

Lex orandi, lex credendi: a three-week preaching series on worship and faith

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, Rector, St. Francis Church

Part I – Gathered (Ascension Sunday, May 16, 2010)

Preacher's Note: Loosely translated, the Latin phrase, lex orandi, lex credendi means “the law of prayer is the law of belief.” For Episcopalians this means that if you want to understand what we believe, then you need to come and pray with us. Our theology is discerned by paying attention particularly to the Book of Common Prayer, and even more especially to the Eucharistic-centered worship that is at the heart of that common prayer. Beginning today and through the end of the month, three meditations will be offered on worship as we are gathered, fed, and sent by God. The first will focus on the Collect for Purity, the second on the Paschal Mystery, and the last on the Post-Communion Prayer.

It has been said that if you want to know what Episcopalians believe, then you need to pray with us. But it is more than just being present for worship, because sometimes we can worship, even for many decades, without ever really stopping to reflect on what we are doing. We can have the experience and miss the meaning. If we mean to internalize our prayer, then we need, from time to time, to step back and reflect theologically on *what* we are doing and *why* we are doing it.

So beginning today, and continuing through the end of this month, I want to offer three meditations to explore three “moments” in our worship together that we may take for granted. They happen to come at the beginning, middle, and end of the liturgy. Today we’ll explore the Collect for Purity; next weekend the Paschal mystery; and then we’ll conclude on Trinity Sunday with the post-Communion Prayer. For the sake of easy reference I want to call these three meditations: *Gathered, Fed, and Sent*.

Each week we come into this room from many different places: all five of the Wachusett towns and further afield as well—from places as different as Worcester and Hubbardston. Our workplaces are even more spread out, not only geographically, but in the work that we do. Yet here we are gathered in, gathered together to ask the Lord’s blessing, bound up together as one people. Our worship begins each week with us praying the Collect for Purity.

This prayer dates back as far as the eighth century—in other words long before the English Reformation. It became part of what would be known as the *Sarum Rite* in England: basically the Mass as it was prayed (in Latin) in Salisbury, England during the Middle Ages. What is interesting to me is that this prayer was originally prayed by the priest *before* the Mass begin, as part of his private preparations and meditations in the sacristy.

One of the core values of the Protestant Reformation was the notion of the “priesthood of all believers.” So along with that Reformation idea and the publication of the first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 was the thought to include this prayer, *in English*, for everyone—rather than just among the priest’s private prayers in the sacristy. Nevertheless, even as late as the *1979 Prayerbook* (the red one in our pews today) the rubric still has the Celebrant praying this prayer *on behalf of the assembly*. In many of the newer liturgies, however, it is a prayer that the gathered assembly prays in unison, which is why for a couple of years now that has become our practice here at St. Francis. We have been deliberately and systematically breaking a rubric to make that next logical move—almost five hundred years after Cranmer’s bold decision! Sometimes these things take time! But in truth, it makes sense for us to be praying it *together* if we really do believe in this radical notion of the priesthood of all believers.

What, then, does it mean to begin our worship with this prayer? Let me remind you first of all what it says and as I offer it again try to hear the words anew:

Lex orandi, lex credendi: a three-week preaching series on worship and faith

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, Rector, St. Francis Church

Part I – Gathered (Ascension Sunday, May 16, 2010)

*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.*

This little prayer is packed with meaning. I suppose depending on the week we've had, these words can sound either very comforting or like an invasion of privacy. Maybe it's always a little bit of both. We come here to remember that there is no place we can go to flee from God. (That, too, can be either a comforting or terrifying thought or a little of both.) We are being reminded, that here in the midst of God's people, this is too important a time and space to play games. We can fool others some or all of the time and we can fool even ourselves sometimes; but God knows our hearts all of the time. God knows our hearts even better than we ourselves know them. So here in the presence of God and God's people, we gather together to open our hearts to the One from whom no secrets are hidden.

Sometimes during the week—in our homes or workplaces or over coffee with a friend, we will act with the best of intentions and yet be misunderstood. At other times we will act with the most manipulative of intentions and get away with it. But here, as we come into the presence of God, we come before the One who knows our hearts before we ever open our mouths to pray.

Worshiping God the Holy Trinity, the God made known to us in the Old and New Testaments and revealed in and through Jesus Christ, is not the same as worshiping some generic “unmoved Mover.” This God invites us to radical intimacy. Our worship is a matter of the heart. When our hearts are feeling hardened or divided, we become separated from God, our neighbors, and even our own truest selves. So we begin our worship by asking for God's Holy Spirit to move through us and to cleanse what is not clean, so that God can be praying through us.

Implicit in all Anglican theology is the creation story and God's original blessing. The very first question asked in the catechism is this: “what are we by nature?” The response is a bold and Biblical one: “*We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God.*” (See BCP 845 and Genesis 1.) Sin distorts that reality, but it does not negate it. The whole point of these fifty days of Easter is that in Christ that original blessing is being restored and renewed.

We are made, in other words, to *perfectly* love God. Now that is a very dangerous word, especially for the perfectionists among us. It makes it sound like we have to get it right; that we better not get it wrong or we'll be in big trouble. And sometimes people have been taught to think of prayer that way; that we need to find a special voice or tone or some magic words in order to be heard by God. But that is clearly not what this prayer means to suggest. When speaking to the God who already knows our hearts and our hearts' desires—the God with whom there is utter transparency and from whom no secrets are hid—we don't have to pretend to be anything other than who we are. Perfect love isn't about perfectionism. It's about remembering that the goal and purpose of our worship is God's perfect *love* for us and then whole-heartedly responding to that love.

St. Augustine once said that we are created with a God-sized hole, each of us, in our souls. And we try to fill that God-sized hole with all kinds of things: power, wealth, status, booze, sex—the list is

Lex orandi, lex credendi: a three-week preaching series on worship and faith

The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, Rector, St. Francis Church

Part I – Gathered (Ascension Sunday, May 16, 2010)

pretty long. And none of them fits, for one very simple reason: because none of them are God. The only thing that can fill a God-sized hole is God. Our souls, Augustine said, are restless until they rest in God.

Even those of us who have come here from the healthiest of families have been loved less than perfectly. Yet we come into the presence of the One who knows our heart's desire. We come in order to be in touch with that love by which we were formed and created. And every now and again, by the grace of God, we glimpse that perfect love working in us and re-forming us and healing us. It's truly an amazing gift. Perfect love casts out shame and guilt to bring new and abundant life and when that happens, Easter happens.

We are called to respond to that love by magnifying God's holy Name. These last words of the Collect for Purity recall Mary's prayer when the angel told her that the God-sized hole in her body was being filled with Jesus, the Christ—that she would bear the holy child of God into the world. Mary, as you will recall, responds by saying: "*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" (Luke 1:46b-47) Mary is the first disciple, the model above all others. She allows her heart's desire and God's heart's desire to meet, so that Jesus can be born into a broken world to bring healing and hope. This is our call, too; to follow Mary's example by letting Jesus be made manifest in our own lives—to come into the world through us, to bring healing and hope to our homes and workplaces and neighborhoods. When we say "yes" to God we, too, magnify God's holy Name.

Today's epistle reading comes from the first chapter of Ephesians. We heard St. Paul addressing the first-century community of Christians in Ephesus and telling them that he has heard of their faith and love and that he gives thanks all the time for them. That is what Christian community is for and why common prayer is so essential to our life together. We don't get it right all the time; no community of human beings ever does. Yet still, there is faith and love here that are worth attending to and worth thanking God for; and love covers a multitude of sins.

As we gather each week for common worship we offer all of that to God, the God who already knows our heart's desire. We listen so that we can better know our own hearts, and we pray that God would fill us with the cleansing power of love and then use us to magnify God's holy Name, not only in this room but in our daily lives. I think Paul's words to that first-century congregation are words for us in the twenty-first century as well. He tells them that he is praying *that God might give to them (and to us) a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know Christ, so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which we have been called and what are the riches of this glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power for all who believe.*

I don't know what Scriptural words the Latin writer of the Collect for Purity had in mind back in the eighth century, but these words provide as good a Scriptural undergirding for the Collect for Purity that I can think of. May "the eyes of our hearts be enlightened" as we gather together—may our hearts be open in love to the One who formed us in love. May we then be fed by this same God, and sent with courage into the world to do the work we have been given to do: to worthily magnify God's holy name.