

Instructed Eucharist and Sermon,
St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, February 12, 2023
(Matthew 5:21-37) The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

Before the opening Hymn:

This morning, we will have an instructed Eucharist. As we go through the service today, we will give a running commentary on what we are doing and why we do it.

The word “Eucharist” means “thanksgiving.” The Eucharist is the feast of the church—the principal act of worship among Christians since the church began. Each Eucharist is a small Easter celebration. God calls Christians to be in community together. So instead of staying at home, we gather together to worship God at this weekly feast.

We do not come to church to be spectators, but rather participants in worshipping God together. So we actively participate—not just by listening and praying and singing, but we participate physically as well. Many people ask about all the gestures we use: crossing and bowing and kneeling and standing. First: you don’t have to do any of these gestures. But if you are interested in learning them and trying them, here’s how they are used.

When we want to call to attention God’s presence by invoking God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we sometimes make the sign of the cross. This happens at the beginning of the service, or during the Eucharistic Prayer during communion, or sometimes when the preacher offers to God the sermon. We also make the sign of the cross as we receive God’s blessing. This happens at the blessing at the end of the service, also at the absolution of our sins, and also in the Eucharistic prayer when the priest says “sanctify us also that we may receive this holy sacrament...”

To make the sign of the cross, take your thumb and first two fingers together, as a sign of the trinity. This leaves two other fingers to remind us of Jesus’ divine and human nature. Touch your head, your chest, your left and right shoulders. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we bow in worship. We do this as a sign of respect to the cross of Jesus who died on the cross for us. We bow when the cross passes by us in the procession. Some people bow before they enter the pew, or when leaving the pew. We also bow during the Eucharistic Prayer when we remember Isaiah’s vision of the throne room of God, where angels sing “Holy Holy Holy!” Isaiah bowed because of how fantastic God is. So we do too.

Some people genuflect by touching their knee to the ground. This is a more catholic tradition, and often signifies reverence to the presence of Christ with us at the Eucharist.

These gestures are part of the “Anglican Aerobics.” We sit, we stand, we kneel. We sit to hear the lessons and the sermon, we kneel or stand to pray depending on the season. We stand to sing, say the creed and hear the Gospel reading. So let’s stand to sing God’s praises with our opening hymn.

After opening hymn:

The service is set in two parts: the liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Table. In the Liturgy of the Word, we gather for worship, we hear from and reflect on Holy Scriptures, we reaffirm our faith using the creed, and we offer our prayers to God. Thus prepared, we exchange the peace of Christ and gather for the Liturgy of the Table.

We start by invoking God's presence and by praying that God would prepare us to worship him. Then we sing a song of praise, or in Lent or Advent, a song of penitence. We then say a prayer that changes each week called a "collect" because it collects themes of the day and the readings of the day.

Before the Lessons:

Each week, we hear from the Old Testament, we read a psalm together, we hear from the New Testament letters, and we hear from one of the four accounts of the Gospel: the Good News of Jesus. There is a schedule of what to read for every Sunday in a three year cycle. This schedule is called the Lectionary. The lectionary takes us through most of the Gospels, a lot of the New Testament, and many sections of the Old Testament.

Before the sermon:

Some of you might wonder why we read the Gospel reading from the midst of the people in a special procession. The Gospel is the story of Jesus, from four different accounts: The Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. In Jesus, God came from heaven to be among the people. So we enact that movement in this procession. The whole Bible reveals Jesus, but we especially hear about Jesus' life, death and resurrection from the Gospel accounts. Not all churches do a Gospel procession; in fact, we only have a Gospel procession at our 10:30 service. We present the Book of Gospels with a special introduction and conclusion.

After the scripture readings we have a sermon. Someone once said that a good sermon is about two things: About God, and about 10-15 minutes 😊. Today's sermon will be brief to allow time for the Instructed Eucharist. In the sermon, the preacher selects one or more of the passages of the day, and helps the congregation to understand the passage and hear the good news that God has for us, especially the good news of God's love for us in Jesus. This requires prayer and study and more prayer. And we pray that God will also be at work in the ears of those who listen. A homily usually refers to a short sermon. That's what we will have today.

The Homily:

Today's Gospel reading (Matthew 5:21-37) demonstrates the challenge of preaching. Jesus' words are challenging to hear. He seems to be raising the bar of righteousness. Indeed, he is asking us to go beyond the letter of the law. It is true that doing no murder is good, but to love the way God loves, we should value others enough not to hold them in contempt or mistreat them even with our words. Jesus gets the attention of the legalistic listeners to pursue true righteousness, and to take responsibility for themselves, rather than blaming others or even "my hand caused me to sin" or "my eye caused me to sin." No, we get to take responsibility for all of it.

Notice that the church has not practiced cutting off hands and gouging out eyes (otherwise we all would be blind and without hands, myself included). But the church has tried to aim higher in virtue and in the way we live out the Christian life. Our current culture often treats the covenant of marriage as easily disposable. For men in the ancient world, it was also disposable. But Jesus points out the dishonor in that and calls us to a more compassionate fidelity. True, Jesus and the church have made some allowance for divorce, but Jesus calls us to go the extra mile in seeking reconciliation and building each other up. He calls us to love as God loves us, even when we do not deserve it.

And herein lies the good news. None of us measures up to the righteousness Jesus describes here. And yet, Jesus lived and died for us anyway, and in his risen life, he continues to pour out new life on us, giving us his Holy Spirit so that we might be forgiven, restored, renewed, and empowered to walk more closely with him in the future. This is God's kind of righteousness—his grace given for us far more than we deserve. Out of this good news we are called to share God's grace with others, far beyond the letter of the law.

The Creed:

We now stand to affirm our faith with the words of the Nicene Creed, an ancient creed of the church that helps set boundaries of how we speak of and understand who God is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, and who we are, and how we are in relationship with each other.

Prayers of the People:

We now offer our prayers to God—both our requests and our thanksgivings. These are the “Prayers of the People” and are usually led by a lay person. The Prayers of the People are designed as a discipline to be sure that we pray for the whole Church, the nation and those in authority, the welfare of the world, the concerns of the local community, those who suffer or are in need, and those who have died. The prayers of the people may be written for the service as long as they include these elements. There are also several forms for these prayers in the Prayer Book. Often, there is time available for individuals to offer prayers either silently or aloud, and I invite you to pray aloud so that we might live more boldly into our identity as a praying community. Everyone is invited to join these prayers in heart and mind together.

Before the peace (after the absolution):

Our final prayer is the prayer of confession, where we confess our sins against God and our neighbor. We declare our repentance, our turning away from these sins and toward God, and we ask for God's forgiveness and grace to lead a new life. The Priest then declares God's forgiveness in the absolution. As our bishop often says to the people at this place in the service, now that, through God's forgiveness, we have peace with God and peace with ourselves, peace with neighbor and even enemy is possible. So we then exchange the peace of Jesus Christ with each other. The confession is placed here so that we are most prepared to share communion with Christ and his church, responding to the words of today's Gospel reading about making peace with each other before we bring our offering to God. With the peace of the Lord in us and between us, we can then join together in the feast of Holy Communion.

After announcements:

The second half of the service is the Liturgy of the Table. Here, we continue our thanksgiving by remembering the last supper of Jesus with his disciples before his crucifixion. In this meal, we first offer to God ourselves through gifts of money for the ministry of the church, music, and especially bread and wine for Communion. We offer to God “our selves, our souls and bodies.” This is the “offertory.” This continues as we “lift up our hearts” in praise and thanksgiving, including singing an ancient song of praise often called the “Sanctus,” or “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

We then continue with the Great Thanksgiving, remembering God’s savings acts in history, especially the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, summed up in his words and actions at the last supper. We remember this meal in our offering of bread and wine, and we remember Jesus’ words that this is his body, this is his blood. This prayer is led by the priest, but it is a prayer of the whole congregation, so the response of the people saying “AMEN” at the end of the prayer is a crucial part of the service. We then pray the Lord’s Prayer and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion.

This is the principle act of worship in the Christian church, the central proclamation of Jesus to the world. In it, we experience the real presence of Jesus Christ. In it, we are knit together with other Christians around the world and from the past. In it we celebrate our baptism and are strengthened to fulfill our baptismal vows.

Before sending Eucharistic Visitors and the post-communion prayer:

Sometimes we send out Eucharistic Visitors to share communion with those who are sick and cannot join us here. Unlike sending a priest or deacon, when we send Eucharistic Visitors, we are essentially extending the altar rail down the street to where the sick person is. So we send the Visitors out before the post communion prayer. That way, they finish communion together. In this practice, they are reminded that they are knit together with us in Christ, and we with them.

In the post-communion prayer, we ask that God send us into the world to serve him faithfully. This prayer and the blessing and dismissal is a *sending*: God sends us back into the world to bring his grace and good news to others. Note that in the dismissal, we add Alleluias in Easter season—not every week. If the Alleluias are not in the call, they are not in the response ☺. We go forth in the name of Christ; we go to love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.