

How Gathering Forms Us

Sometimes these words don't carry their full weight, but I mean them with all my heart—it is good to be with you today. Most of you learned last week that Emily and I suffered the loss of our pregnancy; some of you are hearing this news for the first time. We are still very much mourning this loss, but we take great comfort knowing we have a church family who mourns with us. We are grateful for the many signs of your love for us. We are strengthened by your prayers for us. I am so, so grateful we are a family who believes in New Creation, knowing there is coming a day when Christ will make all things well. These are not empty words—it is good to be with you today. /

For several months I have wanted to have an extended meditation about the worship we offer every Sunday. In ways hidden to me in those planning stages, I could not have known how timely this series would be for my own life, particularly today when we consider how the act of gathering forms us. I'll explore that theme in a moment, but first I want to briefly orient us to what this series *is* and what it is *not*.

In a brief phrase, I want these next eight weeks to be a *pastoral* meditation on our liturgy. Our worship is grounded in the Gospel; from beginning to end, our liturgy is soaked with grace. Our worship leads us to the Good Shepherd whom we worship, who heals our souls. So these Sundays in June and July will be a *pastoral* and spiritual meditation of our liturgy. /

You could not have been better prepared for this kind of focus than to have received John Roop's inspired words from Trinity Sunday. To draw on John's thought last week, there are first things and second things, primary and secondary theology, as he said. The first thing in worship is encountering God together as a family. There are second things, too, like learning the mechanics, movements, and meanings in our worship. These are good things, but they are second things. It isn't necessary to know *why* we read the Gospel in the middle of the Church to hear the Spirit speak through the Gospel reading. First things first: the Gospel is about the heart. /

We will address second things—mechanics, movements, and meanings—but not for the purpose of so-called 'accuracy' in worship (whatever that means). If you see more of a symbol, you might see more of God and his activity in our worship. That's why we'll spend some time orienting and instructing you in the elements of our worship—to see more of God's presence, not so you're a better Anglican.

Inasmuch as our worship means to lead us to the throne of grace, it also grounds us for action in this world. By taking a pastoral meditation on our worship, we'll also seek ways our weekly worship calls us to take action in our relationships and the places we inhabit in this world.

So these are the common threads from Sunday to Sunday—**worship** that proclaims the Gospel, **symbols** that lead us to encounter God and one another, and **actions** that prepare us for life in the world. Now that you have that overview, let's consider the first action of worship—the movement from scattered to gathered. /

Gathering begins in the home before you arrive here. With all the competing obligations, thoughts, and lists you have, you must first gather your heart and mind to choose to be present in worship. I do not mean to say you are gathered and collected when you get in the car or when you arrive at our door. I mean you make the conscious decision to end the separation you've had with your church family and choose community. Gathering begins in the heart before you arrive. /

Alexander Schmemmann says from the moment our hearts decide to make the journey from your doorstep to the church's steps, we have begun a pilgrimage of *ascension*. The trajectory of our gathering is upward, ascending to the throne of grace and the very Kingdom of God.

Taking the journey to worship is ingrained in the ancient practice of worship in Israel. Jerusalem is a city upon a hill, so to go up to Jerusalem meant an ascending route to the Temple. In anticipation of gathering with God's whole people, Israel sang Psalms for the road, called the Songs of Ascent. The songs of ascent are found in Psalm 120-134. 'I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.'¹ 'I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'² 'To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!'³ These are opening verses in the psalms of ascent, telling the soul to do what the body is already doing, ascend to the presence of God. There is some sense that when we gather for worship, that means we are *climbing out of a valley*. /

¹ Psalm 121.1-2

² Psalm 122.1

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So another central aspect of gathering is the movement from isolation to community. 'Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!' /

Gathering in one place before formal worship even *begins* is a sign of grace. Have you ever come to church the mere sight of a dear friend can bring tears to your eyes? You look into a friend's eyes and you know God is here. / You know why that happens? Because your brother bears Christ in his heart. Your sister looks at you with the eyes of Christ. To share the same space, to see those eyes, to hear those voices, these are acts of healing before the opening hymn begins. Every Sunday is a reunion and reunion is healing. And where that healing happens, celebration may begin. /

The Anglican theologian Donald Allchin says that the inner workings of celebration always involves God's action to reunite two opposites. He writes that '[celebration is] a coming together of opposites; creator and creation, God and man, eternity and time, life and death, holiness and sinfulness...in one way or another all these things come together into one in Christ, and in the gathering together of the people who [belong to] Christ.'⁴ /

Every Sunday before worship begins, I hear the sounds of reunion from the prayer room on the lower level of the church. Our clergy gather for prayer before worship because prayer is vital preparation before we begin our liturgy. There have been more than a few occasions when one of us have thanked God in the middle of prayer for the sounds of reunion happening above us. We hear your voices greeting one another, we hear doors opening, we hear the shuffling of feet continuing the procession into the holy place. Ascension is beginning and it is electric. /

The legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis told a story of attending a Lakers basketball game with a friend. At various intervals of the game, Miles Davis closed his eyes for long stretches of the game. His friend was worried he was bored and asked why he closed his eyes. Davis told his friend, 'Because I hear jazz in the sound of the shoes moving on the floor. I'm listening to the music of their feet.'

Miles Davis heard music in the movement because music shaped his heart. I hear worship in the movement of your feet because the heart of our family is worship. The Anglican bishop Jeremy Taylor said, 'Joy and thanksgiving are things that grow by

⁴ A.M. Allchin, *The World Is A Wedding*, 57.

being shared.⁵ The sound of our movement toward one another increases our anticipation of God moving among us, leading us in a unified ascension to his throne. /

In both our worship services, we begin with singing. How singing forms us is the subject of next week's sermon, a sermon that I'm happy to say will have two preachers, myself and David Clifton. You can hear me any old time, but hearing David Clifton speak on the place of singing in worship is not to be missed. /

Without exploring the musical elements of worship today, I want to draw attention to the beginnings of the service proper. The worship service always begins with the signs of victory. The *time* of our gathering is the Day of Resurrection, the day of Christ's victory over death. Sunday worship **always** begins in victory, no matter what. When the music begins, we begin a victory procession toward heaven. The cross leads the procession because the cross has become the sign of victory through Jesus, our King.

Many will bow as the cross passes because we are showing reverence at the sign of our King. If we lived in a monarchy, we would be trained in habits of honor should we ever come into the presence of a royal. In Christian worship, we are always in the presence of the King of Kings, so that is why many bow in the procession of the cross—it is the sign of the King's victory. /

These are the *visible* signs in our gathering, but it's vital that the eyes of our heart look for the *invisible* presences in our gathering. The procession isn't just a few priests or deacons deep, or the choir on special services. The procession of the cross represents the whole communion of saints across space and time who belong to Christ. Evelyn Underhill believed, 'The worshipper, however lonely in appearance, comes before God as a member of a great family; part of the Communion of Saints, living and dead. His own small effort of adoration is offered 'in and for all.' '⁶ That is why we included Hope's beautiful drawing of the saints processing in worship, so that you will always know you are processing with the saints when you gather here. When the cross enters the church, it is a sign to celebrate *our* victory in Christ. /

So what do you do when you feel totally defeated? What about the Sundays when it took every ounce of energy just to come in the door? What do I do when the opening song begins and I cannot even open my mouth to sing? /

⁵ Quoted in Allchin, 61.

⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, 81.

I've had not a few Sundays when I bring those questions myself. It makes me ever so grateful that we follow a cross in procession, not some other sign of might or power. The cross is a sign of *weakness*, transfigured into victory. There is an understanding that gathering in worship means an uphill climb, climbing out of a valley of suffering. But the cross reminds me that my suffering will be transfigured in victory because Christ has conquered by the cross. The cross reminds us that grace gathers us here, grace embraces us here, as we are, not as we *ought* to be.

The procession of the cross reminds me that I am never alone. I belong to a family, a great cloud of witnesses, who remind you that God will be faithful. When I forget who I am, I need not find the answers within, I need only gather with those who process with the cross. On a Sunday when I've suffered one loss, I'm looking for Job in this cloud of witnesses, a man who lost everything, to walk with me as I follow the cross and climb out of this valley. I'm looking for Naomi in this procession, who knew the loss of children. Lead me to Jesus, Naomi, for he transfigured your sorrow into joy. I'm looking for Dame Julian of Norwich in this cloud of witnesses, that great mother who said, 'all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.' I don't need to *feel* that's true; I'm walking in procession with saints whose stories verify that it's true. The procession of the cross isn't a journey of one Sunday, it strengthens and prepares me for a thousand Sundays, Sundays when I'm strong, but especially the Sundays I'm weak. This procession prepares me for my own ascension to the Father. /

Nicholas Ferrar is known as the friend to whom the legendary poet, George Herbert, entrusted all his writings, but Ferrar had a profound witness of faith all his known, a faith shaped by the awareness he entered worship with the communion of saints.

In the hour of his death, Nicholas Ferrar gathered his family around and a family member recorded the mystery of that experience:

Towards evening he called the family and other friends together...and asked them to say the prayers for a dying man. He seems to fall into a peaceful sleep for a time, but they remained with him in the room. suddenly he raised himself up in bed. His voice came clear and strong and, stretching out his arms, he looked upward and around him with a light of great happiness in his eyes. 'Oh what a blessed change is here,' he cried. 'What do I see...I have been at a great feast. O magnify the Lord with me.' One of the nieces spoke to him.' At a feast, dear father?' 'Aye,' he answered, 'at a great feast, the great King's feast.' They stood in awe waiting from him to continue. But he

sank back quietly on his bed and closed his eyes...His lips parted and he gave a long gasp. In that moment they saw that his soul was sped [he died]. At the same instant the clock struck one—it was the hour at which for years past he had always risen for his morning devotions.⁷

It is remarkable how one simple act, repeated over a lifetime, prepares you for the fulfillment of a life lived in worship and adoration. //

A sermon titled 'How Gathering Forms Us' must necessarily end at the beginning. To gather as one family in one place is an action that overcomes resistance, adversity, and isolation. And when we are gathered in, no one comes in his own strength.

The priest begins with the words, 'The Lord be with you.' The reply returns, 'And with your spirit.' The priest needs the prayers of those he serves in worship. All come in need. Yet together we ascend in a common direction. We ascend through an opening prayer for preparation. We ascend through the call and command to love. And we pray a collect that sets the remainder of our course for worship. The [collect/prayer] of the day changes each week in accordance with the Christian year, yet the *unchanging* aspect of the collect is that it unites us in a common direction. The prayer of the day, the collect, prepares us for encounter. When you come climbing out of your valley and you don't know where you need to go, you receive the gift of the [collect/prayer] of the day that says, 'here is where we are going. God will meet us and lead us as we walk *this* way, today.' It is not happenstance that my customary words to you following the [collect/prayer] are, 'Let us listen with expectation to God's Word.'

For then the family is assembled, our isolation is ended, we process with the saints, and the stage is set. When you enter worship, you are entering an unfolding drama when heaven and earth intersect. Who would want to miss one moment of what God means to do when we are gathered together to worship Him? In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Cited and quoted from A.M. Allchin, *The World Is A Wedding*, 70.