

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Easter

Year C

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First Commentary

The first thing to notice about our weekly gathering is the space and architecture of the building. St. James worships in a traditional style building that is based on the architectural norms of the 19th century. The altar is surrounded by a railing, and the readings have two locations like a synagogue has. Most notable of all, though, is that large arch and wooden wall that set apart the choir and altar area from the pews where the people sit. That arch is an architect's trick that does two things. First it carries the eye upward, drawing the eye toward heaven. Second it creates the optical illusion of distance, making the altar seem further from the seating of the nave than it actually is. All these elements remind us of the catholicism of our church's worship, making the altar area visually significant. Like heaven, it is the goal to which we aspire.

Our worship begins with the ceremony of gathering, highlighted by the procession of the cross into the church. The procession is not really of the choir and altar party, but of the cross, which all the faithful follow as our Lord asked: Take up your cross and follow me. Some give a slight bow as the cross goes by as a way to physically honor their faithfulness to follow Christ. We don't bow to

any members of the altar party, even if the Archbishop of Canterbury was in the procession.

Once of the ways we come together is with a hymn. Our opening hymn always praises God, whether with one of our ancient hymns, the Gloria or Kyrie, or a more modern hymn that's only two hundred years old.

Then we enter into our theological theme for the day with a collect, a prayer that collects our intention and focus for the day. Often the collect will give a hint about the themes of the readings and gospel. Episcopalians don't have volumes of theological writings like the Presbyterians and Lutheran's do. If you want to know what Episcopalians believe, read the collects in the prayer book.

Then we listen to the scripture and psalms. We sit for the readings until we come to the Gospel. We stand for the gospel because that is one of two high points in the service. The sermon takes longer, and the prayers may be more heartfelt, but the Gospel is the centerpiece. We stand for the Gospel in the same way that a gentleman stands when a lady enters the room — it is a sign of honor, given for the gospel as the symbol of receiving Jesus Christ into the history of the human condition.

Everything after the Gospel reading until we bring our offerings to the table are in response to the scripture. The sermon is a reflection on the

readings, and the creed is the summary of what the scriptures lead us to believe.

Our intercessory prayers on Sunday morning are a different kind of time for praying than our daily prayers are. Liturgical prayer is an act of the church rather than a time of personal prayer. The gospel leads us to declare the salvation of God for all the world, and our intercessions are our way to offer the world and the whole of its condition to God. Our prayers are more like the closing argument of an attorney: Having heard the evidence of the scripture, having weighed the implications of the evidence in the sermon and creed, we now offer the prayers of our conclusions back to God.

If God is saving the world, then in the prayers we remind God of the condition of the world and we remind ourselves of the hope we have proclaimed in the gospel. If God cares for every individual, then in the prayers we remind God of the conditions of individuals in need and ourselves of the good news of healing and redemption promised for them in our Savior Jesus Christ. If God forgives us our sins, then we pause to confess them and make peace with God before bringing our gifts to the altar, reminding God of our trust in him.

So we have begun: We stand for the great parade, the procession of the cross into the midst of the faithful.

Second Commentary

I asked you to sit before the Peace so that I could remind you of three priorities I'd like you to keep in mind for how we exchange it. First off, the Peace is our final prayer of this part of the service. So as we greet one another, the language is not the casual greeting of the office or grocery store. It's not, Hey, how are you? It is a prayerful greeting: The Peace of the Lord be with you, or God's peace be with you. Second, the Peace is a way of keeping our Lord's commandment: If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift for the altar and go make peace first. Then come and bring your offering to the altar. The peace is a moment in which it is possible to offer a brief apology or forgiveness to someone else before taking communion with a heart out of communion with a brother or sister. Finally, while the Peace is not meant to be the coffee hour, it is a time to look for another Christian you have not met before and introduce yourself. If you learn that the person you've met is visiting or new to St. James, take some responsibility for helping introduce that person to others.

From here we move into the second act of the liturgy, the celebration of Holy Communion. There are four parts to this act: First, we make an offering to the Lord. We do this by way of the gifts we give in the offering plate, but also with the bread and wine and water of the communion. Second, we bless the gifts with the church's great prayer of Thanksgiving or Eucharist. Eucharist is the Greek

word for Thanksgiving. Our nation celebrates thanksgiving once a year; the church celebrates with thanksgiving every Sunday. The third act is breaking the bread we've offered so that all the faithful eat and drink from the same vessels. Symbolically the priest breaks the large wafer as a sign of breaking one for all. The fourth act of the communion is giving the offering back to the people, now as the body of Christ and the cup of forgiveness.

And that may be the most important aspect of the sacrament. Our Lord promised that we would see him in the midst of this life, hidden in the things of this world. Bread becomes the body of the Lord. The cup of wine becomes the blood of the Lord. This doesn't happen literally, as the medieval church labored to understand the mystery. This happens spiritually, as we look for and pray to recognize Christ present in all things.

This is how we understand Paul's teaching to give thanks and praise to God in the midst of all things. This is how we understand the baptismal covenant to seek Christ in all persons. It is not that all things are Christ or that everything has a divine existence. But in all things Christ can become available, and in the midst of everyone the invitation of Christ to new life can be discovered.

We all join in the affirmation of these actions of the communion. There is only one place in the whole prayer book where the Amen is printed in capitals, at the end of the priest's prayer of

thanksgiving. Whether we say it or we sing it, the Great Amen is an acclamation. We offer it loudly, boldly, and emphatically. It is the Great Amen of the the whole church, offering thanks and praise to God on behalf of the whole creation, for all the living and for all the dead, for angels and saints and all the company of heaven. It is the Amen of triumph, that in Christ the church is remembering for all things the perfection toward which God is carrying the whole creation.

So the second act begins. We offer our gifts to God. We bless God for them and give thanks to God for what we have been given to offer. We break our offering open, so that it can be shared with others. We receive our offering back, no longer as our own possession but as the mystery of of our redemption, as the sacred gift of God back to us.

Third Commentary

This liturgy has two acts. We have finished both of them. All that's left is the epilogue. We pause to tend to the business of seeing that the sick and shut in can share in our fellowship of the sacrament. We briefly thank God for this time and ask for it to shape the week to come. We receive the priest's blessing for our week. And then the Deacon sends us back into the world to be the church.

And that's where the church is. This campus is not the church. This building is not the church. St. James is not this; St. James is you, the faithful who agree to meet as the body of Christ. This gathering is the time for us to honor the day of the Resurrection, to offer a public witness to our faith in Jesus Christ, and to participate in spiritual growth by hearing and reflecting on the Gospel with each other. But once that is done, the chief thing to do is go.

And the going is a public action of the church, a demonstration that we are all sent back into the world. The cross is again the point of the procession from the church, not the altar party. The altar party are honored by getting to go first, but they are only first (but it is polite to wait until the priest or bishop has already gone by. The exception would be for children to spill out and walk with me as we head outside.)

The cross goes by to lead you out of the church. So let me ask again, as the procession

goes by, leave the pews and join in. You've said all the prayers you need to say for this morning, and you've already thanked God for this time.

Remember, this is not the hour for your private prayers. You need to find your own time for that. This is the hour for public action, for the drama of the pageant of our proclamation of Jesus Christ.

So when the deacon says Go, get ready to go. This parade is for you, not for me. You are the church following the cross back into the world.