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12 MOMENTS

REFLECTIONS FOR AN
INSTRUCTED EUCHARIST
BY ADAM THOMAS

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INTRODUCTION THREE FUNCTIONS OF WORSHIP

In this pamphlet, we are going to look at what happens during a standard church service – well, at least a standard one in the Episcopal tradition. We are going to look at some of the *whys* behind our actions and our words. I think this is important because of the third function of our Sunday worship.

Wait. The “third” function, you say. Oh, right, now I have to tell you numbers One and Two. Well, the first function of our worship is to give glory to God. The actual act of worshiping our creator is central to our...well...worship. One of my favorite Greek words is the word for “worship.” It literally translates as “to kiss towards.” Think about leaning in to kiss your date. You don’t go all the way just in case he or she doesn’t want to kiss you back. In worship, God goes 90% and our desire to praise is the other ten. We praise God because God draws praise out of us, not because God needs the adoration. We praise because God’s very presence causes us to bend towards God.

The second function is the gathering of the community for support and building up of one another in the power of the Spirit. Again, I know you’ve heard this before, but it always bears repeating. “Church” is not a building. It’s a gathering of people who come together to worship God.

These first two functions of weekly worship are wonderful, but this third function of our liturgy is quite important, too. The third function is that the week in week out service gives us something around which to structure our lives. Each moment in the Eucharistic liturgy points to a way in which we can live out each day. Over the next twelve pages, we’ll look at some of these moments and see how they inform our daily walks with Christ.

MOMENT #1

TRANSFORMATION (CARRYING THE CROSS)

At the head of the procession an acolyte carries the cross. Have you ever wondered why we do that? There are a couple of reasons and the most obvious one can keep us from seeing the less obvious one. The obvious one is that the cross is the most recognizable Christian symbol of all – and Jesus tells us to pick up our crosses and follow him. What better way to remember that command than to carry one during our church services?

But the less obvious reason for carrying the cross into and out of the service has to do with what the cross represents. The cross was made specifically to kill someone in a very painful, very public way. The Romans would line with crosses the main roads leading to cities to remind those they had conquered about the consequences of defying Rome. Thus the cross was a means to induce fear, which led to domination and control.

But Jesus changed all that. While the Romans continued to put people to death using crosses after Jesus rose from the dead, the trajectory of the cross as a symbol has arced toward freedom, love, hope, salvation and the constancy of relationship. These are the utter opposites of the Roman definition of the cross. The keyword here is “transformation.” Jesus transformed the cross from an instrument of death into an instrument of life.

We carry the cross into and out of church services to remind ourselves that when we are in worship, we too are participating in a transformative action. Worshiping God changes us, transforms us into more active servants, more loving people. And the cross is a symbol of that transformation.

MOMENT #2

INVITATION (THE COLLECT FOR PURITY)

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.
(BCP p. 355)

The prayer above is called the “Collect for Purity,” and at a typical Episcopal worship service this is the first prayer of the day, following an opening greeting that varies with the season. A “collect” (pronounced with the stress on the first syllable) does just what you think it does. It collects (emphasis on the second syllable) the themes of the day into one prayer that acts as something of a thesis statement for that particular day’s worship. There is a “Collect of the Day” that changes every week, which comes a minute or two later in the service.

But this “Collect for Purity” doesn’t change. It is the same week in and week out. The Collect for Purity, then, is less about collecting the themes of the day and more about collecting ourselves to be ready to worship. With this collect, we open ourselves up to God’s action in our lives. We invite God into the space that God already inhabits, thus giving ourselves a better chance at noticing God’s presence.

The first line of the collect says three true things about God. By addressing God as the one to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, we ready ourselves to open our hearts. The beginning of this prayer helps us take our masks off; it helps us take our guard down so that we can let God in.

The second part of the prayer asks God to send the Holy Spirit to inspire our worship so that we can love more perfectly, thereby “magnifying” God’s holy name. When you magnify, you makes something bigger and thus clearer. That’s what our worship does. When God opens our hearts, we can discover just how big and how close God is to us.

MOMENT #3
REJOICE ALWAYS (THE GLORIA)

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory... (BCP p. 356)

For most of the church year (excluding Advent and Lent), the familiar words above follow the Collect for Purity. They make up what is known as the “Gloria” (short for “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*,” which is just the first line in Latin). For much of the church’s history the Gloria actually came near the end of the service, rather than near the beginning. The Gloria does good work in either place – either as a culmination of our praise or an introduction to it. We do it at the beginning, so we’ll discuss it in that location.

At the beginning of the service, the Gloria helps us to remember the first reason why we worship. We worship because God’s very being draws praise from us. Our fundamental nature as children of God includes the instinct to worship, and when we come together on Sunday mornings, that instinct plays out – not because God needs to be flattered or appeased, but because God’s love causes us to desire to praise.

But this praise doesn’t end at the conclusion of the Gloria or at the conclusion of the service. By praising God with these words every week, we exercise our praising muscles, which helps us to live by Paul’s instruction to “rejoice always” (1 Thessalonians 5). We say the Gloria each Sunday whether or not we feel much like praising God, whether or not there is much to rejoice about. When we praise even if we don’t feel much life praising, we are not being hypocrites. Rather, we are acknowledging a truth about life – that even in our darkest days, there is always a glimmer of light; that even when we are being crushed by the weight of dire circumstances, there is always some small reason for joy. Sometimes just a sliver, but that sliver is a tether to the God who never abandons us and will patiently wait until we are ready to praise again.

MOMENT #4
LIVE THE GOOD NEWS (THE READINGS & SERMON)

Our fourth moment is really several moments stitched together. In a standard service, we read several items from the Bible, and then a preacher delivers a sermon inspired by something in one of the readings. Rather than giving the sermon its own moment, we weave it together with the readings because the two shouldn’t be separated. We call the readings “The Word of the Lord,” and we hope to hear a message that is a word *from* the Lord. Faithful preaching is a mysterious mixture of study, prayer, listening, and proclaiming, all wrapped in trust that the Holy Spirit is present in the spoken word so that the lowly words of the preacher might be elevated into lofty inspiration from God.

But let’s back up a step and look at the readings. In a typical service, we read a lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures (often called the “Old” Testament), a portion of one of 150 psalms (which were basically the hymnal to the ancient Hebrews), a lesson from the New Testament (usually part of a letter written to a church or a person), and a lesson from one of the four accounts of the Gospel. We bring the Gospel into the midst of the people as an example for what the Gospel calls us to do; that is, to bring the Good News (which is what “Gospel” means) out into the world through our proclamation, our service, and our love.

The sermon follows the readings not only because its purpose is to elucidate them, but also because the sermon shows that the Word of God is still alive. The sermon takes the passages from the Bible, which have been set for nearly 2,000 years, and shows what happens when the Holy Spirit encounters us through the text. In each sermon, the Holy Spirit breathes new life, new interpretation, and new interactions between us and the Word. Every sermon, therefore, is a life-giving engagement with God’s Word.

Thus, our fourth moment is about meeting God in the ancient text, which is just as alive now as it was 2,000 years ago. Because it is alive, it can seep into our beings and dwell within us, animating us to be God’s messengers to a world sorely in need of good news.

MOMENT #5
TRADITION (THE CREED)

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. (BCP p. 358)

Our fifth moment in our worship service links us to all of the followers of Jesus Christ that have gone before us. We speak the words of the Creed (usually the “Nicene” Creed), thus setting ourselves in the tradition of our forebears who transmitted the faith to us. The church has survived for as long as it has because of this transmission of tradition. The church has gone through its difficult periods, its divisions, its dark times, but it has persisted.

The Nicene Creed was compiled through the work of the First Ecumenical Council held in the year 325 at Nicaea in modern day Turkey. A main topic of discussion at the meeting had to do with exactly who Jesus was. Was he, as the Second Person of the Trinity, of one being with the Father, who is the First Person of the Trinity? Or was he just a really swell guy, the best person ever, but still a being created by God and thus not one with God? The latter view was pretty popular, but there was a big problem with it: if Jesus were just the best person ever, then worshiping him was idolatry.

So the Council promulgated the former view – that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was of one being with the Father, who with the Holy Spirit was one God in a Trinity of persons. It wasn’t as cut and dried as these two paragraphs make it out to be, but that’s the gist of what happened.

The important thing to remember for our discussion is that we are inheritors of this tradition. We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, and so on and so forth. Whenever we say these words, we echo the billions of people who have said them before, thus linking us with the great cloud of witnesses that supports us during our worship.

MOMENT #6
PRAYER IS CENTRAL (THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE)

In the very center of our service, we come to our sixth moment – the Prayers of the People. I love the fact that these prayers fall in the middle because their location reminds us of the centrality of prayer in our lives. Of course, the entire service is prayer, but in the very center we find these prayers dedicated to God working in very specific facets of our lives and in the life of the world.

Indeed, the Prayers of the People follow a prescribed formula. We pray for “The Universal Church, its members, and its mission; the Nation and all in authority; the welfare of the world; the concerns of the local community; those who suffer and those in any trouble; and the departed.”

In each of these categories, we invite God to be present and to be at work. But these categories also function as the map for our own service. When we pray these prayers, we can ask ourselves how we are participating in God’s work in each area – in the church, in our country, in the world, in our local community, among those who are in trouble. In the final category we pray for those who have died to remind ourselves that our service to God and God’s relationship with us does not end when we pass away. Rather, the relationship becomes more perfect. This hope propels us to continue working to bring God’s reign ever closer here on earth.

Prayer is central to our lives. Anything we do in response to God’s movement is prayer – this includes kneeling at our bedsides, serving at the homeless shelter, singing songs of praise, sitting in silence just listening, and so many other responses that it would take a lifetime to list them all. The more we strive to be responsive to God’s call in our lives, the more we will be praying, and the more central will God be as we move through our days.

MOMENT #7

BE PART OF THE SOLUTION (THE CONFESSION OF SIN AND ABSOLUTION)

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent... (BCP p. 360)

The seventh moment is the Confession of Sin, and its location is no accident in the service of Holy Eucharist. We confess our sins very soon before we receive communion. This gives us an opportunity to examine our consciences, ask for and accept forgiveness from God, and then take in the nourishment offered through communion so that we can be strengthened to follow Christ more closely in our lives. The Confession comes right after the Prayers of the People because the prayers help us see where we have fallen short, where we have missed the mark, where we have separated ourselves from God. The Confession of Sin and the Absolution proclaimed on God's behalf by the priest reconcile us to God, repairing the relationship that we have let slip but which God never abandons.

But there's something more to the Confession of Sin. Notice in the words above that the Confession is entirely plural. When we confess during the service, we confess as a group. We confess our complicity in all of the big sins of the world that we are part of simply because we exist in a system that is broken. We may not be able right away to break out of that system, but by confessing our complicity we show our desire to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. The reconciliation that happens through the Confession and Absolution reconnects us to God, who is the source of the solution. Thus, we are able to pull ourselves just a little bit more out of the muck of the broken system of this world.

The more we confess this corporate sin, the more readily are we able to see the brokenness in the system for what it consists of – injustice, domination, disparity, fear, apathy. Why would we want to be part of that?

MOMENT #8

PRACTICING PEACE (THE PEACE)

Our eighth moment in the typical worship service is something that wasn't part of a typical worship service until a little more than thirty years ago. Well, let me rephrase – the passing of the peace of the Lord is one of the oldest traditions in the worship of the Christian church, dating back to the “kiss of peace” in the earliest days of Christianity. Then at some time over the centuries, it fell out of practice, only to be recovered in the Book of Common Prayer that we use now in the Episcopal Church.

The Peace is the fulcrum of the service, the pivot point between the liturgy of the Word (everything we've been discussing up until now) and the liturgy of the Table (everything we will discuss following this). We have praised God, listened to scripture and interpretation, said what we believe, prayed, and confessed our sins. Soon we will partake of Holy Communion. But first, we pause to practice greeting one another with the peace of God.

Peace is not just the absence of conflict. In a greater sense, peace is the abiding presence of God. When we greet one another with the peace of God, we express our desire that the other may forever be held in the palm of God's hand, may forever abide in God's presence. During our worship, we practice this greeting in the safe space of the church among those with whom we feel comfortable. It becomes easy to bring God's peace to our fellow churchgoers.

But the challenge is taking the peace of God out into the world where it is sorely needed. Just imagine how different we could make the world if we brought with us into every handshake and high five and wave and embrace, the peace, which passes all understanding. God's abiding presence exists with or without our awareness of it, but when we move through our lives wrapped in the peace of God, we will affect everyone we encounter for the better.

MOMENT #9
GIVING BACK (THE OFFERTORY)

Our ninth moment is easy to miss because in the Book of Common Prayer there is no bold heading that says the “Offertory” and no dialogue between the leader and the people. The leader can say a sentence from scripture to trigger the beginning of the offertory, but the suggested words are tucked away in a different place in the book. Often, the choir sings a beautiful anthem during the passing of the collection plates, so unless you are aware of the plate sliding by you, you are liable to miss the whole thing.

But the offertory is just as important as any other piece of our service. In a symbolic action, representatives from the people bring to the altar the gifts of bread and wine and money or other gifts. In most churches the gifts of bread and wine come up first and then a few minutes later the money comes up, thus severing the intimate connection between the two. So let’s imagine for a moment that all the gifts arrive at the altar together. What would we see?

First we would see the bread placed before God, a symbol of the bounty of the earth that the Lord has made. Human hands took that bounty and molded it into the bread that we bless. The same goes for the wine, a symbol of celebration that also comes from the fruit of the earth, pressed and fermented by human hands and feet. Then we see the monetary offering placed before God. In juxtaposition with the bounty of the earth that most certainly sprang up because of God’s goodness, we see our financial gifts given to the glory of God. And we realize that we are simply giving *back* to God what God has blessed us with.

All of our offerings to God are really our giving to God what is already God’s – sort of like when your parents give you five dollars to buy them a birthday present. The money is theirs, but you’ve taken it and used it for their joy. That is what happens in the offertory.

MOMENT #10
GIVING THANKS (THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER)

Our tenth moment in worship is called the “Eucharistic” prayer. While the term “Eucharist” comprehends the entire Sunday worship experience, it is also a special word used for this particular section, as well as a name for the elements of the blessed bread and wine in which the presence of Christ dwells.

Also known as the “prayer of consecration,” the Eucharistic prayer is composed of several parts. The “*sursum corda*” (Latin for “Lift up your hearts”) is the special exchange between the presider and the congregation, in which the priest asks for permission to pray on the congregation’s behalf. Then the prayer recounts God’s movement in creation, humanity’s downfall and need for salvation, and the coming of Christ. Then the priests prays the “words of institution,” in which we remember Jesus’ last supper with the disciples, and, in remembering, we take part in that supper ourselves. It is not a reenactment of the last supper, but a participation in it. Finally, the priest appeals to the Holy Spirit to dwell in the bread and wine, so that they may be for us the Body and Blood of Christ.

But let’s take a second look at the word “Eucharist.” This fancy word would be much less fancy if you happened to be both from Asia Minor and two thousand years old. This strange looking word simply means “to give thanks.” So, when we come together to share the meal, we are coming together to give thanks to God for all the blessings God has bestowed upon us. The fact that this intentional thanksgiving happens in community reminds us that we must share our blessings just as we share the body and blood of Christ. And it is the very dwelling of Christ in us and we in him that sustains us as we share with others.

When we give thanks to God for the blessings and gifts God has given us, we must remember that thanksgiving is the catalyst for sharing. If we do not share our gifts with others, then we have not truly thanked God for them.

Sometimes, these gifts may seem meager or inadequate, like simple bread and wine. But those are the times we must remember that Christ is there with us, giving thanks for us, and breaking us so he can share himself through our lives with this broken world.

MOMENT #11
SHARING CHRIST (THE COMMUNION)

Like the Peace, the act of sharing Communion every Sunday was not commonplace until a little over thirty years ago. The Episcopal Church preferred the service of Morning Prayer and had Communion only occasionally. But with the “new” Prayer Book (that’s in quotations because it came out when Jimmy Carter was president), the church shifted to Communion every Sunday.

So what happens when we receive Communion? What’s really going on? Well, I’ll give you two answers. The first is going to sound like I’m copping out, which I am, but for good reason. The second will take up the rest of this discussion. The first answer to what’s really going on is this: “I have no idea.” Seriously – the mystery of the Eucharist is way beyond my pay grade. I do know that something is happening because of the nourishment and joy that people receive when they receive Communion, but don’t ask me to do the math.

That being said, here’s the second answer. When we share the bread and wine, we are completing the Eucharistic moment that began with the prayer of consecration. No one can give you a satisfactory answer to *when* the bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. If we could, then the words we say would be magic – hocus pocus, if you will. (By the way, those magic words come from the Latin for “This is my Body.” Cool, huh?). Rather, the blessing of the bread and wine takes the entire Eucharistic moment and culminates in the sharing of the Body and Blood. If we consecrated the elements and then didn’t share them with one another, that would seem strange, right?

The Body and Blood of Christ are meant to be shared. We take in the bread and the wine; thus we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. But, we too, are members of that same Body. So when we partake of Holy Communion, Christ nourishes us with the sharing *of* his Body so that we can share *of* ourselves *as* his Body. We share our gifts as we do God’s work in the world. And the sharing of Christ in the Eucharist nourishes and empowers us to do so, and to do so together, as the one Body.

MOMENT #12
PREPARING TO SERVE (THE BLESSING & DISMISSAL)

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of God’s Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you, and remain with you always. Amen.

(BCP p. 366, *though it’s only a direction – the words aren’t actually there.*)

Our twelfth and final moment in the worship service comes after the prayer that concludes the Communion. The priest (or bishop if present) blesses the people, usually making the sign of the cross in the air. Many people in the congregation will “cross” themselves in response, but this isn’t necessary. If it isn’t part of your devotion then don’t feel compelled to follow suit. Crossing oneself is a physical sign of spiritual alignment. By touching the four “cardinal directions” of your body (North at the forehead, South at the navel, East and West at the shoulders), you motion with your physical body in order to orient your spirit toward God.

But I’m getting off track. The Blessing is the final prayer of the service. The service began with the promise of transformation in the symbol of the cross and ends with the blessing of God, which shows that transformation has begun. God’s blessing always leads to change in our lives, wonderful growth that we couldn’t possibly imagine.

The service concludes with the dismissal. “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God” (or similar words). With the dismissal, we orient our bodies away from the altar and toward the door at the back of the church. The world outside awaits. Everything we did during the service has made us ready to enter the world as the people of God. The church is like a gym. You go there for exercise, but you play football on the field, not in the weight room.

TWELVE MOMENTS: THE CONCLUSION

One of the most common trials of the life of faith is putting up a great, big barrier between life inside the church and life outside of it. With this series of reflections, I have sought to show how the moments of our worship inside the church can inform and strengthen our walks with God outside the church.

Each moment of our worship is shot through with the presence of God. And do you know what? So is each moment of our lives. When we recognize God's abiding presence in our lives outside the walls of the church, then we can worship God at all times. We can participate in God's movement in this world.

The next time you attend a Sunday morning service, pay attention to each of the moments of the liturgy. Ask yourself what God is trying to teach you in those moments about your life as one of Jesus' disciples. What are the priorities you are living by? How does your worship encourage you to change those priorities? How do you structure your life? What is your foundation? What anchors you? If the answer to these last two questions is not "my relationship with God," then pray about how you can change your life so that you participate in your relationship with God more fully.

Worship will help you do that. It will help you structure and anchor your life in the One who breathes life into all creation. What a wonderful gift it is to be able to worship that One, to be able to commune with the God who both speaks creation into being and breathes life into our beings one breath at a time.

** Special thanks to the scholarship of the Rev. Ian S. Markham, dean of the Virginia Theological Seminary, whose book Liturgical Life Principles formed the foundation of this project.*



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