

An Instructed Eucharist

St. Paul's, Henderson, July 29, 2012

This morning we will celebrate an Instructed Eucharist, explaining some of the words, actions, and meanings of our worship as we go along. Whether you are a visitor to Saint Paul's this morning or have been attending for years, we hope that this instruction will help you understand and more fully appreciate our worship. For those who may be worried about such things, please know that we have put this together to take up the same amount of time normally used by Fr. Rich's sermon.

For awhile in the middle of the twentieth century, the Church reserved the celebration of the Eucharist to once a month, or to the early Sunday service. With the development of the current Book of Common Prayer, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, was restored to its position as the central act of worship in the Episcopal Church. This follows the custom of the early Christian Church who, we are told in Scripture, began meeting on the first day of the week to share stories of Jesus's life, to share prayers for strength and courage, and to share bread and wine in remembrance of their risen and ascended Lord. It also follows the command of Jesus himself who said, "Whenever you do this..."

The Eucharist is our *job* as Christians. By definition, liturgy is the work of a grateful people. It is the work of worship owed to the God who sustains us and strengthens us, *and* it is a rehearsal for the real work we leave this place to do – the work of showing forth God's love to the whole world. The Eucharist is, in words we often repeat, our bounden duty and service in worship of the God who has given us, and continues to give us so very much.

The Eucharist is a ritual dance, rehearsing and reliving the wonders and mysteries of Christ's presence in our lives each time we celebrate. In some places, "liturgical dance" is used to describe artistic additions to the liturgy, set pieces designed to adorn the celebration, usually in some form of modern dance. But the tradition of liturgical dance is as old as any of the traditions of the Church. In a moment the members of the worship leadership team, the choir, the acolytes, the lay ministers and the clergy will process to their places and will continue the fluid movements that have defined the dance for hundreds of years. What's more, all of us participate in the dance as we stand to praise, sit to listen, and kneel to pray.

Most of all, the Eucharist is a meal. It is such a *stylized* meal that we sometimes forget that the Lord's Supper began with an *actual* supper, Jesus's last with his friends before he was crucified. We gather together as family around the Table of the Lord, we eat bread and drink wine together, and in these symbols we relive the gifts of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we are nourished for the continuing journey of our own lives.

We begin this morning by standing and singing together hymn number 304.

After the Collect of the Day:

Having gathered for our worship, for our service, and for our communion, we continue by hearing the Word of God as revealed in Holy Scripture. We believe the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments to *be* the Word of God and through the three-year rotation of the Lectionary, those who are regular in attendance, over time hear a great deal of the Old Testament, most of the New Testament Epistles, and nearly all of the Gospels. Since the First Sunday of Advent 2005, rather than the Lectionary published as part of the Book of Common Prayer, the Episcopal Church uses a variant of the Revised Common Lectionary developed in cooperation with other denominations that have found value in following such a systematic way of looking at the Scriptures.

A reading from the second book of Samuel...

After the reading of the Gospel the second Reader returns to the lectern and continues:

After the reading of Scripture, as a community we respond to those readings. Normally the Rector offers a commentary in the form of a sermon. Today, of course this instruction takes the place of the sermon. We continue with the affirmation of our faith in the words of the ancient Nicene Creed, the summary of the orthodox faith of the Church from a time before divisions and schisms and denominations.

Please stand and turn to page 358 in the Prayer Book.

After the Creed:

Normally, we would remain standing, but please be seated.

In the next phase of our worship, we turn to God in prayer. For many years, the prayers at this point in the service were known as “The Intercessory Prayer” and was offered by the priest on behalf of the people. The latest Prayer Book changed the name to the “Prayers of the People” to clearly reflect that prayer is the function of *all* God’s people – prayer is the duty and the responsibility of each and every member of the community of the faithful.

We offer prayers for the Universal Church, its members, and its mission; for the Nation and all in authority; for the welfare of the world; for the concerns of our local community; and for the departed.

Though we generally kneel to pray at Saint Paul’s, we usually stand for Prayers of the People. Actually, standing is a much *older* posture of prayer than kneeling, and the rubrics, the instructions of the Prayer Book, generally suggest either posture for any prayer. Following the general prayers, we move to a time of specific prayer of confession. Most of us kneel for this prayer in humble and devout recognition of our unworthiness to receive any gift from a righteous God. We then hear the absolution of God pronounced by the Celebrant and exchange a sign of our reconciliation with God and with one another. Passing the Peace of God is new to the American Church with the latest Prayer Book, but it is one of the oldest elements of the Christian liturgy, being commended by St. Paul himself. This exchange is not meant as a casual greeting or recess break in the middle of the service, but as an opportunity to make sure that our heart is at peace with those against whom we may have transgressed or with whom our relationship needs affirmed or mended. At St. Paul’s we are quite generous in sharing the Peace, but care should be taken to honor those who choose to continue in quiet prayer in response to Christ’s reconciling mercy.

Let us stand and turn to page 388 as we continue...

After the announcements the first Reader returns to the lectern and continues:

We continue with the offertory. Here we give back to God from the gifts he has given us. That is why we bless *all* of our gifts and our selves to his use, and what we mean when we say, “All things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” In the early centuries of the Church, Christians brought bread and wine *with* them to worship – for the Eucharist, *and* for the relief of the needs of the community. Today this gift is symbolized by our tithes and offerings and by the ushers bringing forward the bread and wine prepared for use in our Celebration.

After the bread and wine are received, the table is prepared with the elements of Communion. After Communion, the elements are cleared from the table and the vessels cleansed in as efficient a manner as possible and placed back in their beginning order to remind us that even though this particular worship service is ending, the Sacraments continue to be the center of our lives in Christ.

Sometimes, the choir presents the gift of an offertory anthem, or some other musical offering. Other times, as we will this morning, we share in offering a hymn as we offer the other gifts of our hearts.

Please remain seated and turn to Hymn number 693.

After the offering has been brought forward:

We come now to the junction between prayer and action as we are all called to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ that are offered to us in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. We believe that Jesus Christ is *really* present in these symbols for one simple reason: not through anything we have said or done, but because he himself said so. He did not say that the bread would merely *remind* us of his body, or that the wine would be *like* his blood, but that the bread *is* his body, and the wine *is* his blood. We accept these fruits of his sacrifice for us and make them a part of who we are.

In the Episcopal Church we understand that these gifts are given to the Church, not as we see it on earth, divided and sometimes torn, but as Christ *himself* sees it – the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, united as the Body of Christ. With that in mind, visitors are reminded that Communion is open to *any* Christian, and we hope that every baptized child of God, regardless of background or age, will join us in this celebration of praise and thanksgiving.

Our liturgy continues on page 361.

After the Invitation the second reader continues:

The methods of receiving the elements of Communion vary greatly by place and time. Here at St. Paul's we generally come forward by way of the central aisle to receive the elements kneeling or standing at the Altar Rail wherever there is an opening. If you have difficulty coming forward, please let an usher know, so that Communion can be brought to you in the pew. Remember that if kneeling is difficult for you, standing at the Rail is perfectly acceptable. The ushers station themselves at the Chancel steps for the sole purpose of being of assistance getting up and down the steps.

At the Rail, the bread is received either by opening your mouth to have it placed on your tongue, or, much more commonly at St. Paul's, by placing your hands together to receive the wafer in your palm. There is no theologically or liturgically prescribed way of putting the wafer in your mouth.

At St. Paul's we have two ways to receive the wine. If you have consumed the bread, the Eucharistic Minister will bring a chalice from which you may sip the consecrated wine. It is acceptable, and very helpful, to take hold of the bottom of the chalice to assist in guiding it to your lips. If you would prefer to intinct, you may also hold the wafer in your hands and the Eucharistic Minister will bring a different chalice into which you may dip the bread before consuming it.

If you feel you should refrain from taking the bread or the wine, this fact is generally made know by crossing your arms over your chest. If you do not receive the bread, the Priest will offer a blessing.

When you have received Communion, you may return to your seat by the most convenient way and continue in prayer as others receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

After the blessing the second Reader once again goes to the lectern and concludes:

Having heard the Word of God in Scripture, having proclaimed the Word of God to one another in the Creed and the Prayers, having experienced the Word of God in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, we now go forth to *share* the Word of God with those with whom we come in contact in the world. We process from here with the desire to do the work in the world that we have been given to do, strengthened and equipped for that task with the gifts of God for the people of God.