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What's the Right Rite?

Bonhoeffer, Climate, and Prayers of Confession

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ABSTRACT
In the face of ecological crises, we are largely still living in what Joanna Macy calls "Business as Usual," even as global systems are shifting and irreversible tipping points nearing or already even past. I explore here how, if at all, the practice of corporate confession empowers Christians to engage these questions, arguing that we need a much richer liturgical repertoire of practices. I approach these questions through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance to "cheap grace" in relation to the tangle of structural sin, complicity, and inextricability involved in contemporary eco-justice questions and in relation to eco-anxiety and other eco-/climate emotions. I use this lens to analyze forms of corporate confession from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's liturgical resource *Sundays & Seasons*. In the conclusion, I point to larger forms of practice that could complement confession and help restore it to its proper role in fostering costly grace.

KEYWORDS
Bonhoeffer. Confession. Absolution. Climate. Ecology. Lament

Introduction

I love my religious tradition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), am on its clergy roster, for decades was the most faithful of church-goers – even a professor of worship at an ELCA seminary – and have found there some of the most important, beautiful, and transforming experiences of my life. ELCA worship at its best brings together layered forms of beauty in music, poetry, ritual, color, movement and is committed to meaningful preaching and contextual innovation while centered in Western rite traditions connecting worshipers to countless other Christians across time, space and culture. It is my home. Yet something fundamental shifted when I experienced an ecological deepening in 2011: my experience of the holy moved decisively outdoors, along with my own center of spiritual gravity. For the first time, I began to experience worship as false when it does not reflect and place us within the bigger natural world from which both our lives and G*D are inseparable. It stopped ringing true.

In the years since my ecological opening, I have spent a great deal of time outdoors and a great deal also immersing myself in questions of science, policy, philosophy, and ethics having to do with our current ecological crises and their roots in Christian and Cartesian dualisms, in entrenched anthropocentrism, in the commodification of extractive global capitalism, and in political, legal, and economic systems of colonialist, racist, and patriarchal hierarchies of value. I write and teach in these questions, attempting to create spaces in which my students (and readers) and I can wrestle honestly with the catastrophic harm that centuries of ecological/human exploitation and devastations have created, the profoundly disorienting and destabilizing disruptions climate change and ecosystemic collapse are ushering in. The emotions these questions raise are themselves disorienting aspects of this process, and I am well aware of how difficult it is to experience them, as well as how central such experience is in making possible meaningful change, growth, and action.

There are many people who, like myself, live and breathe these questions today – but there are many more who do not, for whom they are too overwhelming or too threatening, the scale of these problems blasting through every structure of society and psyche in forcing (or inviting) massive change. What we find in place of the sustained, all-hands-on-deck attention to these crises that they demand is a sort of collective blankness in many spheres of popular media, news, political analysis, and ordinary life. For many people, in most spheres of their lives, we are still living in Business as Usual, even as global systems are shifting and irreversible tipping points nearing or already even past. The language of "Business as Usual" comes from Buddhist eco-philosopher and activist Joanna Macy, who describes

contemporary society as functioning – in the face of this tsunami of crisis and disruption looming in our near future – with three dominant stories. They are "Business as Usual," "The Great Unraveling," and "The Great Turning" (Macy and Brown, 2014). Many people live in more than one of these; but relatively few are yet living in the third. "Business as Usual" is still the primary mode of operation for most of society, reflected in the ELCA practices of corporate confession this article will examine; and all of us still necessarily live here to the extent that we need to pay mortgages, eat food procured from a supermarket, etc. Those perceiving themselves within "The Great Unraveling" grasp the ways ecological devastation is already fraying – and will increasingly dismantle – the industrial and agricultural and supply-chain dimensions of our complex lives, along with the climactic conditions making possible our stable societies and communal life. Taking in the scope of these disruptions, which make visible the ways in which the structures our lives depend on are out of alignment with the planet's life systems, is what powers the capacity to participate in "The Great Turning": the personal and collective attempts on every scale of society to stop the collective suicidal systems and create new ones.

Yet the Great Unraveling is an exceedingly difficult reality to live in, and many find it impossible to stay here. Because that fact is true of most world political and intellectual/media leaders as well, we do not have the collective leadership needed to create public spaces for truly taking in and acting on these vexing questions. As ethicist Clive Hamilton writes,

Our best scientists tell us insistently that a calamity is unfolding, that the life-support systems of the Earth are being damaged in ways that threaten our survival. Yet in the face of these facts we carry on as usual. Most citizens ignore or downplay the warnings.... How can we understand the miserable failure of contemporary thinking to come to grips with what now confronts us?... It is the great silence (Hamilton, 2017, vii, ix).

And this silence pervades much of the public worship of Christians as well, despite the courageous public witness of Pope Francis and the often quite powerful statements of church bodies on these questions.

Many today find the church version of Business as Usual unconvincing.[1] What would it mean to worship in ways that tell the truth about G*D, ourselves, the world, and grace? Specifically, what is the role of liturgical practices in helping spark that ecological conversion to which Pope Francis has called all Christians, or the move out of Business as Usual? (Pope Francis, 2015, ¶14–15, 216–21). This article focuses on one piece of these questions, namely the practice of corporate confession of sin. I argue here that forms of corporate confession widespread in the ELCA liturgical contexts I know best – specifically, the use of prayers of confession written anew for each season and published in the online resource *Sundays & Seasons* – do not successfully engage these questions. We need a much richer liturgical repertoire of practices to set free this liberating power.[2]

I approach these questions through the lens of anti-Nazi theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance to "cheap grace": his lived insistence on a robust theology of discernment and mature responsible action in the face of the world's most vexing and difficult challenges. I assert that practices of confession and absolution that leave Hamilton's great silence intact promote cheap grace and distract us from developing ritual forms that could more adequately address the profound challenges of our time. We need liturgical forms *making possible* such breaking of the silence, toward radically new forms of human life on Earth. Specifically, and perhaps most important, we need rites that break the great silenc*ing* of voices beyond the human realm, voices from the human and ecological and psychic underside, voices from future generations.

In this article I first lay out *Bonhoeffer's theology of confession and absolution*, centering in his distinction between cheap and costly grace, and relate that distinction to the tangle of structural sin, complicity, and inextricability involved in contemporary eco-justice questions. Next, I trace *the role of eco-anxiety and other eco-/climate emotions (grief, shame, guilt, despair, panic, rage, etc.)* in the face of

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1 Church affiliation rates in the U.S. are rapidly dropping, along with similar rates for many other religious forms of community. The most recent study by the Pew Research Center (January 24, 2024), titled, "Religious Nones in the U.S.: Who They Are and What They Believe," claims that 28% of the U.S. population now falls in the category of "Nones," those claiming no formal religious affiliation. These rates are even higher among younger generations.

2 While a range of new work is emerging on, broadly, the relation between Christian liturgy and ecological questions (see the survey found in Dahill, forthcoming), I have found surprisingly little analysis, with the exception of Conradie (2010), of questions of corporate confession in relation to ecological problems. An introduction to *Sundays & Seasons* is found at note 19 below. I am focusing solely on the confessions included in *Sundays & Seasons*' seasonal worship texts found under the heading "Sundays & Seasons Resources" in the Library section of the website: https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Library# (accessed December 2, 2023).

these questions, their pivotal place in the dynamics of change at the heart of Bonhoeffer's view of transforming grace. Third, I analyze *forms of corporate confession* from the ELCA liturgical resource *Sundays & Seasons*, both in terms of problematic dimensions of corporate confession more generally and specifically in terms of climate and ecological questions, and showing how they fail, in my view, to attend in generative ways to the complexity of human dynamics around these questions and fall into cheap grace.[3] In the conclusion, I point briefly to *larger forms of practice* that could help restore corporate confession to its proper role in fostering costly grace.[4]

A. Bonhoeffer, Confession, and Climate Change

Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics aim toward the cultivation of mature adult responsibility in the face of complex systems and structures, and his theology of grace famously provides a key foundation for the direction his own life would take. He defines "cheap grace" as

> *cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit.... a cheap cover-up for [our] sins, for which [we show] no remorse and from which [we have] even less desire to be set free.... [It] is forgiveness without repentance... absolution without personal confession.... Grace without discipleship* (Bonhoeffer, 2001, 43–44).[5]

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3 To be clear, there is much that is beautiful and praiseworthy in *Sundays & Seasons* and the broader repertoire of ELCA worship resources having to do with creation-oriented worship materials. From Eucharistic and baptismal prayers to weekly creation-centered lectionary and preaching resources, to a wealth of prayers and hymns, the tradition includes many invitations to worship planners to "green" weekly worship.

4 For help in shaping this article, I thank in particular my colleagues Amy Carr and David Grafton; the members of the Ecology and Liturgy Seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy; and the anonymous peer reviewers who strengthened the essay. I received funding for the research underlying this work in the form of a Sabbatical Grant for Researchers from the Louisville Institute in 2021.

5 For more on Bonhoeffer and repentance specifically, see McBride, "Thinking within the Movement of Bonhoeffer's Theology"; also, on confession, see Wilkes (2015); and McBride (2017), 17, 115, 185.

A few pages later he notes, "I am liberated from following Jesus – by cheap grace" (Bonhoeffer, 2001, 51).[6] In contrast, costly grace implies and requires and *makes possible* actual change. In the chapter of *Discipleship* titled "The Call to Discipleship," Bonhoeffer outlines several stories of how people respond to Jesus' call, making clear that this call is actually beckoning them into something new:

As long as Levi sits in the tax collector's booth and Peter at his nets, they would do their work honestly and loyally, they would have old or new knowledge about God. But if they want to learn to believe in God, they have to follow the Son of God incarnate and walk with him.... Levi at his taxes could have had Jesus as a helper for all kinds of needs, but he would not have recognized him as the one Lord, into whose hand he should entrust his whole life (Bonhoeffer, 2001, 62).

On the next page, he writes, "The road to faith passes through obedience to Christ's call. The step [in Levi's case, away from his tax booth] is required; otherwise, Jesus' call dissipates into nothing. Any intended discipleship without this step to which Jesus calls becomes deceptive enthusiasts' illusion."

How to discern this call for oneself and become able to hear it, let alone say Yes to the changes of heart and mind being summoned, is not easy. But to think that "grace" means being excused from this, or simply receiving a blessing – that it means, in the case of confession, being released from sins without thereby also being freed to live in new ways – is cheap grace, this "enthusiasts' illusion." Grace for Bonhoeffer, arising from this divine initiative seeing and summoning persons, breaks the power of sin and empowers them to follow Jesus in radically new forms of life and community; such "following after" is what the German term for discipleship (*Nachfolge*) literally means. Grace is what mobilizes us – who on our

6 For Bonhoeffer, grace in the face of failing to obey Christ's call comes late in the process: it's for the person who has tried and tried and tried to live a Christian life but inevitably fails at various points – that's where grace consoles and keeps the person nurtured to keep going. Grace that comes too soon in the process, serving to short-circuit any attempt at such a life, is cheap. He uses the example in *Discipleship* of the difference between Dr. Faust, having devoted his whole life to scholarship, sighing in old age that all learning is still partial and incomplete – versus an 18-year-old using this excuse to avoid studying at all (DBWE 4:51). When what we call grace functions to derail that movement into actual discipleship, as he often observed it doing in his time and context, then it's not grace at all; it's cheap. Scholar Carol Anderson echoes Bonhoeffer's analysis in her 2018 *Huffpost* tracing of the social devastation that arises from the absolution of unrepentant sinners, insisting that we need to stop extending cheap grace to those whose racism is suffocating countless lives and our collective life: "If You Want to End Racism, Stop Forgiving Racists." See her larger analysis of these toxic dynamics in *White Rage*, 2017.

own can't seem to break that great silence – to begin what can feel initially like an excruciating process of facing climate realities and ultimately begin creating new forms of personal and communal/social life that are healthier and harder and far more joyful than being enmeshed in silence and privilege ever were.

Without ever contradicting Luther (in fact summoning Luther as the paradigmatic exemplar of such costly discipleship), Bonhoeffer nevertheless challenges the way the classic Lutheran distinction between law or commandment and Gospel was playing out in his time: the Gospel supposedly freeing people in Christ without any accompanying sense that this freedom was *for* and solely real *within* a new life of personal and communal walking with Jesus wherever Jesus might lead. He writes, "The call to discipleship.... is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It is beyond enmity between law and gospel. Christ calls; the disciple follows. That is grace and commandment in one" (Bonhoeffer, 2001, 59). Bonhoeffer insists that grace, the absolution itself, inheres in (or is indivisible from, or is another way of articulating, or is the power giving rise to) *being* freed from one's sins by living in the new way Jesus is calling one into. Levi cannot just stay at his tax booth with his "sins forgiven," because in that case he is continuing to enact the sins from which Jesus is trying to call him away: namely being complicit with and an actual agent of the Roman Empire's violent exploitation of the local people. In order to be freed from his sin, he has to get up, walk away, and follow Jesus into a whole new life: the call, the commandment, the obedience, and the grace are one indivisible reality animated by divine love.

Central to what makes contemporary climate and ecological catastrophes so spiritually sickening is that it is nearly impossible to be freed in this way from the economic structures fueling the layers of catastrophe: we can't easily step out of these structures, certainly not as individuals. This perceived incapacity to change heightens the sense of "stuckness" and reliance on cheap grace instead. Ethicists refer to contemporary climate/ecological issues as "wicked problems," meaning among other things that our ethical systems and our fundamental theologies and liturgies can't fully account for what it might mean to speak of things like justification when the world itself is going off its geological and biological and ecosystemic and cultural/political rails (Jenkins, 2013).[7] As South African eco-theologian Ernst

7 On the ethics of confession in situations of structural violence, see, e.g., Kevin O'Brien's three part process of "recognizing the harm we have caused, apologizing for it, and then working to redress the wrong" (O'Brien, 2016, 194). abby mohaupt addresses complex questions of church entanglement with and resistance to the fossil fuel industry (mohaupt, 2024); despite her chapter's title ("Corporate Confession"), it deals only glancingly, at the end, with the actual practice of communal confession. Her sample prayer along these lines, however, is a powerful example of liturgical truth-telling in the face of climate reality.

Conradie notes, even figuring out what to confess is incredibly complex, in light of the difficulty of teasing out one's actual responsibility within "the polarization that characterizes discourse on climate change – between East and West, North and South, the consumer class and the poor, (over)-industrialized and so-called 'developing' economies, gated communities and (environmental) refugees, previous and coming generations and between the interests of humankind and otherkind" (Conradie, 2010, 138).

Yet, while it is true that we can't single-handedly change our circumstances or these systems much bigger than we are, we can change our perception of our role and the scope of our belonging, our development of practices awakening a sense of the divine presence in wild new ways, the use of our voice and witness and action and votes and money in public, the decision to invest in new forms of local systems, infrastructure, and economies. In all these and many other ways, we do have tremendous agency, were it not trapped, along with tremendous amounts of bottled-up emotion, behind that great silence. We do have the power to begin to create new forms of human and interspecies communion, the living world we want to inhabit, and to start actually living there.[8]

On the pivotal role of remorse in this process, Bonhoeffer has much to say, not only in *Discipleship* around cheap/costly grace but also in the various places he talks about confession and sin (also using the language of contrition or penitence for sin).[9] These are part of what the Christian tradition terms *compunction*,

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8 Many new books and websites describe these initiatives and the forms of life already taking shape. See, for instance, among many others, Wahl, 2022, and the encompassing range of initiatives outlined on the website of Paul Hawken's "Project Regeneration": https://regeneration.org/ (accessed March 17, 2024). Joanna Macy's Work that Reconnects, described earlier, encompasses a range of transformative practices intended to empower people to move into such action. The process moves through a four-part spiral: Gratitude, Honoring Our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes, and Going Forth. See Macy and Brown, 2014. For Bonhoeffer, such reflection takes place under the heading of *responsibility*: how do I discern the will of God in complex and ambiguous times, and then take the action to which I discern God calling me? Mark Brocker (2016) places these questions of responsibility at the center of his treatment of Bonhoeffer and ecological ethics. See also Fredericks (2021).

9 The primary place Bonhoeffer treats confession (*Beichte*) is in *Life Together* (1996), 108–118; he also treats it in his 1936 Finkenwalde lectures (2013, 89–94 and 746–52). In these texts he makes clear how central this emotional dimension of clearly experiencing the pain of one's alienation is in the process of truly confessing it and seeking forgiveness. Note that such confession of sin (*Beichte*) is not the same as the public and anti-Nazi forms of confession (*Bekennung*) to which he and others also famously enjoined the Confessing (*Bekennende*) Church of his day. "Confession" in English translates both German terms; one could say that what unites them is an articulation of truth-telling. A third German term (*Buße*) refers to penitence or repentance, the contrition at stake here.

being "pierced" not just with the reality of the structures of evil we are part of, our enmeshment in them, but also with our sinful preference for avoiding the costs that follow upon awakening, namely having to feel painful emotions, needing to change our lives, and being compelled to act.[10] At the same time, those things I am aware of and feel remorse about may or may not be the sins I actually most need to confess (white people may live in conscious or unconscious ignorance of the racism they assume and perpetuate). With regard to climate too, the sins of (say) not recycling – the scale of problems many people spontaneously name in their eco-confessions, in my experience – pale alongside things like voting for climate deniers. Costly grace requires radical availability of heart in the confessing: to *long* to be freed from Business as Usual, to *want* my life to be part of the Great Turning, to *beg* for the grace to let go of whatever gets in the way of such participation. Can we confess in this way?

For Bonhoeffer, grace permeates all of this, the entire Christian life: he insists in his *Ethics* that grace is what invites us to participate in the reality of Jesus Christ who has already redeemed the world and embraces it in love, all the time, no matter what (Bonhoeffer, 2006, 54–68).[11] This grace calling us into new forms of life is the same unconditional love grounding all that is. Faith, or the experience of justification as true for oneself, means waking up (by grace) to this reality, which has already been true all along, and living in it. In my ecological reading of him, it means waking up to the astonishing reality of being part of the wild communion of all that is, into which we are already inextricably interwoven in the grace of being alive at all on this exquisite planet and learning to live in a whole new way accordingly.

10 Many in Christian tradition note the importance of conviction of sin, or compunction, what Douglas Christie describes as being "pierced" by the shattering sorrow of one's sin (2013, 70–101).

11 He treats the relation of justification or grace to one's life in the world (i.e., the "ultimate" vis-à-vis the "penultimate") in "Ultimate and Penultimate Things" (Bonhoeffer, 2005, 146–70).

B. Guilt, Shame, Grief, Rage, Despair, Longing, Dread: The Tangle of Climate Emotions

A pivotal question in this process has to do with *how* to let the call into new life touch and move and change us; it has to do with the heart's resonance and response.[12] Questions of remorse noted above open the door to the role of emotion generally in costly grace; and, as contemporary studies around the world are showing, emotion is also at the heart of climate response. These dynamics include a host of powerful and often overwhelming emotions, such as "eco-grief," "eco-anxiety," rage, dread, panic, guilt, shame, or despair, all of which plus many others are part of the larger complex scholars increasingly refer to simply as "climate emotions." One of the foremost researchers of climate emotions today, Finnish scholar Panu Pikhala, explores this phenomenon both theologically and sociologically.[13] He helpfully unpacks the language of *anxiety* often used as a catch-all for these tangles of emotions, noting that feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability are "classic ingredients in anxiety" (Pikhala, 2020, 2). Yet while psychologists generally view crippling anxiety as a "disorder," Pihkala and others reframe climate or eco-anxiety instead as an adaptive response, "an understandable reaction to the severity of the ecological crisis" (Pihkala, 2021, 121).[14]

These grave existential emotions – the very future of our planet at stake, including the lives of all we love, the stability of biological and social/infrastructure systems on which our lives depend from moment to moment, and the conditions of life that give us joy – create a psychic burden that takes a tremendous toll on individuals and communities unable to face and give expression to these feelings. Like unresolved childhood trauma or a Stage 4 cancer diagnosis we cannot bring ourselves to think about, this psychic weight lodges heavily in our collective shadow, requiring great stores of energy to keep it suppressed, paralyzing us from taking action, and contributing to psychological and relational dysfunctions of all kinds through this shared avoidance of reality.

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12 This is an important topic more broadly in and beyond theologies of confession, of course, with many authors addressing it in diverse ways across various psychological and sociological disciplines. The human psyche is endlessly complex, and the psycho-dynamics of change via authentic breakthrough, truth-telling, and liberation from patterns that don't foster health takes place on levels not always accessible to conscious choice. In that sense, it corresponds to how Bonhoeffer describes the dynamics of conversion – namely originating not in the individual's own decision but by divine grace, the experience of being called. See "The Call to Discipleship" (Bonhoeffer, 2001, 57–76).

13 See works cited in the bibliography.

14 Bas Verplanken and Deborah Rov make a similar point in the very title of their article, "'My Worries Are Rational, Climate Change Is Not'" (2013).

Fear of these profound and destabilizing emotions is thus at the heart of "the great silence" noted above (and the manifestation of this silence in liturgies avoiding these questions): we cannot open the door to these feelings because they seem far too big for us or for church. They will blow us apart, they will consume us, they will kill us. In a sense that is true: they will destroy the false self and, ultimately, all forms of existence not compatible with life on Earth. But it is not true that feeling these feelings will kill us, even in their worst fury as they burst to the surface once that door begins to open – just as it is not the Stage 4 diagnosis *itself* that kills a person with cancer. Instead, allowing these feelings to surface and pour forth is the only thing that also opens the door to power, creativity, energy, deep love, a grasp of the miracle of being alive at all, indeed joy: the very life of the world.[15]

Thus, healthy compunction – being truly pierced to the heart by the gravity and impact of what is at stake in ecological questions – matters because it makes confession truthful (I really *do* want to be liberated from this way of life) but also because it opens the door to breakthroughs of many other climate emotions pouring forth in its wake, and ultimately provides the fuel and motivation to make change, including seemingly impossible changes. Unlocking these emotional depths is simultaneously the most terrifying and the most empowering part of the process of transformation toward these questions, as one begins (by grace!) to fumble or leap into new forms of life opened by the softening and heart-stretching of tears and love, the clarity and energy of anger, passionate creativity let loose in the world. This is what Bonhoeffer means by *costly* grace: grace alive, grace transforming the heart and one's vision of the world alive. It is indeed the pearl of great price.[16]

A word about shame and guilt in particular, pieces of the climate-emotion tangle that show up particularly in residents of high-income countries bearing greater responsibility for climate change and other forms of ecological catastrophe and injustice. Both emotions lie at the core of the phenomenon of moral injury, and scholars have begun applying this lens to the emotions of ecological distress (Henritze, et al.). While people of any culture or economic station can experience ecologically-related moral injury from the perceived disjunction between their life choices (often forced upon them) and the damage those create for creatures, waters, or other humans, this phenomenon and its related emotions

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15 "[T]he heart begins to wither when pain, fear, grief, and anger are numbed, locked within walls so thick that we do not even know that these feelings exist. With the withered heart, so too shrinks the holy passion to ignite action. This nation is drenched in numbness, frozen in numbness, rotting in numbness in the face of climate change, our role in causing it, and the consequences" (Moe-Lobeda, 2023, 247).

16 Matthew 13:45f., used as a metaphor of costly grace in Bonhoeffer, 2001, 45.

lie particularly close at hand to the globally privileged people this article focuses on. Sarah Fredericks' 2021 book, *Environmental Guilt and Shame: Signals of Individual and Collective Responsibility and the Need for Ritual Responses*, in fact notes already in its title the role of these emotions in making visible the capacity for appropriate forms of relationship: for collective *responsibility* to one another (Fredericks, 2021).[17]

Yet confession is not a helpful remedy for the shame-based components of moral injury; practices of confession are a liturgical means of dealing solely with situations of actual *guilt*, the only piece of this whole complex of climate emotion that confession directly addresses. Figuring out what we are actually *guilty* of in relation to these huge dynamics is not easy, to say the least. The inseparability of actual guilt or complicity from the many ways in which we are not active or even passive perpetrators of sin but also victims of others' greed, or horrified and relatively small bystanders, means the practice of confession can become hopelessly tangled within seemingly inextricable layers of complexity, confusing the questions of what exactly I ought to be confessing – and what it could ever mean to be absolved in Bonhoeffer's sense of costly grace, namely being *freed* from the necessity of continuing to live in those patterns of sin. Conradie notes, along these lines,

It is indeed crucial to specify one's responsibility in this regard as far as this is possible. Christian confession of guilt is an exercise in naming (see Jennings, The liturgy of liberation*, p. 68–73). The problem is that a generalized sense of responsibility for causing climate change will also lead to vague measures in addressing carbon emissions.*

17 Fredericks wrote an earlier article, adapted into chapters 2 and 9 of this book, whose title seems to indicate work parallel to mine: "Online Confessions of Eco-Guilt" (2014). In fact, however, she is analyzing the phenomenon of environmentally minded people to confess their lapses to one another in online forums of various kinds. The phenomenon she analyzes tends to highlight discussions of concrete individual action (or failure to act), "situate[d]… with respect to descriptions of religion and nature religion" [65], rather than the highly generalized statements of the *Sundays & Seasons* prayers, in relation to Christian theology and practice. Despite the fact that the implied religious framing of these posts tends to fall within a broadly defined "nature religion" or spirituality, Fredericks does note that "much of the language they use to discuss their assessments of their actions – guilt, sin, confession – resonates with Western monotheistic religious traditions, especially the confessional traditions of Christianity" (70). She notes that those posting in this way have together informally created what often functions as a form of ritual (pp. 76–78). Fredericks' book is the most comprehensive and detailed study I know of on the dynamics of environmental guilt and shame, the complexity of developing appropriate ritual means of addressing them, and the ethical questions implicit throughout; see chapter 8 of her book on this latter topic.

Moreover, from a pastoral perspective, it is inappropriate to burden individuals with guilt for a problem that they did not cause and cannot carry on their own. There is also the Protestant danger of an "arrogant assumption of guilt". Those who believe that they are responsible for everything also tend to think that they must really have control over everything (Conradie, 2010, 145, note 29).[18]

One piece is clear: of all those powerful climate emotions lodged deep in the psyche of every human on Earth who has any knowledge of the crises we are facing, we liturgically ignore everything *except* guilt if confession is our sole or primary liturgical means of addressing these bigger spiritual concerns. And the fact that confession/absolution is the primary liturgical tool many ELCA congregations provide for these questions thus limits our capacity to see, hear, feel, address, and welcome the many other important climate emotions welling up in us: those divine energies whose shared expression is both terrifying and liberating, the psychic ground of the costly grace we desperately need.

C. The Practice of Corporate Confession: Does It Help?

To explore the adequacy of the current ELCA liturgical forms of corporate confession, I have examined the seasonal prayers of confession published in the online set of liturgical resources called *Sundays & Seasons*.[19] The Appendix to this article includes the texts of a representative confession from recent years, chosen from the seasons of Advent (Year B, 2023–2024) and Christmas (Year A, 2022–2023) and from Summer (Year C, 2021–2022).

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18 He continues, "See Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 279, with reference to German post-war discourse on anti-Semitism." The inline citation is to Jennings, 1988.

19 *Sundays & Seasons* is the ELCA's online repository of worship resources keyed to the three-year Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used by many Protestant churches in the U.S. and worldwide. I have looked at the resources published for the current liturgical year B (2023–2024 as I write this essay) of this three-year cycle, as well as the two preceding years: Year A (2022–2023) and Year C (2021–2022). These resources are written broadly seasonally: that is, they include a set of prayers (usually an opening rite of Confession and Forgiveness, but in the Easter season a Thanksgiving for Baptism; along with an offertory prayer, an invitation to communion, a post-communion prayer, and a final blessing) composed to be used on the Sundays and related feast days of the seasons or periods of Advent, Christmas, the Time After Epiphany, Lent, the Three Days, Easter, Summer (the Sunday following Trinity through early September), Autumn (September and October, roughly), and November. Many congregations and other worshiping bodies of the ELCA subscribe to *Sundays & Seasons* and download these resources to print into their weekly liturgical texts.

I will first comment on a larger set of problems with the use of such pre-written formulations of prayers of confession concerning dynamics that are problematic even apart from their effectiveness around questions of climate in particular. Such confessions can cause harm in several ways: first, they can put words of remorse into people's mouths that are volitionally untrue (i.e., if people don't actually repent of the sins the printed text tells them to confess, and are then told that their sins are forgiven): a classic example of cheap grace. Second, even aside from this question of a person's remorse, the printed words may bear little or no resemblance to the actual problems/sins/demons a particular person needs to be rid of. This false framing of the "sins" one is told to confess may represent a missed opportunity to go deeper; but it can also cause harm when the words one is bidden to speak do not correspond to one's actual position in relation to the issues described. For instance, as I have detailed elsewhere, a person caught in domestic abuse who is obliged to "confess" that they focus too much on themselves and ignore the needs of others may thereby find the church (by implication, also God) mirroring the perpetrator's blame of the victim for the toxic dynamics of the relationship or system and nipping in the bud, Sunday after Sunday, any nascent perceptions that the real sins needing the breakthrough of divine grace and energy are of a different order entirely: those of ignoring one's *own* needs, disregarding one's emotions and bodily perceptions, allowing one's own worth to remain effaced and invisible.[20] Sins of this sort rarely if ever appear in *Sundays & Seasons*; we hear over and over and over the voices of perpetrators and bystanders ("David"), but almost never the dynamics needing to be named and released by the sinned-against ("Bathsheba"). Finally, these prayers' narrow attention to the sins of perpetrators and bystanders noted above fails to grasp the endlessly complex

20 For instance, in the Summer Year C example in the Appendix, the assumed "we" of the confession is unapologetically persons of privilege, those who, "Instead of putting others before ourselves, [long] to take the best seats at the table." Yet many people in the world are forced into positions of submission or exploitation; for them, living in an economy that privileges "others before ourselves" represents the violent shape of their trauma, not a sin of which they are the perpetrator; learning to read against the grain of this prayer to actually *claim* one's deserving of "the best seats at the table" might represent a step of tremendous spiritual growth. In contrast, the confession for Christmas in Year A 2022 (appearing again in Year B, 2023) includes a recognition that people approach the practice of confession from very different locations: "Where we are [*this*], give us [*that*]…" This prayer is a salutary move in the direction of the kind of concreteness and truthfulness that costly grace requires. In that way it parallels the rites of Corporate Confession and Forgiveness and the confession appointed for Ash Wednesday found in the ELCA's primary worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2005). I have written at more length on these questions in Dahill, 2005.

realities either of climate change – in which middle-class worshipers of the developed West are, in a meaningful sense, *simultaneously* complicit, caught, and victim – or of the human psyche itself, in which even those labeled "perpetrators" also contain depths of trauma mirroring those of their victims and calling for the same self-love and profound self-compassion missing from these prayers.[21]

These overarching problems result in a liturgical practice misaligned with the complexity of human life. The problem continues into the concomitant practice of extending blanket absolution based on such "confessing." Only some of the prayers mention any sins in relation to creation; most leave it out entirely. Those that mention the natural world at all generally refer to it in a single line, with a statement along the lines of, "We [confess that we] have abused the gifts of creation." But every confession in all three years includes a strong statement of general forgiveness, like, "In the name of Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven."

— In the confessions that do include brief mention of creation, this strong absolution implies that the sins against creation thus noted are now released. In the absence of any perceptual or active release from one's entanglement in Business as Usual, however, such words function simply as cheap grace, helping people experience themselves as those who think regretfully in church about ecological problems; in the absence of any actual new forms of life (a form of practice that, as Bonhoeffer notes, effectively abandons people to their sin rather than breaking them free of it – and thus represents a form of cruelty).[22]
— In the texts that include no mention of creation, namely most Sundays across these three years, this absolution implies that sin in relation to creation does not even register as something needing to be faced or confessed.
— In both cases, the "great silence" remains intact.

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21 In addition to *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood*, I explore these questions in Dahill, 2010. Cf. also Park and Nelson (2001), which gathered many explorations of these voices and opened the door for continuing further work. On the need for equally attuned interspecies listening, see Dahill, 2013; and Dahill, 2022.

22 In *Discipleship*, 53–55, Bonhoeffer traces the dynamics by which "cheap grace has been utterly unmerciful to us" both communally and personally (Bonhoeffer, 2001, 53). Sarah Fredericks notes a similar caution, writing, "It can be tempting when responding to guilt or shame to seek rituals that enable one to feel better quickly, by absolving one of wrongdoing, or reframing, even dissolving the problem. Yet, moving too quickly will likely fail to address [participants'] deep-seated emotional and existential concerns as well as the physical, infrastructural, political, and social circumstances which give rise to guilt and shame" (Fredericks, 2021, 171).

These prayers prayed Sunday after Sunday, with similar ones year after year, fashion a world in which a God created in the image and likeness of dominant humans cares mostly about how dominant humans (or any humans functioning out of places of their own relative privilege) treat other humans. How those with less relative power (or any human in the places of their vulnerability and trauma) relate to themselves, G*D, and other people is not of apparent interest to the God to whom these prayers are addressed. How any of us further relate to the rest of the biosphere appears briefly and disappears again from one season to the next in seemingly random ways. How our contemporary dominant economic and legal systems place us wildly out of sync with the rest of life on Earth, destroying life systems, whole species and ecosystems, and the possibility of fruitful, beautiful life on Earth for present and future generations does not appear at all. One would never guess from devout praying of such prayers that the wound and sin at the center of our lives, that from which future generations (if they exist at all) will recoil, is our heedlessness of the active, ongoing, collectively sanctioned unraveling of the biological and social systems upon which our lives and countless other lives on Earth depend.

D. Conclusion

How then shall we pray? This is an enormous question. Dealing adequately with the overwhelming climate emotions our current crises are generating includes dimensions far beyond the church walls, including a sustained collective political response, local and systemic initiatives toward legal systems and economies able to sustain a flourishing biosphere, and efforts on all scales of conservation and restoration of lands and waters. Sustained participation in such initiatives depends on new forms of discipleship centering in costly grace. If practices of corporate confession along the lines of those found in the ELCA's *Sundays & Seasons* rites offer cheap grace, not adequately helping people address these spiritual, psychological, political, and ecological needs, what forms of ritual would be more adequate? One essential step is to include attention to the existence and needs of the world and of creatures and land/waters beyond the human in all liturgical texts, including but also moving well beyond confession. I have written elsewhere about liturgical responses unfolding in the face of contemporary ecological and eco-justice crises, namely practices of lament, of outdoor and interspecies worship, of ritual and symbolic engagement with political mobilizations and protest,

and of soul-work including dreams and deep imagination.[23] A second essential dimension is to broaden the scope of our confession – or, more precisely, of our *confessors*. Bonhoeffer famously advocated the practice of confession not merely to God alone (the classic Protestant model), nor to clergy (the classic Catholic model), but to a peer confessor. Adopting this practice with regard to the inter-species and -elemental relations we inhabit – that is, learning to confess directly to the creatures of all kinds our choices have harmed – would shift our practices of confession dramatically toward costly truth-telling and toward growth in the profound intimacy and responsibility our collective survival and Earth's thriving require. As I wrote in 2022,

To whom in your place would your ecological confession be best directed, so as to elicit greatest honesty, vulnerability, remorse, conviction, and collective urgency for real change? Or, more simply: *What if we began confessing to Earth itself, [to future generations,] and to particular creatures to whom we apprentice ourselves in love?*[24]

Finally, a more adequately Bonhoefferean confession also requires speech "in accordance with reality," or Luther's "calling a thing what it is."[25] How shall our public liturgical speech tell the real truths of our ecological situation, in ways that will animate action accordingly – so that our entire lives may be forms of truth-telling, lived in correspondence with the fullest reality we know? These are questions toward the kinds of liturgical practice Bonhoeffer's theology calls for. Such steps create a much broader liturgical scope within which the practice of corporate confession can take its proper role of liberating people from cheap grace and ecological Business and Usual, inviting them into encounter with the transforming grace Bonhoeffer describes.

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23 Dahill (Forthcoming).

24 Dahill (2022), 9, italics in original. Such practice requires deep listening first, to the creatures and places and future generations to whom we might confess; I discuss these practices at greater length, in in-depth relation to Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* (1996) and to the practice of confession, in this 2022 article.

25 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6:222–24; Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 21.

E. Appendix

Advent (Year B, 2023–2024):
Blessed be the holy Trinity, ✠ one God,
who opens the heavens
and draws near to us with salvation.
Amen.

God is patient and merciful, desiring all to come to repentance.
Trusting this promise of grace, let us confess our sin.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Everlasting God,
you love justice and you hate wrongdoing.
We confess the fear, greed, and self-centeredness
that make us reluctant to work against oppression.
We are complicit in systems of exploitation.
We choose comfort over courage.
We are careless with creation's bounty.
Look upon us with mercy.
Turn our hearts again to you.
Make us glad to do your will and to walk in your ways
for the sake of our waiting world.
Amen.

Hear these words of assurance:
God clothes you with garments of salvation
and covers you with robes of righteousness.
In the tender compassion of ✠ Jesus Christ,
your sins are forgiven.
God's covenant is eternal,
and God's blessing rests upon us all.
Amen.

Christmas (Year A, 2022-2023):
Blessed be the holy Trinity, ✠ one God,
the Word made flesh,
our life and our salvation.
Amen.

Trusting the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior,
let us confess our sin.
Silence is kept for reflection.

God of life,
you promise good news of great joy for all people,
and call us to be messengers of your peace.
We confess that too often we hoard our joy,
our resources, and our security.
We nurture conflict and build barriers.
We neglect the needs of our neighbors
and ignore the groaning of creation.
Have mercy on us.
Where we are self-centered, open our hearts.
Where we are reluctant, give us courage.
Where we are cynical, restore our trust.
Renew us with your grace
and give us again the hope of eternal life in you.
Amen.

Hear the good news:
We are children of God and heirs of God's promises
through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
In ✠ Jesus we are forgiven and redeemed.
Sing with joy, for all the ends of the earth
shall know the salvation of God.
Amen.

Summer (Year C, 2021-2022):
Blessed be the holy Trinity, ✠ one God,
whose steadfast love endures forever.
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Merciful God,
we confess that we have not followed your path
but have chosen our own way.

Instead of putting others before ourselves,
we long to take the best seats at the table.
When met by those in need,
we have too often passed by on the other side.
Set us again on the path of life.
Save us from ourselves
and free us to love our neighbors.
Amen.

Hear the good news!
God does not deal with us according to our sins
but delights in granting pardon and mercy.
In the name of ✠ Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.
You are free to love as God loves.
Amen.

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