

Engage360 Episode 129 | Exploring the Richness of Liturgy; Kathleen Mulhern

[00:00:00] **Angie Ward:** Hi friends, welcome to Engage 360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Angie Ward, and I serve at Denver Seminary as director of our Doctor of Ministry program. I'm glad to be with you here today and thank you for joining us for today's conversation. The concept of liturgy is becoming a popular word, maybe even a hot topic. I know that I have grown greatly in my understanding and experience with liturgy, having not grown up in any type of liturgical tradition but I still have a lot to learn, which is why I am excited to talk to our guest today, Dr. Kathleen Mulhern, my colleague, is interim director of the Christian Formation Program and a teaching fellow here at Denver Seminary. She is also a writer. She would say she's a reader more than a writer, but I've read a lot of her writing and she's a great writer. She's a historian, and as we record this, she is a new, again, grandmother adding a fourth grandchild. Kathleen, thanks for being here.

[00:01:17] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Thank you, Angie. Thanks for inviting me.

[00:01:19] **Angie Ward:** And I know this is your first ever podcast, so I'm honored to be the host and to do this conversation with you.

[00:01:24] **Kathleen Mulhern:** I'm in good hands.

[00:01:25] **Angie Ward:** Well, I aim for that. So, let's start, you have taught me a lot about liturgy. We've talked a bit. I've had you in my Doctor of Ministry classes, but for those who are listening and who may not understand this concept or have different conceptions of it, let's start just by what is liturgy?

[00:01:44] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, the word is actually just the work of the people. We often have thought of liturgy in terms of kind of high church kind of concepts. So, you said you were in a non-liturgical setting, and I would have certainly said growing up, I didn't grow up in a liturgical setting either. If we, however, broaden that concept of liturgy, everything we do in terms of work together in worship would be liturgy. So whatever kind of order of service you had, or I had would have been our liturgy.

[00:02:17] **Angie Ward:** And I think we may have grown up in the same tradition. I was evangelical free.

[00:02:21] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Absolutely.

[00:02:21] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, different parts of the country, but so, liturgy sounds like it can mean a couple different things. It's sort of the structure or the order of our worship. The church I grew up in certainly had a set order, and we sang certain songs. We even did a little doxology, I think, at the end. So that could be considered liturgy? Is that what you're saying?

[00:02:41] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, I think there are, as I understand it, there are like three levels to thinking about liturgy. There's a macro level, where the work of the people of God is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. In which case our larger work is all liturgical. We are meant to glorify the Lord and enjoy Him forever. That is our liturgy. That's sort of a macro sense. Then there's the middle sense, where we think of it as a church structure. The order of the service. And those kinds of, as one writer put it, visual aids to our service would be things like our music or our readings or our

preaching, and those are helps too, and they become our liturgy. But again, if we focus on those things, we're missing the larger sense, which is not to do those things, but to glorify the Lord and worship him. And enjoy him. And then there's a private sense. Where we might say the rhythms of our day are our liturgy. And the best way to think of that is not private so much as personal. We enter into the larger work of the people through our personal acts.

[00:03:59] **Angie Ward:** There's a very popular book that came out several years ago, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*. Would that be more of that kind of micro or personal level?

[00:04:08] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, I like the way the author, Tish Harrison Warren links her personal rhythms to the larger work of the people. So, every one of those chapters is a connection between a personal experience or practice or habit or life event to the larger work. So, losing her keys and confession or maybe it was her arguing with her husband and confession. Those kinds of links between the personal and the communal.

[00:04:40] **Angie Ward:** I'd like to focus on that middle layer that I think what many of us think of, which is kind of the corporate worship experience in a certain order, even beyond what I grew up in my free church tradition, this idea of the liturgy. And let me start with that question. In those contexts, is there a the liturgy?

[00:05:01] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Depends on who you talk to, of course.

[00:05:03] **Angie Ward:** Okay. Talk to me about that.

[00:05:05] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, if you are a high church sort of person particularly Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or even parts of the Episcopal and Anglican community, the liturgy, of course, is very set. These are ancient rhythms of corporate worship. And to become too innovative is to lose the liturgy. On the other hand, I do think that every sort of order of service we craft is liturgical, as long as its aim is, of course, to glorify the Lord and enjoy Him forever.

[00:05:48] **Angie Ward:** You said high church. Help explain what you mean by that for listeners.

[00:05:52] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, growing up in the evangelical free church, we would be considered low church, meaning we don't include a liturgical order, and by that, in our minds, that included prewritten prayers rather than extemporaneous prayers. It included a certain order to including things like the creed, the Nicene Creed, the Lord's Prayer, certain songs and hymns sung, certain verses said, a certain kind of prayer over the elements, all those things would be considered liturgical. And in a low church setting as you and I grew up in, those kinds of things would be modified as discerned to be necessary for the community. And in a high church, that just doesn't happen so much.

[00:06:45] **Angie Ward:** So, you said it depends on who you ask if there's a "the liturgy" and so some traditions would say there is, you said it's ancient. So how ancient if there are keepers of this tradition?

[00:07:00] **Kathleen Mulhern:** The early church sort of replicated the Jewish structures of the synagogue. And so that included certain kinds of prayers, certain readings, certain community rhythms, and the early church replicated that. So, we have to say quite ancient, actually. Obviously,

these were developed in the Christian sense over several centuries, but we have liturgies, orders of service from the 300s or so, particularly by somebody like Basil of Caesarea who would construct a liturgy and those are still being used in parts of the world.

[00:07:41] **Angie Ward:** Wow. Why liturgy? What does it do for us?

[00:07:46] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Great question. Liturgy they are these, as one writer puts it, handrails for us. So, when we grow up in the low church tradition, we are guided by some handrails, but we are left largely to cultivate our own spirituality. They're not highly formative in that sense. In a high church tradition or in a more, quote, unquote, liturgical tradition, they have more handrails. So, for instance, certain prayers from the prayer book or the missal are not just meant to be spoken rotely but are meant to help us think about and understand what we should be praying for, how we should be praying, and thus they are aids to our liturgy.

[00:08:45] **Angie Ward:** You said rotely, which made me think, I've heard a lot of criticism sometimes of liturgy being, well, that's dead liturgy. But I hear you saying, no, it's guardrails, it's a connection to tradition, there's a richness to it. What would make it dead or not dead?

[00:09:03] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, anything has the power to become dead. Even our low liturgy, our low church liturgies can be dead as a doornail. So, it isn't just rote liturgy in a high sense. Anything can become dead if, in fact, you focus on the handrails. If those become the whole point of everything you have lost sight of the higher work of the people. And yet, at the same time, C. S. Lewis talked about his experience with liturgy, and he said that the beauty of a set liturgy is that you can become so comfortable with it that you no longer think about it. And he said the best kind of a church service is a church service where you don't pay any attention to it because all your attention is on God. Now, when we become obsessed with our liturgical constructs, whether they look like dry ice and laser lights and a big band or they look like incense and chimes, when we become obsessed with those liturgical aides, we have lost sight of God.

[00:10:17] **Angie Ward:** Talk to me about the community piece. You talked about these three layers, and this middle is this community in worship. How important is it to be doing this in community? Or can I just go and, read through that kind of thing on my own in my private, quiet time?

[00:10:33] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, first of all, I would say in the truest sense, it's all communal. All three levels are communal. So that's why I wanted to differentiate between personal and private. Some writers would suggest that we don't do anything in terms of our spiritual lives privately, whether that's prayers or confessions or spiritual disciplines, all of them are done in light of the body of Christ. We are members of the body of Christ. So therefore, even our personal rhythms are done in and through the community. But I do think there is a difference when we come together. And it's important not to think of our gatherings as a bunch of personal devotions. Something else happens when we are in community, and the liturgy helps bind us in this glorification of God.

[00:11:31] **Angie Ward:** So, you know, we just talked about how you and I did not grow up in this tradition, but clearly you have a love for it. I know that you now go to a liturgical church, a church in that tradition. How did you come into this?

[00:11:44] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, my father would have asked the same question. Honestly, I was a pastor's kid, and I was a very diligent one. I attended to all the details of the evangelical world, and I enjoyed it enormously. I would never throw it under the bus. But I felt I had nibbled the grass down

to the nubbins and I no longer felt that it was feeding my soul and I just needed to experience more. And this is when I moved into an exploration of the liturgical world, the Episcopal church, and then I discovered church history. And again, in the evangelical world, we're not known for being great church historians, at the lay level. And so, discovering this richness of tradition, these ancient practices and then putting together in a community worship was really formative for me.

[00:12:55] **Angie Ward:** Tell me more about that.

[00:12:56] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, I learned how to pray in different ways. I learned how to worship in different ways. Largely we in the evangelical world think of our worship as the music part. And to recognize that from the very first entry of the cross, the procession of the cross, into the congregation among us, to the recession of the cross is worship. So, there's worship of the word, worship of the preaching, of the sacrament, to take communion every Sunday. These kinds of things helped me see a bigger vision of God and love him more.

[00:13:40] **Angie Ward:** I think it's James K. A. Smith talks about how we're formed through these habits and practices, am I right? So, tell me more again coming back to the, you've said it's been very formative to you, how does it shape us as a community into a people of God's image?

[00:14:00] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, I would suggest that it's highly participative, and insofar as we, as the people, are the people doing the worship, it shapes our imaginations, our actions, or even our joint actions together. We're standing, we're kneeling, we're making the sign of the cross, we're holding our hands out for communion. These kinds of things are not normative in evangelical settings where really what happens on the stage is the worship and the congregation is a silent participant or observer even in a lot of these situations. So, here's an example. When in our church because it's an Episcopal church, they baptize infants and we have a really big baptismal font, big, like six feet across, a basin, the water's in it. That whole font would be moved out into the narthex, out into the foyer. And when it came time for a baptism, the whole congregation would leave the sanctuary area, go out into the narthex, and gather around this font. And the visual gave us this recognition that somebody is entering into the community. So, they're not in the sanctuary yet. The priest gathers all the children around the font. All the children of the congregation, they love this part. And then we say the liturgy around a holy baptism and the child, or the adult is baptized. And then our priest starts to scoop the water and just throw it over the children. And of course, there's just shrieking and delight everywhere and water everywhere. And then this infant his or her parents lead us back into the congregation. Now it's a pretty simple structure, but the impact on us as a community, the visuals, the sensations of it, the high sensory participation is very formative around the whole concept of being included in this grace of God that is so lavish and being splashed upon us.

[00:16:20] **Angie Ward:** Wow. Yeah, what a beautiful image. You mentioned the priest who's splashing everybody. In the liturgy or a service, a gathering that practices that, what's the role of the pastor or leaders?

[00:16:35] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, they are with us they are with us in the acts of worship. And so, they are we would call them holy orders of some kind, although that's much more of a Roman Catholic term, but they have authority to institute the sacrament, and so we recognize some sort of setting apart of grace for that kind of work and in bringing the word to us.

[00:17:00] **Angie Ward:** And are there lay leaders? What other structures?

[00:17:04] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Yes so, we have deacons, and they also can do all kinds of functions of the church. There are acolytes in a liturgical world. They process the cross and they carry the candles and et cetera. We have chalice ministers who come along with the cup and share the cup with us at communion and we have a variety of other ways to participate. So, we used to have a chef in our congregation, and he would bake a fresh loaf of bread for us every Sunday morning and it was just so fragrant. And so, here's another example of formation from our own family life. We had two children, raised them in this church. And this is during that time when this gentleman was bringing the fresh bread. And we went forward one time to take communion. They would break off a big chunk and give it to us and gave one to my son who was maybe six at the time, I don't know, five or six. And we're walking away and there's a little quiet music going on and of course at the top of his voice he says, mm, mm, mm, that was good Jesus today.

[00:18:14] **Angie Ward:** Ah, that's great.

[00:18:15] **Kathleen Mulhern:** So, obviously in his understanding, he put together somehow that bread is the presence of Christ. Could he articulate that? No, but it was good.

[00:18:26] **Angie Ward:** Good Jesus. Yeah. You mentioned acolytes and chalice, all that stuff. I've attended some liturgical churches, worshiped here in Denver that, they don't have all that formality, but they have I would call the movements of the liturgy. Confession and the participation, all that kind of stuff. Is that okay? Can you pick and choose pieces, or I hear of people writing new liturgies today. How important is it to have the full formality and the historical tradition? How much can you mess with the liturgy?

[00:19:00] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, I would again return, C. S. Lewis was writing largely during a period where there was a lot of innovation to the liturgy. And a lot of the innovation, as it is today, they were efforts to grab people's interest, to make the whole service more amenable, to make it more palatable, to make it more accessible. He was grumpy about all that. And I think there is some recognition that while we want to be creative, I mean, I think our Lord calls us to be creative. Ruts are not his thing. At the same time, we have to not take our eye off the ball. So, yeah, nobody owns the liturgy. There isn't sort of a policy somewhere that people who are abandoning parts of it are violating some, some church code somewhere. They probably are to somebody, but again we have to recognize the larger purpose of the work of the people is worship. And if we've become too innovative or too tricky in our approach, we have put our attention on, wow, that was great music, rather than that made me turn my eyes to God.

[00:20:18] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. I remember the first time, this was many years ago, several stops in ministry earlier, I was talking to a friend who had gone to a more liturgical, maybe Episcopal or Anglican, and she said, I like that the personality is taken out of the worship service.

[00:20:37] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Ah, yes. It's hard to have celebrities in a truly high liturgy place because they too are constrained by this order of service. So, we don't have room as much for big personalities. There are big personalities and there are big egos, and they show up in other ways, but it does become less about who's leading it than it is about the work that we're doing together.

[00:21:10] **Angie Ward:** So, this what you're describing seems to me and in my experience kind of a foundational reframing of how we look at a worship service or a gathering and experience of all that. One of the things that struck me in my experience is the priority of the Eucharist and a weekly celebration of Communion or the Lord's Supper. As a church historian and a liturgical practitioner

and worshiper, talk a little bit about that for our listeners who may come from evangelical traditions where it's the primacy of the Word. And I know historically sometimes, like, in the Roman Catholic Church, at times, it was all about a few words to get to the Eucharist and no preaching as we would know it today or that the Reformers had. So just talk about what you've seen and learned in that balance of word and sacrament and Eucharist.

[00:22:02] **Kathleen Mulhern:** And it is very tricky because particularly in a contemporary world a typical service is expected to be about an hour and 15 minutes. You go much longer than that and people get really fussy. So, trying to bring some sort of balance into that is very delicate. Some churches find it just untenable to include Eucharist every week, largely because of the timing of it. It's time consuming to bring a communion, and the bigger the community is, the harder it is to include any kind of Eucharistic element. So, this is what drives some churches to do sort of, Eucharistic stations, you know, where people can go off and do it on their own. Speaking from a church historical perspective, that would be really problematic because this is something we're supposed to be doing together. Again, it's not private. We don't take it privately; we're taking it together as the body of Christ. So, the church has gone from one extreme to the other, and I'm talking in the most macro sense about the church, around, very little Eucharist and all big preaching, 40-minute sermons. And then Eucharist once a month, or once a quarter, or maybe just a couple times a year, to, as you mentioned, Eucharist every Sunday, and five minutes of off the cuff remarks about the gospel.

[00:23:33] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, preamble or something.

[00:23:33] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Yeah, something like that. So, obviously, both of those are a little extreme, and any leader in the church, the leaders have to find ways to craft this, to bring those together in rhythms that are helpful for worship.

[00:23:50] **Angie Ward:** So, what would you say to listeners who are not from a liturgical tradition, they may be kind of leery or a skeptical or maybe their church, they're not going to make the leap to full liturgy. What would you encourage them to learn or maybe try?

[00:24:07] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Well, some people's tolerance for anything that to them may feel like a Catholic practice. is difficult. And unfortunately, we have to let go of that, that these things are not owned by the Roman Catholics. These are ours. So, a simple suggestion, saying the Lord's Prayer together, orally, in a service. Again, it just seems like such a simple step, but I think that would be a lovely one. I think the Nicene Creed, which is universally embraced and is a rich, formative piece of literature in its own standing, but also has all these components of mystery and gospel and prayer. Try saying the Nicene Creed together out loud.

[00:25:03] **Angie Ward:** And then on the flip side, what about our brothers and sisters who are in a liturgical tradition or church maybe even, as formal as what you've described, your experience what can they learn from our more free and flexible brothers and sisters?

[00:25:20] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Yes. Well, I think that we can certainly bring to them the riches of our focus on scripture and, not that they haven't been, but to really listen to the word preached. I've been in a variety of Episcopal churches over the last many decades. And some, they have not always been great preachers. And I think we're robbing the people when we're not bringing them a good sermon.

of things to enrich their thoughts and to inform their prayers, to help them explore the goodness of God in their personal lives.

[00:26:10] **Angie Ward:** There's been, in my experience, including myself, just a renewed interest in liturgy or liturgical traditions. It seems like we're swinging more to that. Probably one reason just because, people are, it's new and to them liturgy may not be stale or dead. It's completely fresh, but What would you say? What other reasons? Why are we seeing this new interest? Why are books like liturgy of the ordinary, a book that has liturgy in the title? I would not have picked that up decades ago.

[00:26:42] **Kathleen Mulhern:** Yes, and there's also books around the Liturgy of the Hours, which have also become, there's growing interest in that kind of a thing. I think it's partly a reflection of the fact that we, particularly in the West, are so highly individualistic, so autonomous in everything, that we've kind of driven ourselves into lonely little corners. And there's some sense that these liturgical movements can bind us together in fresh ways and bring us out of our little lonelinesses.

[00:27:20] **Angie Ward:** That's great. Kathleen, thank you so much for being a guest on Engage360. You just bring an experiential perspective plus the historical, tying that whole experience and I always enjoy chatting with you and learning from you. So, thank you so much for being here.

[00:27:34] **Kathleen Mulhern:** It was a pleasure.

[00:27:35] **Angie Ward:** Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts, and you can always send us any questions or comments to podcast@denverseminary.edu. You can also visit denverseminary.edu for more information and resources, of course, about Denver Seminary including events, degree programs, other episodes of this podcast, Engage360, and full transcripts as well if it's better for you to read it than to listen. We are so grateful for your interest and support and prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you.