

Homily – Common Prayer

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It is nice being back with you after having been gone for three weeks. I have missed our worship together, and being back together feels like coming home. There are the familiar songs and prayers as we lift our voices to God. And, even though I was not here, two of the three Sundays that I was traveling I worshiped with other Episcopalians. At General Convention in Baltimore there were more than one thousand of us using Eucharistic Prayer One from that supplemental Episcopal resource called “Enriching Our Worship.” And then last Sunday I was at a little country Episcopal church near the family farm in Upstate New York where we used Eucharistic Prayer A from our Book of Common Prayer. This is the same prayer that we have been using here at St. Barnabas for the last three weeks. And like here, in that country church we juggled the hymnal, the red Book of Common Prayer and a simple bulletin. Actually, at that country church they had a second hymnal so we were juggling three books. Those of you that are long time Episcopalians have mastered this juggling and for those of you that are newer to our tradition, you will get there. We have two months this summer that we are doing a straight prayer book service with a simple two page bulletin, so you get nine weeks of juggling practice. The main reason for the simple bulletin is to let our office slow down over the summer. Going from a long twenty-four page bulletin to a simple two page bulletin reduces summer workload. I hope you all get to slow down over the summer as well. The other reason we do a straight prayer book service in the summer is that long time Episcopalians have a sense of nostalgia and pride in juggling the books and even memorizing much of the worship service. Before computers and digital laser printers this was the way the service was always done. And, when you have done it a few hundred times it starts to get inside of you and form you. Our relationship and understanding of God are shaped by our rituals and repeated ways we do common worship and prayer.

As Episcopalians we are a branch of the Jesus movement that incorporates ritual words and actions in our worship. This is not true of all Christian worship. Like many of you, before becoming Episcopalian, I came from a tradition that valued spontaneous, extemporaneous prayer and had little to no ritual. So, after switching into the Episcopal Church, I was a bit befuddled and put off but the repeated prayers that are said over and over each week. And after several months the day arrived when I finally understood. About a dozen of us were at a midweek Eucharist when we learned of a third teen suicide at the local high school. I don’t know about you, but for me that is about as bad as it gets. And, the priest had us turn to the prayers of grief and lament in our red Book of Common Prayer. These are prayers that have been used for thousands of years by billions of people. These are prayers that give

voice to the emotions that we feel and our cries to God in times of distress. For me there is comfort in joining together with time proven words. And, when we use these words over and over they shape us. They get inside of us. They mold our relationship with God.

One of the prayers that we say in all of our worship is the Lord's Prayer. Some from the Roman Catholic tradition, know this as "The Our Father" or in Latin this is the Pater Noster. When asked how to pray to God, Jesus taught this prayer. Two versions of this prayer are recorded in the gospels: a longer form within the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, and a shorter form in the Gospel of Luke, the version that we heard in today's Gospel reading. Regarding the presence of the two versions, some have suggested that both were original, the Matthean version spoken by Jesus early in his ministry in Galilee, and the Lucan version one year later, "very likely in Judea". Even Jesus repeatedly taught the same thing, proving, without a doubt, that Jesus is Episcopalian.

The Lord's Prayer is structured as seven petitions followed by a doxology. According to the version in Matthew, the first three of the seven petitions address God, and the other four are related to human needs and concerns. Matthew's account alone includes the "Your will be done" and the "Deliver us from evil" petitions. Some say that this prayer is a summary of the entire gospels or good news we have from Jesus about God. The Lord's Prayer is used by most Christian denominations in their worship; and with a few exceptions, the version used is the one from Matthew, not the one from today's Gospel reading. Protestants, including Episcopalians, usually conclude the prayer with a doxology or short hymn of praise to God. Repeated use of the Lord's Prayer helps shape our spiritual journeys as it molds our relationship with God. And, you may have noticed that we have two versions of the Lord's Prayer in our Book of Common Prayer – the traditional version, that we are using this summer, and the ecumenical version. The second version was created in the 1970s by the International Consultation on English Texts so that most mainline denominations have a common version of this very special common prayer.

So in the Episcopal Church we have two versions of the Lord's Prayer, nine approved Eucharistic Prayers, three ways of saying the Confession, and seven ways that we do our Prayers of the People. So on Sunday morning you can walk into any Episcopal Church and feel reasonably at home with the familiar words and rituals. We don't require certain beliefs about theology. It is not common beliefs that unite us as Episcopalians. It is a common way of doing worship that unites us. The worship that we do here is the same as the worship in the country church in Upstate New York, and it is the same as we did at General Convention in Baltimore. We value that common worship, and we can have great gnashing of teeth when we start to change or update the ritual language in our worship.

Back in 1979, the Episcopal Church issued a new, updated Book of Common Prayer which kept older versions of the prayers alongside new, updated versions. There was a greater emphasis on weekly Eucharist and the theology was updated in a way that was consistent with the thinking in the latter part of the twentieth century. At the same time the Episcopal church widened the leadership of the church to include the ordination of women. While I don't know the exact numbers, these two events combined to prompt great gnashing of teeth and 5-10% of the congregations left the Episcopal Church. These changes were agonizing enough that there is great reluctance to go through the pain of another update to the Book of Common Prayer. However, the theology and language of the prayerbook and hymnal are getting out of date and earlier this month at General Convention in Baltimore there were sixty-three resolutions on changes to our liturgy and music. Some of the resolutions were tabled or nixed. Some were referred to a committee for further review and work. And some resolutions were approved by both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies. You can find all sixty-three resolutions on the web, but there are four that I want to draw to your attention.

First, we have added another saint to the annual calendar. Barbara Harris was the first female bishop in the Anglican Communion. She was also a person of color and was here in the Episcopal Church. We have added February 11th to the saints calendar to commemorate the consecration of the Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris. She is a holy woman and a role model to the rest of us.

Second, the Diocese of Northern California had proposed that we change our official rules so that anyone may partake of the bread and wine during communion. Our rules say that only baptized persons may partake, and many congregations, including our own parish of St. Barnabas, allow anyone to take communion including unbaptized children. This change would have brought our rules into alignment with our practice. However, after much theological back and forth, this resolution did not even make it out of committee, and the resolution was tabled, for now. The rule did not change, and our practice will not change, so we will continue to be misaligned.

Third, General Convention has approved a comprehensive review of the Book of Common Prayer and Hymnal, to determine where the language is colonialist, racist and white supremacist, imperialist and nationalistic. That review will be completed by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, and they will develop and propose text changes to the language of our common worship and prayers. There is a separate approved resolution that moves us to the use of expansive and inclusive language when talking about God and about humanity. These two resolutions lay the foundation for the language of an updated Book of Common Prayer and Hymnal.

And, finally there was a change to the Constitution of the Episcopal Church that puts in place a new process for updating our liturgy. This Constitutional change needs to be approved a second time before it goes into effect. With this change the Book of Common Prayer becomes more than that red physical book that you see in the pew rack in front of you. In this digital age, the prayerbook becomes that physical book plus a new online library of resources with updated language. Some are afraid that this new way of thinking about the prayerbook will allow a plethora of liturgies such that we no longer have common worship. That country church in Upstate New York will have worship that doesn't feel the same as we have here at St. Barnabas. I don't have this fear, for there is still a rigorous, multi-year process for General Convention to add anything new to our prayerbook library. So like the vast majority of Bishops and Deputies, I joined to vote to approve this change.

Now, if you ask most Americans, especially younger Americans, they think Christians are hypocrites. They see a disconnect between Jesus and his followers, and I agree. However, while we have other sins, I think our Episcopal Church is reasonably good about following the teachings of Jesus about God, humanity, and creation. Hypocrisy is not our base sin. And to maintain this low level of hypocrisy, we need to ensure that the language we use in our worship, prayer, and music reflects the real teachings of Jesus. We can maintain the words that have been used for thousands of years. We can continue to have common worship, and we can tweak the language of our worship to make sure it reflects the love, grace, and mercy that is ever flowing from God.