

the congregation thinks they are in the role of being judges on *American Idol* or *America's Got Talent*. But when that happens, even when it is a great show, we miss the mark. All of us are invited to be not passive recipients, but active participants in the work that is set before us, which is first and foremost about lifting our voices to praise God. Our worship is intended to be “the work of the people”—literally what the word *liturgy* means. So we need to take time and get ready as we transition from our busy lives to this holy place. Kneeling for some quiet prayer time, listening to the prelude, getting our two or three books lined up and ready to go; taking the risk of singing the hymns even if we've been told we can't sing are all ways to do that. We join the song of the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven: we need to trust that they will carry the melody line for us.

Many of us here like to be in the same seats each week or at least the same general area in the congregation. That can be a good thing because it means that if someone else enters near that space we will recognize them as someone unknown to us. Very few people here, I trust, glare at newcomers as if they were alien intruders. Usually we are glad that they are here. But we are New Englanders, so verbalizing that welcome is not always one of our strengths. We figure the clergy or the ushers will say hello to that person at the door. But if we mean to be a more welcoming congregation then all of us have work to do.

My advice is to never greet someone by saying, “hey, are you new here?” That is a recipe for embarrassment because nine times out of ten you'll find out they've been here much longer than you have, but they usually attend a different service. And then you are likely to become gun shy and never greet anyone again. Much better to just say: “Hello, I don't know you, my name is Rich.” (Only please insert your own name there, not mine!) Hopefully they will respond by giving you their name. And maybe that's enough, or maybe a conversation follows. (Maybe you will even want to invite them to stay for coffee hour and show them the way to get there.) Sometimes it takes enormous energy to come back to church and trust that the roof really won't fall in. So not everyone is ready to chat or join a committee or even stay for coffee their first week here. But all are welcome in this place, and our body language should convey that even if we don't say too many words.

From the outside we might look pretty homogeneous as we gather together, but I've been here long enough to know we come here from very different worlds: male and female, young and old, thinkers and feelers, married and single, widowed and divorced, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, rejoicing or grieving, strong in our faith and full of doubt. Some of us were raised in the Church and for some of us this all still feels dizzyingly new. Some have literally heard the readings we'll hear today dozens of times before and know them inside and out and others will be confused as they hear these words maybe for the first time. Worship takes some practice and effort and repetition in the same way that learning to kick a soccer ball or playing a musical instrument does. It is a skill we develop over time. May we become more mindful and prayerful as we raise our voices to praise God, from whom all blessings flow. Let us, then, begin. ..

Second Meditation: Listening

Our Eucharistic liturgy is divided into two roughly equal parts: The Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of the Table. In the Ministry of the Word, we listen to ancient texts, trusting the Holy Spirit to help us to hear good news. The lectionary gives us a systematic, orderly way to read through a fair amount of the Bible over the course of a three-year cycle. (Not all of it, by any means but enough of it to challenge a faithful preacher to be preaching texts that she or he would not normally choose if left to their own devices.) These readings from Holy Scripture come from a world in many ways very different from ours and because of that, their meanings are not always immediately accessible. The preacher's job is to help us to open a door; and maybe it is no more than that. And sometimes the door the preacher opens isn't the one we need to walk through today. That's ok—maybe we need on this day to hear good news in the reading the preacher is not preaching on, or in a prayer, or a phrase, or a hymn, or in the sound of sheer silence that is so rare in a noisy world. This part of our worship, then, is characterized by a posture of leaning in to listen, trusting that God does have a Word for us today. Maybe it's just a new or better question that we'll take with us when we leave here. Maybe it's as clear as a bell, the answer to a prayer. Since we are all in different places along the journey it will not be the same for all of us, but this much is certain: God is here and we are here.

Sometimes we think of the *Word of God* as the Bible. But I think that we should take our cues from John's Gospel here: "*in the beginning was the Word.*" John doesn't mean that in the beginning was the Bible; he is talking about the second person of the Trinity—the Word-made-flesh. Jesus Christ has dwelt among us; we have beheld his glory, full of grace and truth. Our worship is centered on that reality, which is simply to say that the Bible points beyond itself, to Jesus. The mystery of faith is not just that Christ *was* raised from the dead; but that Christ *is risen* and is alive and present here and now. So the job of the preacher is not to have the last word, but to help us all to cultivate the spiritual practice of developing eyes to see and ears to hear. Preaching may on occasion be entertaining or funny or provocative or challenging, but the goal is not to entertain or to be funny or to provoke or to challenge. It is to uncover Christ so we can more faithfully hear the call of Jesus to each and every one of us, into the unique circumstances of our lives.

Let's take a few moments, then, to be still, and to know that God is God; just to listen together, and give each other the gift of silence...

Third Meditation: Fed

We just exchanged signs of God's peace. That signals an important transition from the Ministry of the Word to the Ministry of the Table. The sign of peace is a sign that we are ready to do come and share a meal together, as family. We are challenged to see the face of the Incarnate Christ—that Word-made-flesh—in one another. That isn't always easy. Some day when you aren't in a hurry, take a little tour of our parking lot before or right after worship and check out the bumper stickers. We are not all of one mind here in our politics or theologies. I think when Paul says in today's epistle that we are called to have the mind of Christ, he doesn't mean that are all the same or that we all agree. He means we are called to humility and integrity and sacrificial love. That is "the mind of Christ." And the sign of peace signifies our willingness to live into that calling.

For those who grew up in the Episcopal Church, the passing of the peace was a "new thing" that came about when our current *Prayerbook* was published in 1979. It did not meet with universal acclaim among people sometimes affectionately known as God's "frozen chosen." But the truth is that it is a very ancient practice, going back to the early years of Christian worship and earlier than that to Jewish worship. This "kiss of peace" is familiar to people who have experience with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean culture; a greeting warmer than a handshake, the two-cheek kiss. The kiss of peace signifies our desire to be reconciled to each other—not because we necessarily all like each other but because we are all in the same boat: and since God has first loved us, we have been commanded to love each other. The sign of peace is a sign of hope in a world where so many are estranged from one another.

Forgiven, loved, and free, we come with joy to be fed. Not to feed ourselves as strong, independent, rugged individualists, but to be fed by God—as people willing to depend on grace and mercy one day at a time. The meal we share is akin to a wedding banquet; that is in fact a very Biblical image. Think of a big family gathering where multiple generations are gathered together.

I don't know about your families but in my own we have very different opinions—especially when you go beyond the nuclear family and all the cousins are together. Most aren't afraid to express those opinions either. But we are family; we are bound together in love, which goes deeper than our divisions. Wedding receptions like the one Jesus attended in Cana of Galilee are usually joyous celebrations meant for dancing and eating and drinking! So, too, the Christian community—every week a wedding banquet. The fatted calf has been killed and the table is set with veal piccata and a lovely Tuscan wine! (Well, look through the eyes of faith and use your imagination and you will see it!)

The old-fashioned word "oblation" means that we bring our offerings to God. We give back to God, the Giver of all good things. First and foremost we *offer* ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice to God. We *offer* bread and wine as symbols of God's good creation and of our call going all the way back to the first chapters of Genesis to be stewards of those good gifts, by sharing with God in the care of this planet. God gives the gifts of sunshine and soil, but it requires human labor to plow the fields and pull the weeds and harvest the bounty; and then to mill the wheat and knead the dough and crush the grapes and age the wine. These are rich

metaphors about an earthy spirituality that suggest that our daily work is an offering to God. So we also offer our tithes and offerings, a first portion of the fruit of our labors. We share from the abundance of our lives by giving back to God from all that God has first given us.

We rehearse the narrative: telling the story about the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his friends on the last night of his life. We make thanksgiving: that is what the Greek word *eucharisteo* means. We come to be fed and then to become what we eat.

Let us be bread, blessed by the Lord, broken and shared, life for the world; let us be wine, love freely poured, let us be one in the Lord.

Fourth Meditation: Sent

Our work is now nearly finished. We are almost ready to go back to the world—back to our lives. But how have we been changed? We have come together to listen for a Word of God and we have been fed by Christ at the Table where we gather as sisters and brothers, with all the saints who have gone before us. There is a mystic sweet communion between those of us who continue to labor in the vineyard, and those who from their labors rest.

Our work continues as we are sent into the world in peace: sent out to become what we have received and to show our gratitude for all we have been given in two simple ways: to love God and to love our neighbor. (Even the ones who sometimes can be real jerks, sometimes!)

It is a tall task and we could not do it on our own. But with God's help, all things are possible. With God's help, we can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. So we go forth in courage and in hope. We go out to tend the flame of the Holy Spirit by allowing the light of Christ shine forth in our lives: so that the world might be a little less dark, little less scary; a little more like the Kingdom of God.