to make invisible the larger structures and patterns through which people with psychiatric disabilities, many of whom are also poor and black, are often treated like property. Many are regarded as a source of revenue within a capitalist and human service economy that fails to provide basic protection to citizens.

In May of 2012, over a year before my research at Holy Family begins, journalists Craig Schneider and Andria Simmons of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, publish a series of articles outlining the scope of the abuse and injustice affecting people with disabilities in the metro Atlanta area (both physically and mentally disabled people in both licensed and unlicensed personal care homes). They reported that in the five years prior to the publication of these articles, the state of Georgia had found 35,000 violations in personal care homes yet had only leveled 544 fines; the average fine was \$600. Of the 18 homes that had more than 100 violations each, fourteen remained in operation.²⁰⁸ Within licensed homes, violations included insufficient training and background checks on employees, as well as inadequate living conditions such as “dirty floors, bathtubs and walls, soiled toilets and live cockroaches in the kitchen.” Violations also entailed more serious neglect and abuse, including the failure to give necessary medicines for diabetes and heart disease—resulting in the death of a resident—and patterns of physical abuse.²⁰⁹ In unlicensed homes, the violations included such offenses as residents beaten with belts and burnt with curling irons, confined to a basement with a bucket for a toilet, robbed of all of their money, and moved from home to home as owners and managers sought to evade the law.²¹⁰

One of the articles suggests a number of reasons for such rampant abuse and neglect. First, state resources required to oversee and implement regulation—or to track

²⁰⁸ Andria Simmons and Craig Schneider, “Lax Enforcement in Personal Care Homes,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 22, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/local/lax-enforcement-in-personal-care-homes/nQT2J/>.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Andria Simmons and Craig Schneider, “Unlicensed Homes to Face More State Scrutiny,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/state-regional-govt-politics/unlicensed-homes-to-face-more-state-scrutiny/nQWCr/>.

and close down unlicensed homes—are lacking. The authors relate this lack of resources to a significant increase in the number of homes in metro Atlanta, which grew from less than fifty in the mid-1990s to more than 900 homes in 2012. Such growth is attributed not only to an increase in the aging population (the number of people 65 and older increased more than 44 percent in the same timeframe) but also to the federal government’s push to move mentally ill and developmentally disabled persons out of mental hospitals and into community settings. The authors suggest three factors contributing to the rampant problems they uncovered: the increase in people looking for homes; insufficient government resources to provide oversight; and the impact of the 2007/2008 recession on household income. There are not enough good homes for everyone who needs them. Furthermore, some who provide the housing are ostensibly looking for ways to make a living, but they do so without the commitments or institutional capacities to provide adequate care. The result is that many elderly and disabled people are valued as commodities to be exploited for their Social Security and other entitlement checks.²¹¹

It is not that Holy Family congregants are powerless in these situations; many of them tell stories of moving from one group home to the next in search of a better life. I am amazed at the complex maps that many of them attempt to narrate for me as they trace their movements around the city both as their group homes move and as they seek other arrangements. The challenge then is not that congregants do not want or desire something better for themselves, but that when they seek a better life, there are few if any good affordable choices. Even in the best situations, poor congregants with mental illness

²¹¹ Andria Simmons and Craig Schneider, “Perils in Personal Care Homes,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 9, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/local/perils-in-personal-care-homes/nQTgL/>.

often live with numerous other housemates with psychiatric disabilities—persons they did not choose and with whom they may find it difficult to live. As I visit congregants in their homes, it is difficult for me to imagine surviving well in the circumstances that these congregants are asked to tolerate. One local disability advocate summarizes: “They [the homes] are crazy making!”

The AJC articles about personal care homes reveal the horror of living in poverty with mental illness in a particular place and time. But disability scholars argue that such forms of incarceration follow an all too common and pervasive logic by which many people with disabilities are deprived of basic rights: their deviance apparently justifies the social controls of those who confine them. “Disability, situated alongside other key lines of stratification such as race, class, nationality, and gender, is central to understanding the complex, varied, and interlocking ways in which incarceration occurs and is made out to be normal, natural, politically necessary, and beneficial.”²¹² Disability scholars question a common narrative about the “failure of deinstitutionalization” that might emerge from stories such as the one told by the AJC about the inadequate resources to provide sufficient oversight for group homes or independent living. They question the “neoliberal policies that [have] led simultaneously to growth of the prison system, the reduction in affordable housing, and the lack of financial support for disabled people to live viably in the community.”²¹³ In my interactions with Holy Family congregants, it would seem they have enough money to make them valuable “commodities,” but not enough money to give them other viable options about where they live and with whom. Carey, Ben-Moshe,

²¹² Allison C. Carey, Liat Ben-Moshe, and Chris Chapman, *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), x.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

and Chapman point to the desire “to individualize and psychiatrize what is properly a political, ethical, and socioeconomic issue.” This desire redirects attention away from the state and its policies to a “human service sector who are charged with ameliorating the problem with individualistic mental health interventions and haphazardly available free meals or sleeping bags.”²¹⁴

In light of such persistent devaluing of congregants’ lives, how then does the bishop claim that through baptism, these lives are marked through the church, its rituals and sacraments, as inestimably valuable both to God and to God’s people? How can he declare that through the blessing and nourishment of God within the church these congregants are prepared to be sent back out into the difficult, even dangerous conditions they regularly face? The situations into which congregants are sent often contest the gestures and words that Holy Family places upon them through sacramental blessing. In light of the persistent desecration of life that psychiatrically disabled persons face outside the church, the flexibility and freedom of the space at Holy Family also becomes a limitation, a source of lament and despair over the community’s inability to protect clients from the degradation they encounter.

One morning Neil and I discuss the perils of the loose weave of community that is Holy Family: where people come and go as they are able, engaging as full participants for a time and then disappearing for a time to return later. While such flexibility facilitates forms of belonging in a more fluid way that invites noncoercive participation, it also characterizes a community where many who gather are lost to others over time.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Neil describes it this way as he reflects on the relationships of those who come to the community:

The sad side of that is that folks get lost in the rolling out, particularly folks who come in from the participant track so to speak. Like we had one guy, a guy and a lady would often come together. An African-American man probably in his late 40s, dreadlocks, woman, in her late 50s she walked with a cane, and they would come about once a month, which is fine, a lot of our folks do that. Then they were gone for a few months and she came back. And they were like best buds, both homeless but in a very supporting relationship to one another. And I said, "Where is your friend?" I saw him so infrequently I couldn't even remember his name. And she said, "Well, I heard he drank himself to death." And that was . . . I got the impression that that was his closest relationship in the world was his relationship with this woman, and his death was just through the grapevine to her.

Neil goes on to describe how this affects funeral and burial practices, the sacredness of human bodies after death, particularly as it affected a long-time Holy Family congregant:

When [Marlys] died, and the state to do their due diligence, before they will do a pauper's burial, does a search for next of kin. And they hunt down basically anybody who they hope will claim the body and claim financial responsibility. I just feel a kind of spiritual unrest with the body of my friend being in a cooler in the city morgue for a month. I mean there is just something about that that just really bothers me. I don't yet know why that is. I think about it. I talk about it to my wife a lot, and that's just kind of an outgrowth of having such a fluid population here. And people here have fluid loss in their lives, where they just lose so much of family and supporting relationships that they die, and because there is nobody who can claim financial responsibility, their body just stays frozen for a month until they get a pauper's burial in an unmarked grave. I mean the pauper's field is a beautiful field, but I don't know, it's just something about it (voice trails off).

I respond: "It strikes me . . . one of the things I think is beautiful about Holy Family is the flow, the fluidity, people can come and go, and they don't have to show up and sign something, or do whatever, but I do think it makes, I can see that it would be hard because then . . ."

"People get lost!" Neil interjects with vehemence.

I continue: “You lose track of someone in a way that feels important, and so what makes space for difference might also be this creation of loss that is ongoing.”

Neil offers another example of a year in which there were not enough church staff, in the form of interns, to go and do home visits. The following year, he sent interns to follow up at nursing homes with a number of people who could no longer make the journey to Holy Family. He discovered that Holy Family no longer had correct addresses for four people who had once been regulars in the community. He was particularly concerned about a former congregant who had Alzheimer’s and couldn’t engage in conventional conversation; in her situation, it would be difficult if not impossible for her to contact the church. He concludes this story with how “awful” it can feel to know that people who were claimed by the church community might be lost and unable to be found by the congregation: “I have lost so many members of our community to the wind. I don’t know if they are alive or dead, and that’s the painful side of having such fluidity in this community, and that’s also the fluidity of poverty.”

In this community, congregants are often displaced: because a neighborhood becomes too expensive for a group home to exist there, or because home managers are attempting to evade closure, or because congregants move from home to home in a search for better conditions. In these conditions, a congregant might be sent from the parish on any given day without assurance of their safe return. Such patterns condition a community in which congregants’ abilities to be light for their neighbors and advocates for themselves relate to the fragility of social spaces within which they might “love and serve” the world around them. My assumptions are not that Circle congregants are unable to relate to those with whom they share homes. In fact, such forms of support (or lack of

support) are palpable at Holy Family as group home mates seek out and advocate for one another, or have disagreements and become frustrated with one another. Nor is it that they are unaccompanied by divine love, which marks them as beloved in life and death, whether or not the church knows where they are. Yet relationships outside the bounds of the church often appear threatened by fragile and coercive living spaces.

In the sending of the community, what kinds of space and relationships are necessary to hold sacred the promises, the names, placed upon these human persons within the course of Holy Family's liturgy? How might these persons relate not only to the individual parish of Holy Family but also to its place in a network of parishes? A theology of sending asks about the choreographies in which different congregations participate. It also asks about the creation of places that comprise the worldly church (of which Holy Family is a part). How do these particular places keep the promise of those who witness such acts of baptism and confirmation? How do they testify to the new life—to the belonging to God and others—of which they are symbols?

The Church Is Sent to Be Light to the Church

In contrast to such devaluing of human life, the bishop emphasizes the gathering of the church as: (1) the possibility of belonging to a loving, human community, and (2) the solidarity that makes this claim palpable in an ongoing way. His proclamation raises questions about the broader church that witnesses to the value of each human life and that welcomes congregants into various ecclesial homes as family. Might not the broader church, as given for the life of the world, spread across the space of the city and beyond, shape a set of sheltering and life-affirming relationships? Yet even within the broader

ecclesial family, the sending of the congregation highlights the divides that income inequality creates. It underlines the complicated relationships between Holy Family and Christians who seek to provide pleasure and hospitality for its community. Even churches that explicitly claim a bond with Holy Family often participate in both subtle and explicit ways in forms of degradation.

Of the troubled forms of sending that mark Holy Family's departure from church grounds, the events that elicit my deepest doubts about the sacred work of Holy Family are constituted by Holy Family's visits to other congregations. These are Christian communities that support Holy Family and occasionally come to visit. When Holy Family as a group is sent out to be in relationship with other churches in other spaces, the impossibility of truly mutual relationships within the current segregation of the city and economic disparity become evident. Many congregants eagerly anticipate these outings for weeks or even months before they happen and cherish them immensely. Yet such visits also reveal the power asymmetries and the conditional bonds inherent in gathering persons outside of the mediated space of Holy Family.

The most disturbing—and an uncommon²¹⁵—example of this condescension occurs during a trip to the suburbs for a long-anticipated feast. The festive picnic is hosted by a congregation whose members regularly visit and provide crucial support for Holy Family. Unlike some of the congregations who serve meals for Holy Family, members of this congregation are acquainted with Holy Family congregants by name and

²¹⁵ While this story is not typical of outings at Holy Family, I offer it because it reveals important limits and fragility within the parish through the differences it gathers and sends. The manifestations of such fragility are often far subtler, but I witness their presence in other outings as well. What counts as “good and acceptable behavior” matters more when Holy Family interacts with those outside the church in spaces not its own.

take time to develop relationships and friendships. Thus, when I board the van that is waiting to take us to the festive meal, I am shocked by the warnings posted all over the van. The sign reads:

Read this note regarding today's trip []:

At lunch first servings and second servings will be permitted, but no more than seconds. There will be no thirds and there will be no take-home. Do not ask for thirds and do not ask for food to-go. We will be in downtown [].; however, you are not to leave the area where we are eating. Do not wander off. If you wander off, we will leave you and you will be left to walk home. At your fastest walking speed, it will take you 8 hours to walk home from [this town]. Do not enter the church [building] for any reason. A wedding will be taking place, and it is imperative that we not disturb the wedding. If you need to use the restroom, there will be portable toilets outside. Do not litter. And there is to be no smoking whatsoever. If you do not respect these boundaries that have been set for us by our hosts, then they will not invite us back again next year.

The note goes on to suggest that if a congregant breaks these rules, they may never go on another outing. The note concludes with a justification for its demands: "This is a very expensive lunch that our kind hosts are giving us for free. Please respect their generous gift, and express to them your appreciation." I later learn that Holy Family congregants attend for free while other invited church guests pay for their share in the feast.

As I read this note, Tanya, sitting behind me, tells me she cannot read the sign and asks Mason to read it for her, so he reads it aloud for all of us sitting on the van. Read aloud as a kind of proclamation, the condescension and fear of the announcement are even more disturbing. Mason then makes some comment about it that I do not hear, but the driver responds, defending its content as important. Mason then agrees with her that there has to be "discipline and structure."

When we finally arrive at the party, we find ourselves in a parking lot. There is no church or wedding in sight. At the end of a large parking lot are several tents where tables have been set. Food is being served both to Holy Family congregants and to visitors from other congregations, who are paying for their meals as part of a fundraiser. Under one tent is a line for food and under another, folding tables and chairs. Mason looks around the enormous empty parking lot area, far from any other building or public space. He comments, in regards to the warning posted in the van, that he does not see why people cannot smoke over in one part of the parking lot far from the tents. Mason and I are both deeply confused about the concern over appropriate behavior in this almost empty parking lot far from the centers of church and city. It is difficult in my mind to imagine any occasion that would justify the tone of the conditions for participation in a meal.

The warning upsets me to such a degree that I correspond with Neil, whom I greatly respect and whose love for the community and congregants I have come to trust. I later spend several hours talking with him about the conditions that give rise to the warning. I want to know the warrant for such a blatant form of condescension. It apparently denies the basic forms of respect and equality that Holy Family claims—both in its religious services and its Friendship Circle setting.

Neil claims partial responsibility. He acknowledges its troubling nature and attributes it in part to the exhaustion that he and others at Holy Family experience organizing such events. The events, while inestimably precious occasions to many congregants, become logistical nightmares for staff. This particular trip involved five vehicles and five drivers, gathering sixty people from fifteen different locations to take them twenty-two miles to the suburbs for a single meal and then back home again. Neil

describes the tremendous difficulty in retaining volunteers who are able to support such an endeavor, and the time spent cleaning up after outings, especially if congregants vomit or experience incontinence—both frequent experiences of outings for meals like this one. He conjures up for me the negative implications there are for everyone who goes if just a few people from the Holy Family community are disrespectful.

Neil also describes the rebukes he receives if congregants pan-handle, smoke, appear ungrateful, or leave any kind of a mess. As Neil puts it, “most of these reprimands [are] couched in conditional language such as ‘We are so happy to be able to do this for y’all, but this is an expensive lunch for us to offer, and we need to make sure that things run smoothly if we’re going to continue to do this in future years.’” Maintaining these good, albeit conditional, relationships with other congregations feels vital both for the ongoing survival of this community (which depends on the private resources and sustained giving of other congregations) and also for congregants who look forward to events like this all year. As Neil describes it, “For this community a multiple serving [feast] is a rare treat. However, it takes very little to jeopardize the whole community’s continued access to such a treat. There is then a tension between the freedoms of each individual and the sustainability of such events for the larger community.”

Invitations and relationships with other congregations often appear fragile and conditional. While claiming his part in the warning and its condescension, Neil confesses his ongoing frustration with being a leader in a fragile community. Holy Family depends on gifts from people who may or may not be invested in the kinds of community that Holy Family envisions and struggles to maintain. In his words, “We cannot now afford to alienate any donors, potential donors, or partner parishes. I have found it to be difficult to

navigate the direction of this community when there are so many different forms and levels of investment, and so many different, concentric ways of constructing, critiquing, or participating in this community. I feel much ambivalence, and I frequently feel caught in cross-currents.”

Just as poor Holy Family congregants sometimes find it difficult to sustain life-giving relationships and connections, so Holy Family too experiences a fragile and fraught interdependence with other congregations nearby. I have often seen congregants and staff resist and confront forms of condescension that occur in relationships with those outside the congregation. And yet, there are also times when Holy Family assumes a position of obligation to those through whom the congregation is able to survive. Holy Family is a “mission” church, which means it is explicitly dependent on the diocese and on other churches to support its work. Such dependence means that it benefits from the ongoing friendship and generosity of those who are not its members in ways that would be unusual for many congregations. It becomes difficult for Holy Family to shape a place within which to articulate a clear communal identity and from which it can send congregants on their own terms.

As Neil and I parse the complicated web of dependent relationships that make mutuality impossible, we also try to imagine the conditions—material, social, and ecclesial—that might make relationships of full mutuality more possible. What assumptions would need to be made about the relationships between those who visit and volunteer at Holy Family and its regular congregants? What kinds of understanding of social and economic realities might need to emerge, and how would that formation take place? In what kinds of particular places? Is Holy Family that place? Can it be? Neil and

I talk about a time when those who visit Holy Family might be given their own set of conditions about what they must and must not do when they are on the property of Holy Family. Some volunteers and visitors find Holy Family a very challenging place to build community because of the expectations of long-term staff and community members. Furthermore, expectations mount from consistent volunteers who have difficulty being open to or patient with the difference and inexperience that new volunteers bring. While Holy Family might be more explicit about its own terms for receiving the gifts it needs from others, neither Neil nor I imagine that such practices could emerge through mutual condescension or shaming of either congregants or volunteers and visitors. Other gestures and postures must transform theological imagination in regards to the sharing of resources that being the church entails.

A Dance of Ecclesial Welcome: Becoming Hosts and Guests

In light of the troubled acts of sending that Holy Family reveals, I want to argue that the liturgical act of sending requires an adequate theology of consent to dwelling and remaining together both within and outside the physical boundaries of the parish. To do so, I dialogue with works by two theologians who reimagine the practices of hospitality (dwelling) and witness (remaining) in light of human difference and human suffering. I argue that a liturgy of sending must also hold dwelling and remaining if it is to lament and resist the persistent denigration of some human lives that is the aesthetic of a segregated city.

In *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, theologian Thomas Reynolds suggests that at the heart of human existence is a question that also

animates Christian theology and ecclesiology: “Is the world a home for us?” Is there a welcome for us? How will our lives be received and embraced by others?²¹⁶ Reynolds posits that the answers to these questions are never abstract: “We inhabit the world in particular places of welcome, dwelling in homes that on a local scale mediate a sense of being at home in the larger world. . . . Home is a dwelling place marked by the presence of other people. It is a communal place of orientation in which we fit comfortably, grow roots, and reside safely.”²¹⁷ To dwell with and through other people is to occupy spaces where particular visions of a good life make sense to us: ideals of health, wealth, education, or love are some examples.²¹⁸ These frameworks function as “economies of exchange” in which we offer ourselves in ways that are recognized (or rejected), through bodily practices in which we come to name our own worth and understand our power to belong to others.²¹⁹ Thus, Reynolds’s description of “home” echoes a definition from anthropologist Michael Jackson: homes are places where we experience a certain “sense of existential control and connectedness—the way we feel when what we say or do seems to matter, and there is a balanced reciprocity between the world beyond us and the world within which we move.”²²⁰

Such definitions posit that not all houses, institutions, or cities are homes for all who dwell there. Eiesland reminds us that both human bodies and Christian churches can be habitable and inhospitable places: “The church as a communion of struggle, like our bodies, is not always agreeably habitable. Just as our relations with our own bodies

²¹⁶ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 51.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56–59.

²²⁰ Jackson, *At Home in the World*, 154.

involve elements of struggle that cannot be eliminated, a supply of grief seldom fully dried up, and pain whose source is not always entirely evident, so, too our relations with the church.”²²¹ Displacement and struggle for home, in this sense, are common human experiences even as some communities and groups of people disproportionately experience them. Reynolds argues that disability is often read as an incomplete form of embodiment that disrupts patterns of recognition and thus complicates the power of the disabled person to belong or dwell in socially acceptable ways.²²² He argues that Christian churches often become sites where prevalent patterns of devaluing the “abnormal” are often reinforced rather than interrogated or resisted. In response to a worldly church that is often inhospitable and unwelcoming to strangers, Reynolds proposes an alternate theology of church as a dwelling place. As dwelling place, the church provides a graceful economy in which unconventional body-minds might be desired and recognized.

At the center of each congregation as a dwelling place of welcome, Reynolds imagines the stranger as a blessing, as all human beings are vulnerable strangers in one way or another, at one time or another.²²³ As humans we bear the *imago dei*, the image of God: like God, we are creative, relational, and available to those around us.²²⁴ In some sense the “stranger” helps to reveal the divine image we all bear; those who are guests call forth an awareness and exercise of the creativity and availability that human relationships require. Places of welcome, dwelling spaces that create patterns of welcome for those who reside within them, are identified both by solidarity (practices of belonging

²²¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 109.

²²² Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 67–70.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 240–242.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 179–186.

to one another) and improvised creativity (the fluctuating host/guest relationships that give rise to new forms and patterns within community).²²⁵

In the ongoing animation of a true home or a dwelling, Reynolds posits the creative spaces between guest and host as those which offer hope for new forms of generous and permeable communal identity. He emphasizes the vital work of acknowledged human vulnerability at the heart of such interactions. In his words, there is:

a mixing between guest and host that undoes the distinction between outsider and insider. . . . Here boundaries shade into one another, for the generosity of hospitality consents to a kind of role reversal that now also leaves the host vulnerable and dependent. Once the stranger is invited in, the host yields stability and control, adjusting the household to accommodate and attend to the guest's unique needs as they become apparent.²²⁶

In a liminal space created together by host and guest, the familiar becomes unfamiliar in a way that makes welcome possible.²²⁷ Through mutual vulnerability, welcome and hospitality are marks of an ecclesial dwelling that honors divine welcome and affirmation of all human life, able-bodied and disabled.²²⁸ The Holy Spirit empowers and charges the church with hospitality in way that welcomes difference without pity or assimilation.²²⁹

While Reynolds offers a normative theological vision to counter the reality of many Christian churches as places of degradation and discrimination,²³⁰ his portrait of an ecclesial dwelling begs the question of how marks of solidarity and creativity are

²²⁵ Ibid., 242–245.

²²⁶ Ibid., 243.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., 234–236.

²²⁹ Ibid., 240–241.

²³⁰ Heather Vacek also argues that Christian churches should respond to people with mental illnesses through practices of hospitality and compassionate welcome. Vacek, *Madness*, 172–179.

manifest in places where bodily aesthetics are frequently contested. Life together at Holy Family draws attention to a dwelling that becomes possible through the sharing of multiple, overlapping aesthetics that are often in tension. Conflicts arise from contested visions of appropriate responses and interactions within a common space. At Holy Family aesthetic differences arise not only from the mental differences of congregants but also from material conditions. Some congregants come from private homes and others from communal homes that are only temporarily their own. From different kinds of homes, they bring different understandings of what constitutes acceptable embodiment. Is it appropriate to fart in church as long as you say you're sorry, or to play loud dance music during communal meals? Is it fitting to wear a hat in church or to ask for money from guests? Is it acceptable to keep headphones on during a worship service or other church meeting? Is it ugly to smell like you haven't taken a bath in a couple of days?

Reynolds imagines this dance of host and guest within the solidarity of the church in a way not unlike what I have called a liturgical "art form"—the artistry of interpersonal connection that make multiple forms of belonging possible. Holy Family's arts of weaving and disrupting create an aesthetic of welcome that mark congregants as both hosts and guests within a dwelling place that is their own. In the acts of sending, however, more troubled relationships become evident. More often than not, some Holy Family congregants occupy the role of guest in every place in which they seek welcome. They are often guests at Holy Family as other churches bring meals, entertainment, or other necessary resources into the community. While they are the members and hosts of the community and in many ways set the terms for acceptable communal interaction within the bounds of Holy Family, the guests who come from other churches and

communities often perform the role of hosts: preparing meals, organizing activities, helping to read or lead liturgies, providing money for whatever is shared or enjoyed. These guests decide what is to be eaten and how it is to be served and how much of what is given and when. While those who serve Holy Family are very often remarkably generous and kind and patient, accepting of interactions at Holy Family that they might not consent to in their own home spaces, they nonetheless play the role of giver, of host, within a congregation to which they are connected but which is not their own.

Such a guest role is further accentuated when Holy Family is sent out to other churches for outings, where they are now in another congregation or community's space. Again, many Holy Family congregants find ways to make themselves at home and to make their needs and desires known. They celebrate the rare opportunity to be treated as invited and honored guests. But here too, it is clear that they are recipients of gifts not their own, in places in which they do not make decisions about the structures and patterns of giving and receiving that take place. Many congregants are also guests in the church's immediate neighborhood, their clothes, behaviors, and lack of jobs marking them as those who could not live in this part of town. Finally, they are guests in their own homes, where their home spaces are not their own but whose rules and patterns for eating and sleeping are given to them by house managers.

While Reynolds alludes to the possibility that to be stranger or guest is a blessing, to be a perpetual guest means that the kinds of mutual, creative host/guest relationships and mutual spaces are difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. More accurately, Holy Family congregants are often perceived as neither hosts nor guests. They are capable of the art forms of hospitality and welcome, but are viewed homogeneously as a group of

patients, clients, or recipients of charity. The whole group is marked by the possibility of one who deviates from expected protocol.

How then can the sending of the church be understood as a blessing, a promise of divine love and protection, rather than a doomed mission of perpetual itineracy? What ecclesial choreographies are called forth by the Spirit whose fire and light frame the sanctuary doors at Holy Family, by these symbols of unquenchable vitality and luminosity? What is the implicit interrelationship between sending and dwelling?

When I map the sending of Holy Family, I note that new relationships formed within the congregation do little to disturb forms of segregation in the broader city or create new patterns of living together outside the space of the church. If ostensibly distinct spaces are always overlapping and intersecting through the memories, histories, and bodies of those who gather and create a place together, as Fulkerson argues,²³¹ then the dwelling place of Holy Family is continually informed by the ways in which those who are sent do not share space and time outside the church gathering. A liturgy decentered and inspirited out to the boundaries of the congregation is often circumscribed by the physical boundaries of the church property, outside of which forms of solidarity and creativity are more difficult to imagine. Such forms require an intersection of time and space that feels impossible given the current distances. Not only spatial, but also economic, racial, and mental distances exist between congregants; these distances make it difficult for some congregants to access one another across the time and space of a week.

One of the priests often emphasizes the mission of the church as it is made explicit in the Book of Common Prayer: “to restore all people to unity with God and each

²³¹ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 29–31.

other in Christ.” Such images of unity resonate with refrains in the Eucharistic prayers that talk about gathering those who are scattered from the nations as one people. Yet when I imagine the promises of sending each one, the hope is that those who are gathered might then be scattered not alone but *together* across the dividing lines of wealth. The hope is that the differences gathered might also be mirrored in new patterns of intimacy and creativity in the particular places in which people live around the city. Such scattering might perform the theological work that theologian Shelly Rambo calls “remaining” or “witnessing” to the spaces where it is most difficult to orient oneself to others, or to claim a place of love and provision. What then might it mean “to witness” or “to remain” together outside the space and time of the weekly church gatherings? How might remaining be understood as essential to the liturgical work of sending?

Middle Spirit and Sending as Remaining

The sending prayers at Holy Family claim that all who are sent are “faithful witnesses to Christ our Lord” through the love and service rendered. In her reworking of what it means to be a “faithful witness” to divine love, Shelly Rambo invokes a middle space and time that is often overlooked in Christian narratives and liturgical rhythms. It is a time and space between crucifixion and resurrection, between life and death, where trauma itself involves a blurring of these categories. In her “theology of remaining,” Rambo contemplates human bodies who find themselves in the “unmappable terrain” of Holy Saturday, a day that Christians mark liturgically between the agony of Christ’s passion on the cross on Good Friday and the celebration of resurrection on Easter Sunday. In Rambo’s work, Holy Saturday is interpreted through the experiences of those

who have suffered trauma and must live on, remaining with the persistent presence of death in their everyday lives. In this “middle territory” of survival, linear conceptions of time, from death to life, are inadequate. The present emerges not as something given or stable, but as a question about what cannot be known of the past and future. Embodied orientation in the middle spaces is thus an experience of what Rambo calls “elisions” of time and space, elisions of the senses. These elisions are confusing rather than stabilizing, eliciting questions from those who witness them rather than answers or convictions.²³²

As a kind of continuity between death and life, the Spirit is not so much power coming down upon and through the body of survivors to transform their experiences into a new life of resurrection, but the Spirit is a remainder, a presence with them, that enables their continued relating and imagining in a time of loss. “The Spirit, as the breath of witness, testifies to the importance of giving rise to life, of imagining it rather than assuming its arrival.”²³³ The Spirit is thus a symbol for divine imagination that allows those who remain in places of death to claim love in a place where they struggle to witness to their experiences. If Christ reveals something of the form of divine love, the Spirit offers human bodies a way to tentatively imagine new forms beyond normalcy: “the Spirit continually seeks form rather than securing it.”²³⁴

Rambo’s theology of the Spirit provides profound language for exploring a liturgical theology of sending at Holy Family. Many congregants have suffered traumatic events in ways that it can be difficult for them to bear witness to—mental and physical abuse, the deaths of loved ones, a disconnection from their own body-mind, the

²³² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 39–42.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 124.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

brutalities of incarceration. And many live in and are sent to “middle spaces” that do not permit or promote human flourishing even as life and love somehow persist within them. At Holy Family these middle spaces are interpolated by a kind of “social death” or social abandonment. These middle places are what anthropologist João Biehl identifies as “zones of social abandonment,”²³⁵ where what it means to be human is contested. In these zones, societies come to relegate certain persons as “ex-human” through repetitive practices of neglect, abuse, or indifference.²³⁶

For Rambo, a theology of middle spaces and middle Spirit is a theology of remaining and witnessing, in ways that are difficult to translate into terms that count theologically (hope, resurrection, triumph over the forces of death) or politically (adequate protection under the law, advocacy, resources). The question of remaining and witnessing from these middle spaces then becomes a question not only for those individuals sent back to zones of social abandonment but also for the congregation as a whole and for the wider community who explicitly claim congregants at Holy Family as “belonging” and “beloved.” What does it mean to remain and witness with those who continue to experience a kind of “social death” in terms of the value placed on their lives?

As I ride the vans and occasionally visit personal care homes, I come to understand the undesirability of occupying these middle spaces of group homes, both for those who live there and for those who might visit from the church. Here, the possibilities for human flourishing and the material conditions under which poor persons might live well with mental illness are not yet imagined or felt. One volunteer describes the group

²³⁵ João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39–41, 52–53.

homes as “too depressing,” especially in light of incredibly difficult circumstances she has in her own family. Yet she also dreams of a day when every person in the congregation has an advocate in the form of another person who would intercede on their behalf for the resources they require.

Yet, even in cases where Holy Family congregants attempt advocacy on behalf of one another, outside the boundaries of the church relationships are troubled by histories of racism and ableism that inhibit acts of solidarity. For example, a young, white, able-bodied woman tells me the story of how she struggled to advocate for needed medical resources for an older, disabled, black man. He came to resent the assistance she was trying to give him, and he thus resisted dependence on her to fill out the necessary medical paperwork. He felt belittled rather than empowered by her desire to remain by his side in the hospital even as he needed her help to navigate a system that would not recognize his needs and that he could not navigate on his own. To remain together and to advocate from within such spaces reflects the deep ambiguities of solidarity across histories of oppression and condescension.

At the same time, sending is the promise that all those who gather are infinitely beloved by God. Therefore, remaining and witnessing in the middle spaces of group homes and hospitals and food stamp offices cannot be the sole responsibility of those whose lives are called into question. Those who are subject to the marks of “social death” cannot be held solely responsible to shine a light on the injustice of their own home situations and of the body practices of incarceration they experience. In this case, “loitering with intent” as an ecclesial practice might name a practice of attention to the conditions and relationships necessary for art forms of interpersonal relationships to

continue outside the grounds of the church. Such loitering has both ecclesial and political dimensions and calls attention to the interrelationship between the two.

Such a connection is evident in Lloyd's reflection on life at this church, a place where he is certain that God has called him to be. He wonders if the church could play another role: "we could do more . . . like when they do things at the Capitol, try to sign people up, there's one in January . . . a mental health day, not raise hell, but silently raise hell. I read a lot about these silent protests, they don't cause trouble, they're there." He reflects on how his anxiety around crowds prevents him from taking part in such protests. Like Holy Family, Lloyd struggles to imagine a way to transform public regard of himself, and other congregants, whose beauty might remain hidden within the parish grounds. He imagines this could require political action on the part of the congregation, but both he and I have trouble imagining what communal forms this action might take in light of the fragility of the community as it already struggles to sustain the space and time of its own identity.

Political action—and its relationship to ecclesial belonging as Eiesland defines it—begins with the fragile yet ordinary interdependence of human bodies. To be embodied is to be held together and to act out in love of one's own life and the lives of others. "Acting out" is the refusal to accept the roles and places assigned people with disabilities. "Holding our bodies together" evokes those practices which enable solidarity with one's own body and with others who are marginalized.²³⁷ For many people at Holy Family holding body-minds together or acting out against injustice is shaped by the struggle for life in the middle spaces. On the one hand, poor, disabled congregants are

²³⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 94–95.

remarkably resourceful in claiming their own beloved lives in light of a strong resistance to that which would mark them as “ex-human.” On the other hand, those who live in group homes often cannot afford to act or speak out against those on whom they depend for survival. Yet without social protest of such “zones of abandonment,” or without moral imagination to envision an alternative, congregants’ lives and relationships remain at risk of real abuse and literal death. Congregants are sent again and again without the hope of a dwelling from which to act out.

The liturgical act of sending at Holy Family requires forms of protest and imagination that are resonant with both the beauty and the fragility of a disabled church. “Dwelling,” “remaining,” and “witnessing” at Holy Family must, then, take clues from patterns familiar in the gathering of the congregation: from the practices of consent that help to hold its communal life together. How, for example, might the pleasures of eating together shape the protest of the community against the degradation of some congregants? Such a question occurs to me after another sermon, which links the acts of sending with the work of theological imagination. In this connection, theological imagination is never far from the basic human needs of eating and dwelling.

Perils and Promises of Eschatological Imagination

On the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, a visiting preacher reads this landmark piece of legislation through the lens of a gospel text. The disabled preacher invokes the feeding of the five thousand as a parable about eschatological imagination. Describing the ADA as a work in progress, he notes the disciples’ inability to grasp the provision for the crowd that Jesus intended. “It’s really important to begin to

believe in a world that God dreams, and that world is a world where everyone has access to the means to live,” he urges the small group gathered in the sanctuary. As I listen to him, I have difficulty imagining the real possibility of a world in which these congregants are regarded with both dignity and desire and, therefore, have access to the resources they need. I find it almost impossible to believe in a soon-to-be world where they would have adequate protection.

Claiming the good news of the text, the preacher reminds us not to give up hope:

Our role as a people of faith is to claim God’s vision and to claim that the history of God is to claim a history of bread. It’s a history of feeding people *and* taking seriously that people have what it takes to make it through the night, *and* using that vision of the world to ask good questions of lawmakers, *and* to push forward when we don’t quite have what we need, *and* to be persistent about this idea that people should not have to live on less than is livable. People should not have to make it on just a portion of what they need! And so it becomes important to ask ourselves and to ask the church: what is it we’re going to do to continue to push for a future where everyone has what it takes to make it through the night?

After the sermon, the community celebrates a sacred history of bread, of feeding, as we do every Sunday: an enthusiastic passing of the peace, prayers of the people, a gathering of offerings both monetary and vegetable, and a Eucharistic prayer that recalls salvation history. As we eat together, I am left with the preacher’s questions: how do we come to believe in a world that God dreams? What kinds of belonging to and intimacy with other people does this require? What do I need to know of another to dream a world where she has what she needs or where she can claim from me what she needs?

Liturgical theologians often emphasize the communion table as a site of such theological imagination. Bieler and Schottroff, for example, trace eschatological motifs woven through a history of Eucharistic prayers and texts: a gathering of those who have been scattered, a feast for the nations who have gathered, an end to violence in the

remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ, and a reminder of the covenant God has made with God's people.²³⁸

With similar hope, M. Shawn Copeland argues for the possibility of Eucharistic witness to transform community. Identifying her theological task as one of “remembering and remembrance,”²³⁹ she remembers the marked body of Jesus as one who regularly ate with other people, in intimate practices that were interpreted by some, according to the gospel accounts, as strange and scandalous. Copeland interprets the sharing of an open, common table as an imitation of Jesus and a faithful witness to the community of desire and resistance of which he was a part.²⁴⁰ In Copeland's argument, we must mark the flesh of Christ through a communion table where all are welcome. Gathering human differences, marked, despised bodies, around a communion table, Christians resist the devaluation of human flesh.²⁴¹ Interpreting Eucharist as a resistance to the “anti-logos” and “anti-liturgies” of globalization that debase human life, she envisions a “welcome table” as a beautiful act of loyalty and belonging.²⁴²

At Holy Family the congregation eats together at an “open table” in the ecclesial spaces of the church, a place where all are explicitly welcome to partake of the holy meal and of any church meal that precedes and follows holy communion. Yet such intimacies emerge in sharp contrast to the many tables that are not shared at other times in home spaces, where the closest friendships and familial bonds are manifest. The holy table stands apart from the ordinary tables of home and group home, not only because

²³⁸ Bieler and Schottroff, *The Eucharist*, 41–67.

²³⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 130.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 57.

congregants that do not live together spend little time in one another's home, but also because a mutual sharing of home spaces is difficult for many to imagine.

Even within a congregation like Holy Family, which expressly desires mental difference to be at the heart of its Eucharistic celebrations, there is a danger of segregationist charity. What might it mean for congregants, volunteers, and visitors to share not only the common tables of altar and church dining room and picnic table but also the personal spaces of homes scattered across the city? What might it mean to share Thanksgiving Dinner and Easter Feast and wedding showers and birthday parties, not only within the moderated space and time of a church gathering but in the intimate spaces of home and group home, with family and friends across a table?

Such questions are occasioned by an invitation to a home. I am welcomed to a private celebration in the church to which both church and non church guests are invited. It is a festive sharing of food and friendship that takes place in the priest's house. The gathering is characterized by different kinds of eating (no lines, no long tables) and socializing (mingling, moving in and out of small groups in the kitchen and living room, touring the home) than is possible with such a large group in a parish hall. While I am grateful to be present, I find it significant that although not everyone in the church could be invited, no Circle participants are present. While this absence might well result from the difficulties of transportation from a different part of the city, it appears as a clear divide within an ecclesial community, a divide made palpable in social interaction that would likely differ in its form if group home congregants were present.

Such an event compels me to ask questions about the people who are invited into my home and whose homes I visit. Many of these people share something in common in

terms of wealth, ability, education, and race. I consider inviting even just two or three Circle congregants to parties and dinners with my own friends, particularly those Holy Family members with whom I most enjoy sharing pleasures within the space and time of the church, as well as those who express desire for more opportunities for social interaction during the week. Such an invitation would necessarily entail arranging transportation. Such an invitation would also result in different kinds of social interaction than might otherwise occur at the gatherings my husband and I host.

I also imagine accepting invitations to be part of a holiday in a personal care home. (I twice received invitations to a group home BBQ that I could not accept due to previous obligations.) I envision people who live in different parts of the city, with different aesthetics of interaction over food and conversation, discerning how to share and consent to space and time together. What arts of social interaction might be summoned forth by such occasions? While many Holy Family congregants are supportive of my research and writing, some are far less concerned with written representation than with sustained social interaction. Will I continue to spend time with them, even when my project is over? Will I keep coming back? Entertaining this question, I envision new relationships this continued commitment might entail.²⁴³

For if I imagine a time when everyone at Holy Family has access to the means to live, it begins with a scattering of those who gather out into one another's lives across the dividing lines of ability, wealth, race, and security, to share the desires and aesthetics and

²⁴³ I look forward to learning more about the answer to this question after my formal research period under Institutional Review Board is over; it is my intention to pursue the formation of such relationships through the sharing of home spaces. While I was writing this dissertation, I felt it was important to be careful about maintaining my role as a researcher rather than a close friend, so that congregants did not share with me information that they would not have shared with a researcher otherwise.

discomforts of many common tables. Such a sharing of pleasure and deprivation would occur outside the safe spaces and the moderated liturgical time of the church through invitation by small groups or individuals. Such a liturgy of sending would begin with relationships made possible through the gathering of Holy Family but also extend the physical boundaries of the community. It would entail smaller configurations of relationships that might be sustained over time. It would not consist of one group (volunteers) helping another (participants), but a few people together at a time helping to rearrange the spaces of the city with and through others.

At Holy Family, the liturgical act of sending maps an ecclesial dwelling in relationship to the possibility or failure of other homes to provide safe shelter for those who are sent. The art forms of guest and host, those who together create the contours of something we call “home” or “dwelling place” at Holy Family, are inherently fragile. Yet the church not only sustains its own spaces but also contributes to other kinds of arrangements of “social flesh.” Different social arrangements might also call forth different political arrangements, different dreams of the common good, different felt senses about what material conditions for life are required beyond the bounds of the congregation. It is my contention that such different arrangements are not only desirable but also necessary for the artistries of host and guest to take place within the dwelling of the church.

Arts of Sending a Disabled Church

We encounter then an unavoidable question: Does this meditation on sending perform a negation of the chapters that have gone before? Are the artistries of connection,

the sensory pleasures of disruption, and the struggle for right names inevitably overshadowed by the struggle for the means to live which goes on when the church doors are locked and all of the many spaces of Holy Family are empty? If sending is an act of promise, where is the hope and blessing?

I began this chapter with a sermon about a theology of sending; yet in the bishop's own homily, the sending presumes another act; the gathering and blessing of those who belong to one another. When Jack, Andie, and Belinda go forward to receive the marks of baptism, reception, and confirmation, they are claimed as "God's own forever" with and through those who gather. They do not stand or sit alone near the baptismal font. There is an immediate circle of some family members and friends and those from the congregation who "sponsor" them. And there is the congregation, who strain from the pews to catch a glimpse of each one and who speak on behalf of the church to promise to love and support them.

In light of the suffering that sending might entail, these concentric rings of people around the baptismal font—touching, blessing, promising, claiming these lives—appear fragile. Yet Bieler and Schottroff remind us that "sacraments" have the potential to make visible to us the love that often remains hidden, as well as to reveal the experiences of God's absence in the world and the church.

What I have hoped to show in the prior chapters are the artistry of shared space and time that are sometimes hidden when congregants are sent outside the bounds of the church. I have argued that the belonging to one another, the aesthetics of consent, is made visible through art forms and through the slow time and decentered space of Holy Family. For the truth of these sacraments remains: none of the people who gather are

worthy of social death, but rather deserve the means to live together, to belong to one another, and to have power to renounce the forces that would say otherwise. In the language of *The Book of Common Prayer*, which rings oddly in a congregation that does not often talk about evil powers or the devil: those who are baptized “renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” Those who gather vow to “do all in [their] power to support these persons in their life in Christ.”²⁴⁴ The divided spaces into which people are sent often belie this truth. And yet it is manifest in the space and time of Holy Family, albeit in fragile ways that are difficult to sustain.

Sending cannot be an ableist imperative for each one to overcome the circumstances of her or his life by God’s grace. Rather, sending entails the promise that the palpable belonging experienced within the time and space of the assembly at Holy Family is the more profound truth of these relationships than what often appears when the congregation is sent. Other patterns and practices of remaining, witnessing, belonging, and dwelling can exist. And that possibility is experienced again and again not only in the communal acts of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, but also in the jokes, conversation and silences, touch and gesture, in the struggle for adequate names, and in the pleasures of eating together. When the congregation consents to such ways of being together, it mirrors the possibility for a broader consent to a life together outside of the time and space of the parish gathering.

As researcher, I return again and again to Holy Family. It is here that my desire and ability to imagine a world I cannot yet imagine is stoked and refined—not in terms of either optimism or pessimism (although I experience both), but in terms of a persistent

²⁴⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, 302–303.

hope that the beauty of the people who gather at Holy Family demands. When I want to imagine a different city than the one I now live in, I spend time at Holy Family with the people whose liveliness and lament evoke this urgency for me. Even in the fragility of the relationships at Holy Family, hope is called forth and made manifest. Those who are marked for “social death” refuse those marks in the fragile beauty and consent to life that persist. Through art forms, congregants insist that even in the liminal, provisional space and time of a congregation, something new can be created and held out as a witness to other social arrangements. Such hope insists that something impossible be understood as possible; a different way of dwelling together as both church and neighborhood can be imagined.

In Holy Family’s case, such hope makes visible a connection between a set of tables: the communion table, the many tables in the parish hall, and all of the tables around the city where people sit down to eat together in places where others could not comfortably dwell. It has been my argument that the arts of Holy Family draw communal attention to the permeable nature of liturgy. Sending, then, is the hope that the community might hold together and perceive together that which is sometimes divided. When Holy Family is sent into the world, “the good thing” that is sent is the “we” that emerges through artistry of connection. This small “we” can be sent because it is the we that has eaten together and laughed together and sat together in silence.

The call then is not that each one is sent as an enabled individual to be a bright light in a dark world. Rather, the goodness of these eating and belonging practices might extend the liturgy, stretching it out into the places outside of the parish walls, so that new aesthetics of belonging and dwelling can be learned. The lines that divide some bodies

from one another in the city can be troubled, revealing a failure to manifest both Christian and human belonging. It is not that I imagine such practices of intimacy as a cure for the structures of ableism, racism, and income inequality. But such patterns of dwelling and remaining together might bear witness to the forces of social death, so that desires for other kinds of political, economic, and ecclesial arrangements might be deemed necessary. They might foster a dream of a common good—one that would make possible an alternative mutuality of relationships between those who call themselves the church.

Such a common good would include Rose. Rose is a congregant with mental illness who lives on her own, in spite of the fact that some friends and family think she should not. When Rose asks me to come to her home to conduct a formal interview, I gain a new understanding of her life in that space. When I get lost finding her apartment in the affordable housing complex, I learn that hers is the balcony filled with plants. I know Rose as an artist but not as a gardener. As she shows me around her house, she talks about how much she loves to cook but also about the dangers of cooking given certain health conditions. Her frequent complaints and concerns about her caregivers become more palpable when I can visualize her reliance upon them to occupy this place on her own. She tells me stories of people in her neighborhood who watch out for her, and people who take advantage of her. There are pictures everywhere of her family, and she tells some of their stories, both happy stories and ones that trouble her. There is a large photo album filled with pictures that document her many years both at Holy Family and at another church she attends, a history of relationships. At the end of our conversation, she walks me to my car and points to a gazebo in her housing complex. She describes a time when two women on staff at Holy Family, Shonda and Beatrice, came

on their own time to share a celebration with her in that gazebo. It is a memory that she cherishes. Thinking about Rose's relationship with Beatrice, I recall a time during the art program when Beatrice helped Rose navigate a problem she had encountered in maintaining her food stamps. As I perceive it, Beatrice's ability to advocate and watch out for Rose comes from interactions that Beatrice and Rose have both within and outside of Holy Family. Spending time with Rose in her home, I glimpse the possibility of ecclesial relationships that might remain and bear witness to Rose's needs and dreams outside the time and space of the church. Likewise, I can imagine Rose's love of planting, cooking, and singing as enlivening the spaces of some with whom she might consent to share her time, transforming certain stereotypes of mental illness and poverty as constituting an uninhabitable life.

Holy Family sends people with words like "Home" and "Friendship" and "Advocate" outside the bounds of the parish. It imagines the conditions in which these names, these words, these symbols, might find an adequate form in the neighborhoods, the city, and in other parishes. When Holy Family welcomes, in the name of God, it names those who gather as those who belong to one another. Sending then is an invitation to reveal those marks of belonging through recognizing one another in spaces where some congregants are most likely to be feared or disregarded. Such an invitation is manifest not only in the ritual words of the priest but also in the invitations and dreams of congregants whenever the "small we" of desire for companionship and adventure appears as an invitation to me or to another: We should go for a hike in the woods. We should go to the movies. We should do yoga together. Can I have your number? In such

proposals, I hear a desire for smaller configurations of relationships to extend beyond the physical boundaries of the parish, marking and revealing other patterns of belonging.

Such desired intimacies challenge in profound ways the dividing lines that remain in fragile communion at Holy Family. They also make apparent the different material conditions of congregants' lives and the struggle to inhabit shared spaces across experiences of relative wealth and poverty. To be sent is not only a mandate to proclaim good news; it is also an invitation to seek out new patterns and more truthful arrangements for dwelling and remaining together. Sending requires trust that the Spirit who amplifies sacred space within the grounds of Holy Family also dwells and remains in the places from which the church is gathered, restlessly rearranging zones of security and abandonment, creating the conditions for beauty where social death might otherwise prevail.

Conclusion – The Disabled Church: Beauty and the Consent to a Community of Difference

“How will we live among bodies with whom we do not always share taste, smell, political opinion, or religious ideology, with whom we do not share knowing, psychic or cultural, resonance?”

Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*²⁴⁵

“Together, with little or nothing in common, we pray and sing and walk and talk and believe and lose our beliefs, we understand and have no idea, and practice with one another what we have received from the traditions and that which we invent and add to the traditions.”

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization*²⁴⁶

One morning in Holy Family’s art studios, I wander into Kirby’s room, piled high on all sides with his remarkable art. There are paint bottles strewn over the rug and floor, which themselves have become canvases mottled with blotches and swirls of paint. As I stand beside Kirby, he touches a blank canvas, putting four or five globs of each color in a circle moving inward toward the center of the painting—white, blue, green, yellow, and red. He then swirls the paint to create a movement of gentle wavy color; the edges of the canvas are earth tones with brighter colors at the center. He looks down over his painting for a time. Then, surprising me, he dramatically alters it; he dabs black paint around the outside and then swirls dark swaths of liquid around the edges. The mood of the painting has changed. It looks like a storm. I say this out loud, and he agrees with me although his interpretation later changes. Standing up and looking from a distance over it, he discerns what else is needed, then gets down on his knees, close again to the painting, to add an intense highly textured patch of red here, some green over here, swirling down through

²⁴⁵ Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 81.

²⁴⁶ Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 31.

the center, some more intense yellows at the center. Occasionally, he murmurs, apparently dissatisfied with a turn in his work, but more often he appears satisfied, yet unsure if there is more to add. At one point, he asks if I think the work is done. I find it beautiful, but I cannot say if it is finished. He stares again for a time, and when I ask him if he is done, he tells me that he is still thinking. He props it up so that he can get a different angle of perspective on it. He seems reluctant to judge his creation. Then, abruptly, he is finished. "I'm quitting" he tells me, setting the painting up to dry.

My experience of the painting changes over the course of the hour I watch Kirby; adding just a little bit of color beside another color in the left corner alters my relationship to it. I am aware of the lack of specific criteria available to me to decide if the painting is finished or if a certain color enhances or devalues the painting. There is a sense that Kirby has developed as an artist, something that makes a change in the painting agreeable or disturbing to him. At the same time the colors he uses also surprise him. Kirby and I discuss how the changes in the painting affect us, but there are limits to the language we have with which to describe or evaluate it.

As I watch Kirby paint, I think of Holy Family as something like this canvas, a community created continuously as different people and personalities are added to the art of the liturgy and participate in the color, mood, variation, and texture of community. Unlike Kirby's other paintings—scenes, where life-like figures sit, read, and converse—in his abstract paintings, forms of life are focused into colors that function by virtue of their necessary relationship to one another. Kirby attends to different corners of the painting, thinking about how a patch of red changes the line of blue beside it. The colors themselves are not able or unable, virtuous or deviant, good or evil, but necessarily

constitute the painting. A pattern on the edges shifts the mood of the artwork, what it is able to name or evoke as a whole, and how each part of it fits together.

As I think about my own subjective portrait of Holy Family, I investigate criteria for evaluating it, and the stories, images, and gestures I have chosen to represent it. Who is to say that its liturgy is beautiful or inadequate or that its relationships of difference are hopeful or harmful? Who is to say that it is an institution that is pleasing or troubling to God?

In her analysis of the tensions between art and theology/philosophy, philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch articulates the potentially competing commitments of these disciplines. According to Murdoch, whereas artists are invested in rendering an interpretation of the particular and in conveying the ambiguities of “the whole [person],” theology tends to elevate that which it understands to be good and is fearful that art might distract from the mind’s pursuit of divine truth or reality. In pointing to truth or wisdom, theology and philosophy render judgment of what is good, beautiful, and real in ways that artists often consider unnecessary. Comparing the “purist” tendencies of theology and philosophy with art as a “shameless collaborator”²⁴⁷ Murdoch reminds her readers that “the artist is a great informant, at least a gossip, at best a sage, and much loved in both roles. He lends to the elusive particular a local habitation and a name.”²⁴⁸

In focusing on the artistries of Holy Family, I have rendered a portrait of the church called Holy Family that helps to capture the ambiguities of the whole congregation and yet also encourages my readers to appraise its beauty and fragility. In describing Holy Family, I have drawn attention to the subjective nature of my

²⁴⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 72.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

interpretation, of its location at a particular point in time and from a very particular perspective. At the same time, I maintain its relevance for other religious communities who are envisioning what it means to create a good life together that assumes God as the one who makes common prayer and communal love necessary, possible, and hopeful.

I have attempted to show how the particular artistry of connection at Holy Family lend to an encounter with God “a local habitation and a name.” Yet, I assume that a particular habitation and name make Holy Family no less relevant for those who occupy other particular theological locations. The God who weaves, disrupts, and names Holy Family offers something to other congregations and communities through the gathering and sending of this fragile parish; the questions that emerge from Holy Family’s life together have vital significance beyond the place and time of Holy Family.

For other religious communities invariably require space and time for the differences and disabilities of those who constitute them. Prayer that assumes the power of a unified choreography of human bodies always emerges from a range of human embodiment and the limitations of uniform participation. The question is not whether such differences exist in other communities but whether or not these differences can be desired and assumed rather than tolerated or overlooked.

I have proposed that an aesthetic frame might help theologians pay attention to a gathering that assumes divine presence but does not assume a normative set of abilities or body-minds. This frame might also appraise a liturgical choreography on its own terms and in terms of the particular people who gather. It might be used to discuss the adequacy or inadequacy of liturgical forms inhabited by a congregation as it lives out a relationship with the divine in patterns that do not presuppose uniformity or conformity. Furthermore,

a theological aesthetic might illumine if and why a particular liturgy is beautiful. Beauty, as I will argue in this conclusion, matters because of the faith that difference can be gathered without coercion: beauty both accompanies and testifies to the importance of consent.

Consenting to Be with Another in the Dark and Light of Difference

I have analyzed the communal body of Holy Family in order to ask how these gathered human bodies point to an eschatological horizon of love, one that cannot yet be imagined by those who gather. My exploration begins with a theological assumption that I share with many of the congregants I study. What is not yet experienced at Holy Family is claimed as possible: the faith that difference can be gathered without harm or coercion and without hierarchies based on ability, race, and class.

As I reflect on such faith and its expression and suppression at Holy Family, one of the most important words that emerges in concert with beauty and fragility is consent. This word is highlighted for me in part by my work as a researcher, as I engage a careful process by which I collect “informed consent” from those who contribute to the knowledge I gather and create. I must be mindful about consent both as a carefully delineated process, entailed by my research protocols, and a fluid, interactive process by which I discern a person’s discomfort or dis-ease in the presence of certain topics or questions or in certain spaces or in the presence of certain other people.

Such a process of research discernment has parallels with the discernment involved in consenting to participation in forms of congregational belonging. There are clearly delineated protocols for joining and belonging as a church member, but there are

also subtle practices through which recognition and belonging are performed and negotiated by those who gather. When I discuss my research with those unfamiliar with Holy Family, I sometimes encounter a stereotype that people with psychiatric disabilities must either join a church out of coercion or out of delusion. Such suspicions raise broader questions about what it means for any human person to inhabit a religious community consensually and truthfully. What does it mean to willingly join a Christian church? How does one consent to time and space and form together in light of the challenges of access and desire? How would one track that consent and understand the freedom it entails without losing sight of the constricted choices that any congregation and congregant faces every time human difference is gathered into a common time and space?

By choosing theological aesthetics and ethnographic methods as tools for analyzing Holy Family, I have departed from a frame for consent to community that would mark belonging to a Christian church solely in terms of explicit theological discourse about the identity of Holy Family, or in common beliefs about God that must be claimed by those who come to church. Rather I have argued that a week-long liturgy anticipates God as the one who requires and creates the possibility for relationships and connections between those who gather. The conditions for consensual belonging to Christian community are performed through the amplification of spaces for differences and the disruption of linear notions of time, through artistry that weaves congregants together, and through a struggle for language and recognition with which to claim oneself and others. When and where consent rearranges the possibility for relationships at Holy Family, those who gather find beauty. This beauty must surely bring pleasure to a God for whom each one gathered is a unique and colorful human person.

For in a strain of theological thinking, the categories of beauty and consent are interrelated in a mutually dependent way. Beauty accompanies transformation as a way to map a person's consent to their transformation through immediate pleasure or delight that works non-coercively with human embodiment even in all its variation and social construction. For example, in a community like Holy Family, as one transforms one's ableist assumptions about the way that productivity and efficiency determine the possibilities for a worthy human life, one is also drawn by divine love through desire and pleasure into the life of the community; such a transformed relationship to oneself and others may entail suffering or resistance, but it is not inherently destructive or harmful to the one who engages in it. Beauty marks the possibility that one can be transformed without destroying or harming the person one once was: that a person might change and still be truthful to who they are in the divine light. This does not mean that those who gather at Holy Family never experience harmful thoughts or intentions toward themselves or others, but rather, that a process of belonging to community through mutual consent does not require those who gather to suppress their differences or desires for God's sake.

Beauty functions then as a witness to the non-coercive nature of God; the divine does not force human transformation or destroy something of the human person in order to make them good. Rather, the beautiful accompanies a consent to a deepening or expansion of the abilities of the human person through divine desire for human change. Various theological accounts of beauty name it as an intimate relationship between the accessibility of the immediate pleasures of human life and the heights and depths of what a person might become.

In order to trace some possibilities of this relationship between beauty and consent, I turn now to three theologians who analyze beauty differently and yet help me to articulate the importance of its presence and absence at Holy Family. I briefly explore these articulations of beauty in order to help my readers understand its role in the creation of Holy Family. I then go on to suggest that Holy Family demonstrates aspects of beauty that are not emphasized in these accounts of the beautiful, nor in many theological accounts of a desire for God; I examine the work of beauty in extending liturgical surfaces and confusing liturgical borders or boundaries of ecclesial belonging and identity.

Theologian Simone Weil describes the love of the order and beauty of the world as that which prepares a human person for direct contact with the divine; it is what Weil terms one of four “form[s] of the implicit love of God” along with love of neighbor, love of religious ceremonies, and friendship.²⁴⁹ As Weil puts it, “At the moment when it touches the soul, each of the forms that such love may take has the virtue of a sacrament.”²⁵⁰ Weil associates beauty not primarily with human others in neighbor love or friendship (although justice is beautiful, she claims) nor with religious ceremonies, but with the created world. Like the other forms, the beauty and order of the world is a form of love for God because it elicits the creative attention that expands the abilities of a human mind toward God.²⁵¹

Weil describes beauty as both a surface and “the mouth of a labyrinth” by which God lures human beings to God’s self, both enticing but also refusing to force any kind of

²⁴⁹ Simone Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 83.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 102–103.

love. There is something both infinite and impenetrable to the beautiful order of the world that humans cannot control, manipulate, or use as a means to an end, even if they so desire.²⁵² In this sense, beauty prepares humans for love of God by teaching a divine form of renunciation. Such renunciation is the love by which God consents not to manipulate or coerce God's own creation.²⁵³ Thus, we might say that beauty is the quality through which God regards humankind as theological subjects, beautiful in their own right, rather than theological objects to be used as a mere means for divine purposes.

Beauty for Weil is not only readily accessible to all who encounter it but also transformative. It might release a human person from the illusion that they are the center of the universe and so create an opening for divine love to enter the depths of the soul of that person and to admire the beauty of creation through that person's soul. Beauty is not inherent within matter but is possible through a certain kind of perception. Thus, beauty involves attention to that which is not the self in a way that is also truthful and thus makes the soul more virtuous.²⁵⁴ Beauty prepares the soul for God by helping to increase human virtue.

Theologian Jonathan Edwards also associates the theological category of beauty with "the nature of true virtue" by which humans consent to the being of any and all others, not only those they personally know or are related to through kinship bonds. Like Weil, Edwards emphasizes a depth that beauty invites because of its impersonal dimension; it is that which cultivates human desire for that which is not us or ours, or immediately related to us, because through it we come to understand our unity with all

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 105–106.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 99, 115–116.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 99–100, 104–106.

that exists. As Edwards explains, “Beauty does not consist in discord and dissent, but in consent and agreement. And if every intelligent being is some way related to being in general, and is a part of some universal system of existence; and so stands in connection with the whole; what can its general and true beauty be, but its union and consent with the great whole?”²⁵⁵ For Edwards this consent is only possible through an intelligence and a love that is like God’s, an indiscriminate love for everything that exists and a benevolence toward it. Edwards contemplates how this kind of love might go against human nature, as he considers human proclivities to protect and love that which is dearest, most proximate, and most familiar at the expense of a more general consent to any and all beings. It is only by loving God, who loves and consents to all that exists, that such far-reaching and public, rather than private love grows within life.²⁵⁶ Yet, Edwards argues that God has made the world and humankind in such a way, so that what is good for us (love for all that exists) is also beautiful to us, bringing some immediate sweetness and gratitude, even if such consent is also difficult and impossible without divine redemption which makes such beauty possible.²⁵⁷

If Weil and Edwards trace the pleasures of the beautiful as necessary accompaniments to the challenges of truth, virtue, and justice presented by divine love, then theologian James Cone writes of the discomfort and anguish of beauty as an accompaniment to the unimaginable suffering in black existence.²⁵⁸ Describing black

²⁵⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, reprint edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 4.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14–18.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

²⁵⁸ Just as disability scholars and activists often warn against reducing disability experience to tragedy and/or inspiration, so there is also a danger in identifying black experience solely with suffering and resistance. See Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 91.

artists as “society’s ritual priests and prophets, seeking out the meaning of black experience in a world defined by white supremacy,” Cone writes about the moral imagination to make explicit connections between the cross of Christ and the lynching tree in American history.²⁵⁹ He argues that by conveying the beauty in black bodies lynched and beaten, these artists refused the supremacy of white brutality: “The beauty in black existence is as real as the brutality, and the beauty prevents the brutality from having the final word.”²⁶⁰ Such beauty is made evident through attention to black subjectivity, dignity, communal suffering, and spiritual agency rather than interpreting suffering as the helplessness of black victims.²⁶¹ While Cone does not use the language of consent, focusing instead on the deep discomfort and outrage that such beauty in brutality brings, he describes beauty as that which must be acknowledged in order to bear witness to the truth of black suffering. The moral imagination required to see the lynching tree as the cross, and vice versa, emerges from an artist’s ability to expose the ugliness of brutality without dividing it from the beauty of black experience. Cone links the beautiful in black life with a transformation of perception and imagination that enables black artists to see the world as subversively as God does, whether or not they profess any explicit Christian practices or commitments.

In different ways Weil, Edwards, and Cone evoke the power of the beautiful as a relational quality, that which connects the one who perceives with the one perceived, while not conflating the two positions. Consent to the love of God through nature, consent to the love of God for all that exists, and consent to engage the divinity and

²⁵⁹ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 94.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

humanity in black suffering all require the recognition of belonging to another whose right to existence is marked as beautiful by divine presence. All three theologians describe the work of beauty as a catalyst in the moral transformation of those who consent to their own lives and to the lives of others through the desire of God for all that God has created. Beauty animates connection through desire and respect rather than pity or charity. Beauty is thus the principle by which God weaves human pleasure, desire, and wonder into divine desire for God's creation to struggle and dwell together in light of a common good.

Beauty and the Surfaces of Space and Time and Form

If we follow the claims of these three theologians and consider beauty as an accompaniment to love, truth, suffering, and human connection, one way to look for beauty at Holy Family is to bear witness to the moral transformation of individuals through their participation over time in the community of Holy Family. Pursuing such an approach, I might trace beauty through narratives and practices that bear witness to altered depths of understanding, focusing on new or restored mental patterns or greater awareness or evidence of love of God and others. Following Weil, Edwards, or Cone, I would ask if and how the beauty of Holy Family results in greater human abilities: obedience to and love for God, or an opening within the self that consents to compassion for others, or an altered moral imagination. Pursuing this path to beauty and marking its presence or absence, I would lift up, as I have throughout this dissertation, ways that people have talked about their own transformation or their struggle as participants in Holy Family. I would bear witness to the ongoing formation or malformation of

individuals at Holy Family through the particular aesthetics of the community's gathering.

While I believe my dissertation bears witness to Holy Family as a place of hopeful transformation for some who are a part of it, my research reveals the difficulties of tracing such formation through particular behaviors or narratives for a number of reasons. Those who gather were and are complex narrators of their own experience, as are most human beings. The same person who tells me how much she loves Holy Family suddenly stops coming or offers a contradictory narrative at another time. Another has little to say about what they find in the community but returns again and again to be part of it. Some who have been at Holy Family the longest are also the ones most willing to treat others in ways that appear condescending rather than beautiful, even if they are also the most sacrificially committed to the well-being of those who come. Narratives and behaviors may be difficult to integrate into any kind of coherent witness or evidence to a depth of communal formation over time.

As an ethnographic theologian spending three years with this community, I also find it difficult to map the kinds of transformation over time that some theological anthropologies imply. Someone might testify to an altered perception or relationship with those whom they would have disregarded prior to Holy Family, but it is difficult to measure the impact that is claimed. I have limited access to the range of encounters across ability, race, and class that occur outside the space and time of Holy Family. I also find that my own interpretations as a researcher fluctuate over time: there are days and weeks when I am filled with hope and gratitude for the life of Holy Family and the kinds

of encounters and relationships it makes possible. There are days when I doubt its abilities to bear witness to a liturgy without segregationist charity.

While I do not doubt that the beauty of Holy Family, however it appears, affects the formation over time of some individuals, Holy Family's life together has drawn my attention throughout this dissertation to a different work of beauty. Rather than contemplating human relationships through metaphors of depth, I have been compelled again and again by the surfaces of interaction that make Holy Family possible. While these surfaces reveal beauty in ways that resonate with Weil, Edwards, and Cone's descriptions, they also help to capture a different theological aspect of beauty. Rather than focusing on the transformation of individuals or communities through a focus on the interiorities or capacities of persons, I have discovered theological significance in the spaces between and among those who gather, as they together alter assumptions about common space and time and form. Holy Family illumines human embodiment as made of sensory surfaces with theological significance because of their necessity in any relationship with God and others. I have attempted to convey how that which is experienced as beautiful by individuals within the community, whatever these forms may be, extends the space and time of the community and stretches out forms of encounter, making them more accessible.²⁶² I have been drawn to what becomes possible through shared beauty between and among those who gather.

This kind of access requires consent to the differences in the body-minds who gather. Such interactions may not have an ethical or moral intention, or demonstrate a studied self-awareness by those who pursue them, or require a focused attention often

²⁶² Betcher describes the importance of "a disability aesthetic that practices 'ethical width'" drawing on religious images of the width of divine mercy. Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 67.

attributed to those who most manifest the goodness or virtues of one transformed by love of God. Yet, they are no less important for thinking about the relationship between beauty and consent to a divine love that binds those together who would otherwise not recognize or acknowledge their belonging to one another. In other words, eating hot dogs side by side or sharing a cigarette or talking about pop songs by the church entrance or weeding together in the church garden or drawing pictures of teddy bears during church may or may not make the individuals who partake in these interactions wiser or more generous or more compassionate human beings than they were before these actions; nonetheless, they are significant in the relatedness they constitute and in the creation of access to relationships which is fundamental to Holy Family's life together. The artistry of interpersonal connection are beautiful because they consent to common space and time and persistently invite others into the creation of a life together that I have been calling liturgy.

I think, for example, of a conversation I had with Mother Daria about a sermon she gave on Easter Sunday. She began the sermon with an invitation to name your favorite dessert, an activity that would seem to require little spiritual depth, attention, virtue, or moral imagination. She remembers her dessert illustration eliciting an intense and active response from the congregation. At that point in her sermon she sensed that the congregation was able to follow her thoughts and actively engage one another through each one's sensory experiences. Might her opening illustration have been as important as the body of the argument, a careful and creative interpretation of the Easter text for that day about the different ways we experience God through different senses and sensibilities? She voices this question to me when we talk about the sermon together. She

reasons aloud: “at its core, Episcopal worship is about common prayer so if the prayer cannot be commonly held, then it’s missing the point. It’s not meeting the needs of the community. I don’t think that means that we do whatever and just anything. It has to be intentional, but I think there are ways it can meet the needs of the community and make sense, ultimately, and if it’s not making sense, then there’s a question.” At Holy Family the artistry of interpersonal connection help to make sense of difference. One consents to particular others within the community through creating small common spaces and times into which different congregants are invited, known, and held within the larger common prayer.

Each of the previous chapters has considered a different aspect of this consent. In chapter 1, I analyzed how mental disability once gathered at Holy Family helps to transform the space of the community through the creation of multiple, decentered, common spaces across the landscape of the church. I attempted to convey that what is beautiful about these spaces lies both in the kinds of interactions that are possible in each but also, and perhaps more so, in the plurality of access points. At the same time, I considered the danger that decentered liturgical spaces become a means of coercion through their segregation. I argued for the beauty of a liturgy in places that unfold rather than divide. A plurality of access points is beautiful in their provision for the different needs and body-minds of those who gather and who desire to belong to the congregation.

In chapter 2, the art forms at Holy Family are beautiful because they consent to proximity. As I describe the artistry of interpersonal connection, they both refuse the distance and fear of segregationist charity while also creating fluid and flexible forms of belonging for those who gather and at times require distance from one another. I offered

weaving as a metaphor to describe the interactions through which congregants consent to proximity with one another, particularly in light of the inaccessibility of some of the assumed liturgical forms. Different kinds of embodied minds are perceived and experienced as beautiful within a flexible and adaptive liturgy. What and who is woven into community is experienced as beautiful when the forms of gathering refuse coercive or dismissive words or gestures that deny the sacredness of each one who gathers. Rather, the beauty of such proximity relies on intuitive modes of interaction that reflect the abilities and disabilities of those who gather.

Thus, I described “art forms” of the community as improvised artistries of interpersonal connection that respond to ostensible barriers of verbal communication and reflect the patterns through which mental disability transforms more standard forms of liturgical communication including text, sermon, dialogue, prayer, and confession. Such artistries are a necessary craft for liturgy as prayer or work or holy play. The challenges of difference interrogate the relationship between form and content, drawing as much attention to surfaces of communal interaction as to the profound wisdom of liturgical language.

In chapter 3, I analyzed how time might be experienced as both beautiful and unbearable through different kinds of relationships to it. I focused on the role of disruption and the way it draws attention to different senses of time experienced by those who gather as the employed and unemployed. While ostensible disruptions to anticipated or familiar rhythms may cause tensions among those who gather, they also make palpable the time required for a gathering of difference. I argued for the intersections of eschatological time and crip time as a possible window into the consent to ample time

that liturgy assumes. I described the theological work of sensory pleasure in the hope for a capacious sense of liturgical time. Consent to pleasure marks the beauty of engaging liturgy as a work that is not efficient; it is not driven by an agenda to accomplish certain liturgical practices or objectives as a measure of productive time. Rather, it assumes the generosity of divine time as enough time for the differences that compose a congregation.

If chapters 1, 2, and 3 traced beauty through a theological aesthetics that informs consent to shared space, form, and time, chapters 4 and 5 reflected on the dissent from proximity that is both part of Holy Family's inheritance and its fragility. Chapter 4 suggested that distances between some groups and others within the church are accentuated through the struggle for adequate names. Such distances between people result in experiences of naming and being called names that can feel dismissive or untruthful to those who use them or are defined by them. At the same time, I described the beauty experienced by the community when an accumulation of names feels adequate to the life named by it. I imagined the beauty of adequate names as a form through which God draws forth a desire for more consensual and less coercive relationships among those who gather. The possibility of such naming practices requires the consent to common space, time, and form made hopeful by other aspects of Holy Family's liturgy.

If chapter 4 analyzed metaphorical distance and power asymmetries that occur through naming practices within a community, chapter 5 lamented the harmful physical distances that occur between some lives and others outside the space and time of the church. Any beauty at Holy Family appears fragile in light of the structures outside the church that limit consent to a common political and social good. Thus, the sending that is assumed to be beautiful in its empowerment of each individual to change their world for

the better is called into question by any false assumptions about autonomy. There is no beauty in sending if sending does not acknowledge the sometimes brutal or abusive circumstances into which congregants are sent. Beauty attends to such suffering and fosters a dream of rearranging the conditions, the commodification, and the devaluing of human life, under which such brutality and neglect persists. In this sense, beauty is what Pinn names a “creative disregard” for the hierarchies that elevate the worth of some lives over others.

Can the Beautiful Raise Hell?

How then to think about the beauty and fragility of Holy Family? If the consent to extending the surfaces of common space, time, and form is revealed as bounded and limited by coercive structures, is it still possible to name Holy Family as beautiful? To assume that beautiful consent is important and even essential to this church’s life requires faith. It is not evident from the pleasures of manicures and pedicures that very different congregants actually consent to another’s way of being in the world. To use Fulkerson’s term, “obliviousness” to the hierarchies of wealth and ability persists.²⁶³ Furthermore, such hierarchies, and the artistry that bridge them, occur among people who have very few choices about where and how they can live and with whom; to describe beauty as consent to being together must take this systematic oppression into account. Betcher reminds us of the challenge to Christian practice if our work is not always pleasurable but also requires us “to live with pain in such a way that it does not sever or cut

²⁶³ Fulkerson calls obliviousness, “a form of not-seeing that is not primarily intentional but reflexive. As such it occurs on an experiential continuum ranging from benign to a subconscious or repressed protection of power.” Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 19.

insurmountable chasms through the city but might support the emergence of social flesh.”²⁶⁴ Any account of beauty must acknowledge the need for dissent from the subtle logic of segregation and degradation that are also fostered through the assumed “safety” of shared spaces, times, and forms.

As a participant-observer, I have sustained a faith in the beauty of Holy Family. I have also nurtured doubts during the years of my research. I have asked: what makes significant these sensations, enjoyed in common, in light of a city where some are kept at a distance from others, and where cities are made beautiful by obscuring the perceived ugliness of those considered undesirable and unproductive? Is the church another place to hide the sensations of people that others would prefer not to encounter? In chapter five, I discussed how Lloyd and others at Holy Family struggle to know how to “raise hell” about how some congregants are treated and perceived. How does the church reveal the beauty of its congregants? I argued that many at Holy Family desire to transform public perception, but beauty often remains hidden within the church grounds.

Yet I believe that “silently raising hell” at Holy Family begins with small, elusive circles of consent to interdependence. These circles trouble the boundaries in cities and churches that mark which kinds of lives and minds are worth loving and protecting. By occupying a rare relation in this city, Holy Family congregants not only help one another, but sit down and enjoy space and time (and not working) together. They take uncommon pleasure in the everyday objects, encounters, and relationships they hold up to the light.

When I sit with Pete during a service of Holy Eucharist, he grabs my hand, rocks back and forth, crying and laughing over a familiar hymn. He stares straight at my lips as

²⁶⁴ Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 77.

I sing, standing close to me so that he can feel my singing even though he does not sing. Most of our communication involves gesture because I struggle to make out the phrases he speaks to me. One evening, during the Eucharistic prayer, I hear his words with remarkable clarity. “I can smell the beans cooking!” he announces with a mischievous smile. Pete smells the ingredients of a common meal wafting up from the basement through the sanctuary floor and shares his pleasure with me. In doing so, he calls to me from outside my own sense of what prayer to God should entail, expanding the surfaces of this gathering in which his unconventional participation becomes beautiful. The arts of becoming a disabled church at Holy Family suggest that these expanding surfaces of shared relationship and communication are a pleasure and a struggle. The stretching of such beautiful surfaces requires those with and without psychiatric disabilities, a work of extending community that is unfinished but possible.²⁶⁵

Holy Family sheds light on this struggle because of the way its fragile beauty draws attention to the importance of that which might be taken for granted or judged as superficial rather than essential to Christian liturgy: both what may be held in common and the unconventional differences that accentuate common forms. When I recall Holy Family, the images that first come to mind are sharing a bench, eating across the table from another person as we grasp at topics for conversation, whispering with another during church, holding a hymn book with another, or sitting with a vague awareness of another sleeping beside me. Like an attempt to grasp the beauty of the world and hold it,

²⁶⁵ What I describe as extending and stretching the surfaces of a liturgy, Betcher might identify as social flesh. She identifies flesh as “a plane on which bodies encounter one another and become involved, entangled.” *Ibid.*, 158.

the search for accessible forms is both elusive and essential to community at Holy Family.

The range of differences gathered at Holy Family reveal a humanity “at full stretch” to borrow Saliers’s description of Christian liturgy.²⁶⁶ Actions and relations that can be held in common become beautiful even if they do not contain the same associations of “depth” often used to describe profound and meaningful human interaction or virtuous Christian identity or good liturgy. Thus, as I look forward to conversations or interactions that might have felt strange or superficial to me in another context, these encounters become easy and pleasurable because through them those who gather experience and manifest a connection to others. I suggest that God is as present in such interactions as God is in a time of reverent, sustained prayer, or in a complex and attentive theological discussion with a wise friend, or in a contemplative reading of the Bible, or in a gathering of those mobilizing for justice work.

“What do you need in order to have church?” In *Holy Things*, Lathrop reminds us that centerpieces of Christian worship—baptism, Eucharist, preaching, and reading Scripture—are intimately connected to the most ordinary actions and objects in human communities—water, a bath, a table, a meal, a loaf of bread, wine, storytelling, clothing, a candle.²⁶⁷ The liturgical task of those who gather, he argues, is to unfold (or break open) the meaning of common things, common both in the sense that they are ordinary and that they are sacred because they are given by God as a center of human interaction to be animated by divine love through a worshipping body: “The gathering is to do something, to set these symbolic objects in motion, to weave them into a pattern of

²⁶⁶ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 212.

²⁶⁷ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 88–97.

meaning. People do not gather at water only, but at a bath, and a bath interpreted by words and by other things set next to the bathing—anointing oil, a burning candle, welcoming hands, new clothing.”²⁶⁸ In Lathrop’s understanding the objects gain new depth of meaning as they are juxtaposed and reanimated by other people and objects in a traditional yet creative liturgical pattern.

What do you need in order to have a church that assumes difference at its heart? At Holy Family the water, the table, the bread, and the word are given life by artistries of connection that expand the surfaces of an extended liturgy. The sermon is interpolated by jokes or commentary, and it functions better as a story than as a lecture because of these patterns. A service of Holy Eucharist is most often set alongside another meal happening outside of the sanctuary doors, which is as significant as the meal inside the sanctuary to those who gather. What animates these basic actions, these “holy things for holy people” are the differences, both the remarkable stories and sorrows of those who gather. By drawing attention to such basic objects and gestures, these patterns also suggest the intersections of pleasure and discipline that might help to further decenter Holy Family’s liturgy: the ongoing creation of public spaces for common acts of sharing food and storytelling and the sharing of private home spaces for these same pleasures. The beauty of shared surfaces at Holy Family both blurs the borders of where liturgy begins and ends and, at the same time, invites the community who gathers to stretch out liturgical time and space in order to nourish and protect the lives of all who gather and are sent.

While Holy Family is not ostensibly involved in the transformation of political and social structures that affect the daily lives of those it gathers, it bears witness in

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 88–89.

important ways to the value and devaluing of the lives of its congregants. In its life together, it traces the importance of both access and consent in the ongoing creation of space and time for those who gather and in the calling into question of liturgical aesthetics used to mark those not fit for any ecclesial choreography. In this way beauty helps to illumine what Cláudio Carvalhaes names “the borderless border” of Christian liturgy: that place recognizable to those who worship God within it and to those who seek a place of welcome from outside it and yet flexible and creative enough to respond to the differences of those who enter.²⁶⁹

The “borderless border” of Christian worship is an elusive space because liturgy is always embodied and therefore inherently bordered. Carvalhaes names five different kinds of borders that mark any Christian liturgy, with a particular focus on the Eucharistic table: ecclesiastical borders that articulate the norm and standards of who belongs to the church; theological borders which give content to any given definition of Christian church; liturgical borders which locate worship of God in particular time and space and dictate shared rituals; social/economic borders where social class often determines who is found within a given liturgical border; and political borders which reflect economic, social, and political commitments that affect liturgical identity.²⁷⁰

Given these multiple borders in any liturgy, Carvalhaes suggests that a primary task of Christian liturgy is to work with and around the borders, to continually negotiate them in memory of God who becomes “our permanent home” and in whom those who might lose themselves in the negotiation of these borders will always be found and

²⁶⁹ Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization*, 13.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

held.²⁷¹ A God who is not contained or limited by liturgical borders is nevertheless found within them and is known in exploration of the “borderless border” of that which is God. For belonging to those who are God’s is both impossible to define and always defined in some way by the words, gestures, silence, and practices of those who gather. Even if “all are welcome,” as so many Christian churches proclaim, the theological aesthetics of a community, or what Eiesland calls the “body practices” of a liturgy, create and maintain a “physical discourse of inclusion and exclusion.”²⁷² These borders also provide connection to God and to other Christians across time and space and make possible a prayer to God with other bodies in meaningful, intimate, and familiar ways.

Yet liturgical borders are and always have been contested by the differences of those who gather. As Carvalhaes reminds us, “It is within these blurred, complicated, and interconnected borders that liturgical practices and spaces must engage and be engaged. The messy, nervous, and uneasy interrelations of these borders are a challenge to every Christian believer and privileged place for the field of worship.”²⁷³ I would argue that these uneasy liturgical boundaries are also an important place for tracing the work of beauty and disability. Where beauty opens a border that might result in coercion or harm, the artistry of relationships and improvised collaborations must emerge to hold and incorporate human variation across these possible divides.

I am reminded of this blurred, messy, beautiful border one Sunday morning when I walk to Holy Family for the baptism of a young child after almost a month of absence from the congregation. I walk past the smoking benches and greet a man standing there

²⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

²⁷² Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 112.

²⁷³ Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization*, 17.

alone outside the church, whom I do not recognize. He turns his back to me, refusing my greeting, preserving his right to the silence of that space. Once inside the sanctuary, Forest rushes back to greet me with a bump of his fist, refusing any distance I might preserve around myself, announcing my return to the church.

I notice that the church is filled with strangers; the family and friends of the one to be baptized fill the front section in places of honor. These honored guests struggle to keep up with the songs, hymns, and prayers in the same way that many of the regular disabled congregants do. I witness a common struggle between guests and Circle congregants to fully participate in the standard forms of the service. At the same time, the dress and comportment of these guests also mark them as distinct from Holy Family folk; a socioeconomic border appears in the differing aesthetics of those who gather. Holy Family congregants must share a liturgy with no assurance that those who gather do not regard them with pity or condescension.

As I listen to the sermon and witness to the baptism of a child of God, on one side of me sits Mr. Davis. He tells me he is sick and proceeds to fall asleep. On the other side, Debbie shares a book with me and follows with me as best she can. But when the sermon feels long, she seems to register the restlessness in the congregation, stands up, and begins to sing a solo during the sermon as she might during noonday prayer. Someone from the back rushes up to quiet her. I pat her back.

Debbie is not the only restless one; in front of us four small children, guests of the church, crowd into three seats. One of them covers all the words in the bulletin with a purple crayon making it impossible to read the order of service. Two others begin to measure each other's faces with their hands. They whisper to one another; they arrange

their toys over the seats and on the floor. Eventually, because they cannot see the front of the sanctuary, they spill out into the aisle to get a better look at the baby; they are then invited to the front so that they can witness the baptism up close. I look at those who surround me, Mr. Davis, Debbie, and the children, and acknowledge that we have no direct access to the sermon, the baptism, and the Holy Eucharist except with and through the border of those who help to constitute the liturgy with us. Such interrelations can be difficult, distracting, or distancing, but they can also become beautiful in a consent to each other's right to occupy a shared space and time and to do so in a manner fitting to each.

Whom do we need in order to have a church that assumes difference at its heart? In this dissertation I have proposed an answer to this question: at the heart of any Christian liturgy are people whom we would not otherwise choose to surround us and a fragile system of human communication by which we consent to the relationships that are a given of any religious ritual. At Holy Family mental disability makes clear both the fragility of human connection that is a requisite for any love of God and the persistent beauty of this connection as the gathered ones find, create, and manifest forms for communal love and knowledge of God. Thus, access is sacred and essential, not just something it would be good to have if possible and feasible: the access of one to and through another reveals the sacred arts of being human in relationship with the divine. In the "creative disregard" for certain borders (silence during the sermon, wakefulness as essential to presence in worship), the community consents to the possibility of different kinds of human beings sharing a common space and time. Thus, mental difference

reveals the elusive spaces of the “borderless border” and its ongoing creation and animation through artistry of connection that are essential to any worship of God.

I am arguing that the God for whom human difference is ordinary rather than aberrational makes possible the elusiveness of an accessible life together, one that we are able to share not in spite of but through human differences. The animate border of the liturgy, possible in and through creative, consensual relationships, is beautiful as a community consents to an understanding of divine love manifest not only through what is held in common but through what diverges, distracts, and extends the surfaces of hospitality and community. That the access of one might not limit the worship of another is a testament to the non-violence of the beauty of God. Borderless borders become beautiful, rather than frightening or irritating, when those who gather consent to one another through their creative disregard of the segregationist charity that would separate them not only from other humans or from the rest of creation but also from access to the beauty of God.

Thus, for example, Kayla and Rose’s solo performances at noonday prayer bring the most delight to the congregation when they appear at ease within a form of love for God that fills them with pleasure. Even when this singing appears disruptive to some people in some contexts, it still carries a beauty for many in the congregation because of the way it both creates access for Kayla and Rose to the community’s common prayer and gives access to Kayla and Rose’s worship for those who witness their singing. Performances like theirs help to rearrange the meanings of not only noonday prayer but any space where they assume the roles of those who can offer something pleasing to God.

For to meditate theologically on the “borderless border” of the disabled God in Christian thought is to follow a Trinitarian aesthetic. Incarnate God takes a particular human shape and time, assuming and requiring an imperfect body. The memory of Jesus, led by the Spirit, lends a particular shape to worship and informs the prayers and embodiment of a church as the flesh of Christ. At the same time there is no life without the Spirit of Christ, the Breath, the Ghost, the Advocate, who animates the body of Jesus and the flesh of the church, creating new possibilities for human life and for access to God and human community. The Spirit moves freely and with ease across the permeable border of Christian communal gathering, animates its beauty in the bodies of those who gather, and informs the consent to one another and disregard for the ostensibly impermeable liturgical borders of those who gather. To acknowledge such inspired, interanimate borders as necessary because Christian liturgy requires an “endless preparation with those who are there and those who are yet to come” as one “made of connections with what we know, what we have and what we find around us. In this sense to constantly create a borderless border hospitable liturgy is a theological Sisyphean task of creating, relocating, connecting and dismantling borders.”²⁷⁴

Creating Space and Time for the Beauty of Belonging

What does it mean to consent to participate in a community, parish, or church: to belong to that which by definition is both bordered and in flux and in which access is both continually created by those who gather and also frequently denied? Such questions often characterize the Circle community meetings that take place two to three times a

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 31.

year. In addition to welcoming new participants, making general announcements, fielding complaints, and resolving conflicts that arise, church staff often facilitate time for a discussion about what it means to be the Friendship Circle of Holy Family. Such guided discussions, intended to improve weekly programs and to help those who try to raise funds for those programs, often result in circuitous and meandering, albeit energetic discussions as congregants both respond to and redirect the dialogue. The results, some of which are usually captured on a white board by a volunteer scribe, are more like Kirby's process of creating an abstract painting than like a focused mission statement or set of program goals that clearly define the church and its objectives.

Where would you be if you were not here? Neil asks one Thursday morning to the group gathered in the sanctuary. The answers are multiple and give no assurance to the benefit of Holy Family to those who come: in bed, at work, sweeping at Goodwill, watching Western movies, at home calling friends, trying to get out of the house, thinking about coming here to do something, at school learning life skills, at home, reading the Bible and praying, at the library trying to get a job, at an amusement park, visiting friends, going to another church, at a peer center, or bored and helping other people.

Will the Circle ever be five days a week? One woman wants to know, wishing to be here every day.

Neil then asks the community to compare Holy Family's programs to other programs they have attended. At first the responses are more focused, moving toward a definition of Holy Family. Wallace suggests that there are new experiences in life here; you get out what you put in it. Marji talks about nutritious meals rather than the balogna sandwiches. Lucille names church and prayer as unique aspects of Holy Family. Brittany

talks about the fact that although there are no doctors here, she is treated better here than in other places and has more chances for success. Norah suggests that this community is about finding joy rather than meeting goals.

But quickly the discussion turns to the topic of whether or not Holy Family is a cult, as some outside the church have described it, according to one of the participants. There is then a vigorous refutation of Holy Family as a cult based on the diversity of those who gather, which leads to a process of self-identifying among those present. Most identify as Christians, but Marji describes herself as an atheist turned deist who really loves Mother Flora's sermons. Chad argues that God does it, and we don't. Lucille admits that you could call her a Baptist, but she identifies as a follower of Christ. As participants negotiate their relationships to Holy Family and to the Christian church in multiple ways, there is no clear definition of who is inside and outside of what makes Holy Family its own unique place, both a church and not a church.

As we begin to discuss the third question about how Holy Family has impacted your life, Annie leans over to me and expresses her delight, "I like this!"

"What do you like?" I inquire.

"Everything that they're talking about. I thought I would be bored but I'm not. Friendship. Love. The clothes closet." I suddenly notice that she has put her drawings and writings away, those tools that usually help her to navigate most church services and meetings. She responds to this community meeting with a direction and intensity that I find unusual. Later I surmise that somewhere in this circuitous conversation, concerning the myriad ways that those who gather consent to a shared community with one another, Annie discovers a space and time for her own mental patterns, for her frame for

belonging at Holy Family, and she is drawn into the energy of this discussion. Through Annie's delight and curiosity, I witness something beautiful about the controlled chaos of community meeting and the resonance it creates in her and others. Together we marvel at the beautiful opening of an accessible space for bearing witness to what kind of world one comes from and what kind of community one would like to imagine oneself creating alongside others.

In the fragile hope for a capacious and beautiful liturgy that assumes and desires mental differences like those of Annie's and my own, I offer this limited depiction of Holy Family. It is my hope that this one dissertation portrait of Holy Family, among the many other portrayals that could be rendered, will inspire those who read it to consent to the beauty of shared ecclesial and social spaces with those whose differences stretch their love and knowledge of both human and divine. I hope it may also inspire those with mental disabilities to participate in extending the breadth of the beauty of what counts as sacred liturgy. My desire is to contribute in some way to the extension, creation, and preservation of spaces, times, and relationships within which we hold one another before God, in our communities, and in our cities.

Postscript

Inspired by Holy Family, I follow an associative pattern of thinking and arrive at another memory. Annie's energetic response to community meeting reminds me of another conversation, this dialogue in the garden with Clyde and Joshua. When I go back and read my fieldnotes, I am moved by the fragility of this moment in time, knowing as I do now that Joshua and his household will be lost to Holy Family within a year. They are

not yet found as I finish this conclusion although some in the congregation continue to hold out hope and work to find them.

As we talk side by side that day in the garden, Clyde wants to discuss what gives us energy and helps us to be productive. Joshua admits that it is most often coffee and cigarettes that help him get through his work in the garden. I say that writing is the most difficult thing I do now, and Clyde wants to know why it is difficult. Is it hard to tell the truth? he suggests. I agree that it is difficult to be truthful in that it is hard to find the right words to express what I want to about this community. Clyde empathizes with this struggle by describing his own challenge of writing honest self-assessments for a mental health program he is taking part in. I ask what helps him during his writing process, and he claims that knowing that he is writing for people who know him and for people who might understand what he is trying to say helps him to write more truthfully. Clyde's hopes resonate with my own. I have tried to write both imaginatively and truthfully in the trust that those who read will understand and will, therefore, neither romanticize nor disparage the gathering that is Holy Family but take hope and creativity from it. Although I write for people that do not know me or those at Holy Family, I trust in the possibility of sharing knowledge and creative energy through the words of these pages. I acknowledge the Beauty that makes possible not only the ongoing creation of Holy Family but that also makes this dissertation a hopeful endeavor.

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