
Taste and See that the Lord is Good: Religious Trauma, Ritual Leadership and Communion

Brooke Petersen

*John H. Tietjen Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care, Director of Master's Programs, and Coordinator for Candidacy
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois*

When I was trained as a pastor, I remember well how anxious we all felt about our worship leadership classes. It was undoubtedly a new thing for many of us to stand in front of peers and professors while holding our arms in the correct *orans* posture, making sure to never let our thumbs flair out. When to move your body or adjust your arms was at the center of our discussions outside of class; more than a few of us likely stood in front of bathroom mirrors to see how we looked as we moved into this new stage of pastoral training.

Our work, understandably, was often very self-focused, because we were sure it was through our bodies that the people we imagined in future congregations would know that God was present in the rituals of the church. The essence of these rituals was God's goodness, forgiveness, and love, and we didn't want our arms or our hands to distract from something that God was doing. And yet, I found that most of our conversations and practice sessions were so focused on the bodies of the minister, while they were much less focused on what might be happening in the bodies of those *in* the pews. What were they feeling as we stood in front of them? What were *their* bodies telling them about what was happening, and what could *their* bodies tell *us* about what was happening in all of us gathered for worship?

It wasn't until I started working as a psychotherapist with people who had experienced religious trauma that I felt a shift in my focus. Often as I worked with a client planning to return home to a congregation or a family that was a site of a religiously traumatic past, we would talk at length about what they wanted to do when the time came for communion. Would they sit in the pew and refuse to participate? Would they step forward even though they couldn't be sure that when they reached the pastor that person would deign to give them bread or wine? These feelings also showed up in the bodies of people who were making initial steps to return to progressive religious communities. They wanted to know what would happen if they stepped forward during communion. Would they cry the whole time? Would they be able to choke down the bread? What if they panicked? What did it mean

Often as I worked with a client planning to return home to a congregation or a family that was a site of a religiously traumatic past, we would talk at length about what they wanted to do when the time came for communion.

to participate in this ritual in this new place if in other congregations these symbols of God were refused to them?

It is with these stories in mind that this article will explore the intersection of religious trauma and the sacrament of communion. To be faithful to the call of God to leadership in ministry, we must practice trauma-informed ritual leadership, particularly in the ritual of communion. As Julie Prey-Harbaugh argues, communion is a ritual that reaches toward the "mystery of God's profound healing power" and when we are trauma-informed in our ritual leadership, we have the opportunity to use this sacrament to instill profound hope in the lives of our people.¹ I will first begin by exploring how we might think about religious trauma as a concept before making a connection between religious trauma and the ritual practices of communion. Finally, I will offer some constructive ideas about how we might engage the ritual of communion to support the continued healing and growth of people who have experienced religious trauma.

1. Julie Prey-Harbaugh, "A Lord's Supper Liturgy for Survivors of Trauma: On Sacramental Healing," *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, 5:4, 2004: 29-49, DOI: [10.1300/J154v05n04_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J154v05n04_04).

Spiritual abuse, religious trauma, and frameworks for trauma diagnoses

Judith Herman argues in *Trauma and Recovery* that “the study of psychological trauma has a curious history—one of episodic amnesia.”² The study of trauma, and its popularity in cultural conversation tends to ebb and flow because the very study of trauma requires us to come in contact with the most vulnerable and horrifying aspects of our human existence. The cultural conversation parallels what is often happening in the bodies of those who have been traumatized; when we get too close to the traumatic wound, there is a strong pull toward dissociation and denial. In the same way, we protect ourselves, just as victims of trauma do, by pushing engagement with the events of trauma aside.

As one explores contemporary cultural conversations about trauma, it is hard to deny the ubiquity of the concept. From podcasts to talk shows, trauma, its impact and possibility for recovery, seems to be central to understanding what is happening to people in their families, relationships, and workplaces. Fears raised by COVID-19 and the death of nearly 7 million people world-wide brought conversations about collective trauma to our dinner tables as people across the world weighed what felt safe and what felt terrifying in new ways.³ Collective trauma is all around us.

Yet, much of our language around trauma centers on what Maria P.P. Root refers to as “direct traumas.”⁴ These kinds of traumas, whether individual or collective, form the basis of the accepted view of post-traumatic stress disorder—experiences of violence, war, natural disasters, sexual assault and abuse, etc. We expect the life of the traumatized to be in a state of upheaval after a direct trauma; it makes sense that their lives have been changed by the event.

However, beyond direct traumas, Root advances the argument for additional categories of trauma. Indirect trauma, for Root, includes secondary trauma—witnessing trauma or being “traumatized by the trauma sustained by another, with whom one identifies in some significant way.”⁵ Indirect trauma, such as the internal reaction many LGBTQIA+ people described after the 2016 massacre at Pulse nightclub in Orlando where more than fifty people were murdered or the 2022 mass shooting at Club Q in Colorado, both popular queer nightclubs, are prime examples of this indirect trauma. For Root, LGBTQIA+ people who experienced indirect trauma as a result of the news of these shootings, despite not being present for the shooting itself, are often seen as reacting in an out-of-proportion manner to the event. Their response may be dismissed or seen as a personal failing of character

2. J. L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic-Books, 1997), 7.

3. K. Lonsdorf, “People are developing trauma-like symptoms as the pandemic wears on” NPR April 7, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/07/1087195915/covid-pandemic-trauma-mentalhealth>.

4. M.P.P. Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” in *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, eds. L.S. Brown and M. Ballou (New York: The Guilford Press, 1992), 229.

5. Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” 238.

The study of trauma, and its popularity in cultural conversation tends to ebb and flow because the very study of trauma requires us to come in contact with the most vulnerable and horrifying aspects of our human existence.

rather than an instance of indirect trauma. For those watching these stories unfold, imagining themselves in such a nightclub, knowing that hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ individuals are common, indirect trauma is a “normal” human response to this kind of event rather than an outsized response that suggests a characterological problem.

Finally, Root argues for a category of insidious trauma. Insidious trauma shapes the worldview of its victims, rendering the world a place that cannot be trusted, a place where psychological safety, security, and survival is not guaranteed. This kind of trauma, often resulting from homophobia, racism, and sexism, can also be passed down through generations. Insidious trauma “results in a construction of reality in which certain dimensions of security are not very secure; as such, the individual is often alert to potential threat of destruction or death and accumulates practice in dealing with threat.”⁶ Insidious trauma, more than indirect or direct trauma, can result in the suspicion by others that if only the traumatized would “work harder” or “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” they would be able to function successfully. Rather than seeing behavior as a normal and even healthy instance of self-protection in an insecure environment, communities where insidious trauma is rare often cannot help but blame the traumatized for their situation.

Ministerial leaders and congregations often feel as if they should respond to direct traumas; religious communities have long been at the forefront of care and concern for those who have faced natural disasters or tragic loss. Insidious and indirect traumas are harder to identify and require a more complex view of trauma in order to provide care for those who suffer. However, it is helpful to examine how all of Root’s categories of trauma might also show up in religious contexts.

Beginning in the 1990s, spiritual abuse began to grow as an area of interest and study. Though definitions have shifted and changed over time, the general focus within these conversations has been the experience of abuse as it exists between an abuser and the abused. This kind of abuse is often characterized by “manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship

6. Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” 239.

of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behavior, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuse has a 'divine' position, and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.⁷ One can imagine that for people who have experienced religious abuse, rituals in religious contexts would be a tool of this manipulation and exploitation.

Expanding on this view of person to person abuse, Religious Trauma Syndrome, a term first coined by Marlene Winell, focuses on the process of "recovery" from toxic religious communities that are sites of trauma through a definitive exit from those communities so that one is able to "think for themselves" in a context no longer overshadowed by fundamentalist religion.⁸ Religious Trauma Syndrome is not just the result of an abusive relationship with a religious leader, it is a reshaping of how one understands the world and their place in it as a result of a toxic and often fundamentalist religious upbringing.

Religious trauma, in my research and therapeutic practice, expands beyond Winell's original view. Through my work with queer persons, I have come to recognize that religious trauma, an internalized fragmentation that occurs when one's relationship with God and a religious community is traumatically destroyed or lost, reshapes how one understands the world and their place in it. And, even despite this traumatic loss, many people still seek a relationship with God in a community more open and accepting than the one that traumatized them. The response to religious trauma is not always just the leaving of a religious community, but, for some people, the return to a progressive religious environment.

Though there are many aspects of religious trauma that have come up in my own psychotherapy practice and work with survivors of trauma, in particular, for many participants in my study on religious trauma, it is the loss of a ritual space—where they were baptized, received communion, or met the divine—that was one of the most significant parts of their loss. Because queerness in these religious communities was anathema to Christian faith, queer people were not allowed to access religious rituals. The congregations who abandoned them told them they were sinful, and, in some cases, that God hated them and was disgusted by their participation in these rituals. It is this ritual loss, and the trauma that accompanies it, which is at the center of their search for healing through participation in a new community.

Why communion?

Direct, indirect, and insidious trauma are present in the bodies of people who sit in pews on Sunday. Religious trauma and spiritual abuse are the lived experience of many people who are trying to re-narrate the story of their relationship with God. Trauma shows up in our communities, but it is often the indirect and insidious versions that stay hidden. Yet, we know that God is a God of love,

7. Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20-22.

8. Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 1993), 253.

Ritual has the power to both harm and heal, it can reflect the good news of God's love, or it can create barriers to that love. However, examining the variegated experience of trauma can point us toward how our rituals can be a place of love and healing for those who carry these hidden stories into our pews on Sundays.

freedom, and liberation, and by recognizing the impact of trauma in our communities we have the opportunity to recognize both the healing and harming dimensions of our rituals. Ritual has the power to both harm and heal, it can reflect the good news of God's love, or it can create barriers to that love. However, examining the variegated experience of trauma can point us toward how our rituals can be a place of love and healing for those who carry these hidden stories into our pews on Sundays.

In work with victims of sexual assault, Hilary Jerome Scarsella points to the painful connection survivors continue to make between their trauma and communion. As Scarsella worked with victims of sexual violence, she heard a frequent reflection that communion rituals "strengthened the grip of abuse on its victims or exacerbated survivors' traumatic suffering."⁹ Scarsella argues that our very theory of ritual must make space for "the social and psychological dimensions of ritual participants' lives."¹⁰ Often, in our ritual theories, theologians tend to elevate the liturgical essence apart from the embodied experience of liturgy, with the understanding that if the core essence of the liturgy is good, then it is a misinterpretation of the ritual on the part of the participant that is to blame for any feelings of harm.¹¹ With this view of communion, it is the victim of trauma who bears the fault for communion being a trigger for that trauma.

Scarsella argues for a complex "entwinement of ritual participation, culture and psychology" where "ritual participation, culture, and psychology can neither be collapsed in on one another nor held apart as entirely distinct."¹² Through interviews with survivors of sexual violence, Scarsella notes that there is an inherent mismatch between what ritual leaders perceived as the

9. Hilary Jerome Scarsella, "Victimization via Ritualization: Christian Communion and Sexual Abuse" in *Trauma and Lived Religion: Transcending the Ordinary*, eds. Ganzevoort & S. Sremac (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 225-252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91872-3>.

10. Scarsella, "Victimization via Ritualization," 228.

11. Scarsella, "Victimization via Ritualization," 230.

12. Scarsella, "Victimization via Ritualization," 231.

impact of communion, and how these rituals were being felt in the bodies of those who were traumatized. In the Mennonite tradition Scarsella explores, to prepare for communion, one is asked to enter into a process of self-examination and confession, focusing on the ways that one has fallen short or continues to hold tightly to sins that ought to be laid down. Survivors noted, however, that this self-examination assumed that what was most needed was laying down of sin, rather than taking up of the belief that they were worthy of receiving the sacraments. For victims of sexual abuse, their experience of self already identifies them as sinful, worthless and outside of God's love, because they describe often hearing these words about themselves from their abusers. The ritual of communion, for survivors, requires more space for welcome, grace, and the acknowledgement that their lives matter to God, rather than a rejection of self in order to get into right relationship with God.

In my work with survivors of religious trauma, it is precisely ritual loss which accompanies their trauma that might be re-narrated in a new community. Communion, a ritual often denied when they came out as queer in their congregations, becomes a place in the liturgy in accepting communities where they most need to hear not that they are sinful, but rather that they are beloved, and that the gifts available at God's table are precisely for them in all of their wonderful queerness.

If we adopt this view—that our rituals ought to be held not entirely distinct from the psychological world of participants in these rituals—it stands to reason that we ought to consider our ritual practices as an act of pastoral care that, at its best, would be trauma-informed. Even if a ritual is good in its essence, we must also consider how the ritual is being interpreted, misinterpreted, and received in the embodied experience of ritual participants. To imagine our communion ritual from a position of being trauma-informed is to recognize the opportunity we have to use the gifts of God as a pathway toward healing. To proclaim to survivors of trauma that despite these experiences of trauma they are welcome to taste and share in the goodness of God is a rewriting of what they once believed to be the only story of God—a story of rejection and loss.

Trauma-informed ritual leadership

In *Trauma and Grace*, theologian Serene Jones describes her relationship with a new member of her religious community, Leah. During what felt like the familiar rhythms of a Sunday morning worship service, the pastor moved to the table and began speaking the eucharistic prayer, describing the gifts of Jesus' body and blood for the gathered community. As Serene looked next to her in the pew, she saw the early signs of a panic attack in Leah—her hands were twisting the bulletin, and her fear was “cold” and present. Before the prayer was finished, Leah left the sanctuary and stood numb and dissociated in the bathroom, unable to remember how to turn on the water. Jones raises this question: “How was it that the very thing she was reaching for was the thing that terrified her? ... A story-ritual about Jesus' love for her, grace incarnate, had

Trauma-informed ritual leadership, as an act of pastoral care, provides a way for us to commit to conveying this love in the hopes that it will be received by those who desperately desire to know a God who has loved them in every moment of their lives. ... I offer three areas that may act as touchstones in committing to trauma-informed communion ritual leadership (explicit welcome, holding space for overwhelmed bodies, growing theological imagination).

thrown her into a cold, frightening place where violence seemed to stalk her. How could this be? How might the church not harm her in the very same minute it is trying to convey to her the treasure of love unending?”¹³

How might we convey the “treasure of love unending” in a ritual that might still terrify people who have experienced trauma, particularly religious trauma? Trauma-informed ritual leadership, as an act of pastoral care, provides a way for us to commit to conveying this love in the hopes that it will be received by those who desperately desire to know a God who has loved them in every moment of their lives. Though becoming trauma-informed as a religious community and in pastoral ministry certainly requires further study, I offer three areas that may act as touchstones in committing to trauma-informed communion ritual leadership.

Explicit welcome

In Judith Herman's work on trauma and recovery, she outlines a three-step process for healing from trauma. Though these stages are not linear, and stepping and stumbling forward is a common experience in recovery, Herman argues that “establishing safety” is central to the beginning stage of creating the kind of relational alliance that can lead to healing.¹⁴ For people who have experienced religious trauma or spiritual abuse, establishing safety creates the ground on which a relationship with God and the church might grow. For religiously traumatized people, returning to a progressive church community, and risking the possibility of participating in the rituals of that church leads to deep fear and anxiety. Though

13. S. Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2009), 3-5.

14. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 158.

many progressive church communities demonstrate this commitment with notices in the bulletin, rainbow flags, or other passive markers, in my work with survivors of religious trauma these signs are necessary but not sufficient. Establishing safety requires explicit welcome.

How might explicit welcome inform our ritual leadership in communion? For people who have been religiously traumatized, they often carry an embedded story that they are disgusting or unworthy of the things of God. In eucharistic prayers and the welcome to the sacrament, religious leaders can explicitly name that God's welcome is for all of those who have been told that they were unworthy. The gifts of God are not just for the "general people of God," but particularly for those who have been rejected, marginalized, or told that God's love doesn't extend to them. Naming this welcome rather than assuming that it will be understood is a part of establishing safety for religiously traumatized people.

Holding space for overwhelmed bodies

Jones describes Leah's traumatic reactions as a "rupture disorder," when, in an instant, "something could startle her causing everything inside her mind to fall apart—her memory, her language use, her capacity to keep track of time."¹⁵ This is a common bodily response to traumatic experience and requires more than just a cognitive response as a pathway to healing. Jones highlights the constant reenactment of biblical story on an embodied level as a way of developing the "healing imagination."¹⁶

Trauma takes people out of their bodies. Our nervous systems are made to protect us when we feel the onset of a threat. Leah's experience of becoming dissociated, a feeling that one is not present in one's body, is a common physical and psychological response to a trauma as it is occurring or when encountering a trigger of a past trauma. The work of healing from trauma involves more than just talking through the story of what happened, it also often involves being able to turn back to the body to feel the sensations and feelings that result from the trauma or triggers of that trauma in order to support the nervous system toward regulation.

In many religious communities, space to feel into the body, to notice sights, sounds, smells, textures, and feelings is already built into liturgical practice. However, it may be a new thing to see these liturgical moments as a part of trauma-informed ritual leadership. Using moments in the communion liturgy to invite participants, if they feel safe, to notice their breath, to feel the sensations in their bodies without judgment, to witness what is happening in their bodies as a source of knowing can unlock some of the internal messages that may overwhelm a religiously traumatized person. Trauma-informed ritual leadership can bring into focus not only the sensations in our bodies, but also the varied ways that our bodies are communicating to us. When our trauma responses are activated, often a first step is to look around for "social referencing" a process where we pay attention to the people around us

15. Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 19.

16. Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 20.

The gifts of God are not just for the "general people of God," but particularly for those who have been rejected, marginalized, or told that God's love doesn't extend to them. Naming this welcome rather than assuming that it will be understood is a part of establishing safety for religiously traumatized people.

for clues about whether a situation is safe or dangerous.¹⁷ Inviting people to see those next to them in worship, to breathe together, to feel a connection to those around them can also signal to an overwhelmed body that this ritual space is safe.

Growing theological imagination

Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring notes that embedded theologies are those theological beliefs, instilled in childhood, that exert unconscious influence and often exert their power when people are under stress. We become aware of these theologies when we experience a world disruption, like a trauma, and in those moments have the opportunity to excavate these theological paradigms.¹⁸ Survivors of religious trauma are often painfully aware of the life-limiting theologies that have been central in their theological worldviews but may feel at a loss for what a life-giving theology might look like. Trauma-informed ritual leadership not only recognizes the life-limiting theologies that might be present for people in the ritual event, but create a space for the growth of life-giving theological paradigms.

As Scarsella notes in her work with survivors of sexual trauma, it was not life-giving to make the primary theological claim of communion a release from sin, because survivors coming to this ritual were already overwhelmed by an embedded theology that they were sinful beyond saving, worthless, and beyond God's love. The trauma-informed response to this suffering was to use the ritual of communion as an invitation for self-examination to lead toward recognition of the *imago Dei*, a sense that God is not separate from them, but the image of God dwells within them.¹⁹ As we seek to become trauma-informed ritual leaders, Scarsella's work points to the importance of knowing what embedded theologies our people carry in order to invite them to cultivate a theological

17. H. L. P. McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection through Embodied Living* (Brazos Press, 2021), 61.

18. C. Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2014), 19.

19. Scarsella, "Victimization via Ritualization," 242.

imagination that allows for the growth of life-giving theological views of the self.

Conclusion

Survivors of religious trauma who find their way to life-giving religious communities deserve to know the love and grace of God. Becoming trauma-informed ritual leaders is one path toward conveying to survivors the powerful love and grace of God. And yet, the work of becoming a trauma-informed ritual leader and a trauma-informed congregation is not just for the benefit of survivors of trauma. As we embody this position of leadership, as I have learned in my own clinical practice, we are also changed. As we witness the risks that survivors take to show up in religious communities, despite histories of abuse and trauma, we are invited to see lived out before us the risk that faith requires to trust that God's promises are real. Trauma-informed ritual leadership invites us into the hope that despite the painful and traumatizing aspects of the human experience, our bodies, in the ritual of communion and elsewhere, can still taste and see the goodness of God.

Trauma-informed ritual leadership invites us into the hope that despite the painful and traumatizing aspects of the human experience, our bodies, in the ritual of communion and elsewhere, can still taste and see the goodness of God.
