

A few months ago, Rhett and I had an idea to preach back to back sermons on the theology of our Sunday Eucharist, on why we do what we do. I would talk about the Liturgy of the Word in the first sermon and Rhett would take on the Great Thanksgiving in the second.

It seemed like a good idea a few months ago. We'll see if we were right.

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Two things before we get into the details.

First, a big thank you to Jim Farwell, my liturgy professor from seminary. Jim is an excellent teacher and thanks to the miracle of YouTube I can continue to learn from him.

A lot of what I'll say today I learned from him.

Second, he taught me that as a priest you communicate a lot about your pastoral care through how you preside over worship. Do you seem approachable, trustworthy, faithful, or kind?

I'll expand on that idea to say that a parish communicates to newcomers who they are through how they worship every bit as much as the priest communicates his pastoral care of the members.

Holy Trinity, you reveal yourself to our newcomers every Sunday. They will get a feel of whether this parish is faithful, is kind to one another, is open to new people.

Newcomers may show up with a slight curiosity about all this God stuff, or they may come with a desperate longing to hear the good news of salvation, but whatever they're looking for, they'll sense from how we worship together whether they'll find it here or not.

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Now, the first thing we do on Sunday is gather.
Sounds obvious but it's really important.

We gather as the body of Christ in this place and this time,
because we are not individuals standing near each other.
We are saved together or not at all.
So before anything, we gather as a people.

At Holy Trinity that starts with a hymn
because nothing gathers us together quite like singing.

The choir could do something beautiful, or Will could do something alone,
but nothing gathers a people together like having the good singers,
the bad ones, the loud ones, and the quiet ones,
all grab their hymnals and become a people by praising God together.

“O, for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer's praise!”

After the hymn, our worship formally begins with a beautiful acclamation
and a statement about who God is:

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be God's Kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Then a beautiful prayer asking God to cleanse us from distraction,
and right into a word of praise. We might sing our praise or say it,
and it might be the words of the Gloria, the Kyrie, the Trisagion,
or a hymn, but worship begins by praising God.

And our final act of gathering is a prayer we call the collect of the day.
Each collect is unique for that Sunday of the year,
and each one asks God to guide us in ways that are similar
to what we'll hear in our scripture readings that day.

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Now that we've gathered,

the first thing we do is break open God's holy word.

This is pretty straightforward but let me point out a few things
you may not have thought about.

First, and y'all probably know this one,

we read 3 lessons from the Bible each Sunday:

one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament,
and then another New Testament reading from one of the 4 gospels.

Second, and you might know this, too,

the lessons are not chosen by the preacher.

The lessons follow a 3-year cycle that was agreed upon by churches
all over the world.

Not all of them, but a lot of churches from a lot of countries
agreed to keep this same schedule as a statement
that we are all one in Christ.

If you think about it, that's pretty wonderful.

Third, all three readings should have some kind of connecting theme,
and that theme should point to God's saving work in Christ.

Fourth, the psalm is not a 4th lesson, but a response to God's word.

The psalms are our ancient and holy songbook of response
to God's presence in our lives.

Fifth, the lessons for the day are not just a duty to be checked off,
and they are definitely not a setup for the sermon.

Proclaiming God's holy word is, or should be,

one of the most important things we do in worship.

The sermon is just a response to that proclamation,
and the responsibility to give God's word its proper impact
is not on the preacher, but on both the readers AND the listeners.

At Holy Trinity we try to keep the door for this ministry as open as it can be.
We want young readers and readers whose voices don't have
the strength they used to, and readers who want to get
more involved but are nervous about being in front of people.
That's how it should be for a parish church.

But we should still expect the very best of whatever each person has to offer
when they proclaim God's word, and we should expect
the best from ourselves in listening to God's word.

Children, force your parents to coach you
and listen to you practice over and over.

Those of you whose voices don't carry like they used to
and those of you nervous about public speaking,
force yourselves to take a breath & get settled,
and make sure the microphone is just right for you.

And those of you who can do this ministry really well,
I challenge you to not get lazy.

How will you, our strongest readers, proclaim the saving works of God?

Do you know the meaning of the words,
or have you just mastered saying them out loud?

Do you have a handle on Paul's complicated syntax,
or the poetry of the prophets, or the wildness of John's vision?

Readers, your job is to break open the Gospel of God
in the Old Testament and New,
so that the rest of us can understand its power.

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The sermon is a lot of things. This sermon...is just a lot.

I'll say two things about sermons.

First, up until now everything we have said has been written in a book.

It has been universal, appropriate for every church around the world.

But the sermon is the time to be specific to this time and this place.

What does God's word say to THIS gathering on THIS day?

The second thing is that a preacher's job is not only to help

the gathered body understand the scriptures,

but also to express the hope that is in YOU.

There's nothing special about being a preacher,

just like there's nothing special about being a priest or deacon or bishop.

Our core identity is the same as yours: baptized child of God.

But the preacher's job is not only to break open the word of God

but also to break open his own baptismal life

to show that God's work is not confined to the covers of the Bible.

My job is to invite all of you into the very same discipleship

that I share with you.

Friends, whatever their style, whatever their skill,

whether you agree with them or not,

that's what you should expect of your preacher:

they should point to God's work in the world,

and they should show you the hope that is in them.

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And then comes the Nicene Creed.

I've heard rumors that not everybody loves the creed.

We could spend weeks studying it

and I could spend lots and lots of energy trying to convince you
how wonderful and crucial it is,

but today let me give you two quick thoughts.

First, the Nicene Creed is our COLLECTIVE statement of faith.

Each Sunday we gather as the body of Christ and that means

we gather as the body of Christ across time and space,

with the living and the dead,

and the Nicene and Apostles Creeds are the profession of faith

for the whole church.

So if you want to fuss about or critique some aspect of the creed, go ahead.

If you want to write your own personal creed, I think that's a great idea.

But when we gather as Christ's body on the Lord's Day,

we profess our collective faith using the words of the Nicene Creed.

The second thing is that the Creed is a necessary corrective

to the excesses of the moment.

As a preacher, the pressures of the moment can lead you

in all kinds of directions.

Sometimes you pray and you study and you think and you still get it wrong.

The creed helps protect us from that.

Having heard what was on the heart of the preacher

at this very particular moment,

the Creed returns us to the eternal work of God.

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Now, two things about our prayers of the people.

First, the prayers are our response to the proclamation of God's word.

Before we go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

our first act of service is to bow our heads and pray.

Just like Jesus prayed before he went to his passion,

so we pray before we go out the world.

When the pressures of your life build up or when you see injustice in the world and you think to yourself, "What do I do? What do I do?"

remember that before you do anything, you pray to God.

First, you pray. Then you act.

Second, if I'm honest, we could do a better job with our prayers.

The prayers are like the sermon.

They're our chance to move from the universal to the specific.

What is on the mind of the gathered body this day?

What are the joys and longings and question of our hearts

and what suffering have we known

that we need to name before God?

Our prayers at the rail are good but we need to give more room

for our specific prayers each Sunday.

I'm not sure how to do that but I hope you'll think about it with me.

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Three quick things about confession.

First: presiders, we need to give the gathered body time and silence to gather our thoughts, time to make our confession before God.

Second: when we kneel and confess our sins to God, don't forget that this is a collective confession.

Along with your own personal shortcomings,
how has this parish, this part of the body of Christ,
failed to live out God's call in thought, word, and deed?

We won't change until we recognize and confess our collective sins as well as our individual ones.

Third, and hopefully this is obvious, but it's worth saying just in case, forgiveness comes from God, not from the priest.

We pronounce God's forgiveness.

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And finally, the Peace, the shortest part of our liturgy.

"The Peace of the Lord be always with you. And also with you."

One last Proclamation and Response.

At most parishes, the Peace is light and easy. Smiles, hugs, & handshakes.

And that's how it should be because most parishes
are more or less at peace with one another.

But it isn't always that way, not here. Not anywhere.

There will be a day when either the parish is divided as a whole,
or when you are in conflict with a sister or brother here.

On that day, peace is not easy. Peace is not a given.

When those days come, take the Peace seriously.

St. Paul warns us that the danger is great if we receive
the body and blood of our Lord improperly,
without being at peace with one another.

If one day you cannot offer or accept the peace of the Lord
from a sister or brother in the parish,
then you sit and pray during communion.

Do not take the Lord's presence into your body
if you are not at peace with your sisters and brothers in Christ.

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Gather. Proclaim. Profess. Pray. Confess. Be at Peace.

That is the first half of our service.

Now you are ready to come boldly before the throne of grace.
Now you ready to come to the banquet of that most heavenly food.

Amen.