

LISA G. FISCHBECK

Foreword by Samuel Wells

BEHOLD WHAT YOU ARE

Becoming the Body of Christ

 CHURCH
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Contents

Foreword by Samuel Wells	v
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
1 Liturgy as Public Expression and Formation of the Body of Christ	1
2 Formed by the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy	19
3 Formed by Special Events and Seasonal Opportunities	47
4 Liturgy of a Church without a Church Building	77
5 The Life of a Church as Meta-Liturgy	101
Notes	123

Foreword

This is a book of wisdom. The conventional way to be wise is to disappear to a secluded place, away from other human beings, sit in your cell, and let your cell teach you everything. Lisa Fischbeck hasn't done that. She has faithfully ministered to one congregation for many years—and has let that congregation, and most of all the church's liturgy as lived by that congregation, teach her everything. She has chosen the better way.

It is the definitive claim of the ethics of virtue that the actions in which you have become habituated are revealed most explicitly at a moment of crisis; as Iris Murdoch puts it, "Decisions are what we take when we've tried everything else." When the unexpected happens, disaster strikes, usual procedure is impossible—then the world sees what you're really made of. More than once in this book Lisa Fischbeck recalls moments when something has "gone wrong" during a worship service: most commonly, a congregant is taken seriously ill. Such a moment is like a cross-section of a tree: it reveals what a community and its leader are really about. If everyone panics, tries to suppress the truth, pretends it isn't happening, then you know, painfully and undeniably, that what's happening is a performance, and, like viewers at home watching a live broadcast, the show must go on in such a way that no one notices. But if this really is the Body of Christ, and if the suffering of the hand affects the flourishing of the foot, the leader is more likely to say, "You may have noticed that one of our number has been taken ill. I'm glad to say emergency support is on its way. But of course we're all anxious for her. I'm going to say a brief prayer to place her in God's loving embrace, and then we'll resume our worship." Not only does such action deepen the ligaments of Christ's Body, it models to all present how to locate every

setback and shock of their lives within the larger pattern of devotion and faithfulness. Such is the wisdom expressed in this book.

This is a book of renewal. Out of anxiety, many congregations and their leaders seek a technique to get evangelism right, a template to make worship more attractive, a sales pitch to draw strangers to events or gatherings. But renewal is based fundamentally on trust. This book is testimony to the extraordinary things that happen when you trust the Holy Spirit to show up. Ministry is about creating the right environments where the Holy Spirit can reliably be expected to show up. Lisa Fischbeck displays those moments, those environments, and that trust. The definitive such environment is the Eucharist. Every action of the worship service is precisely such a moment when the Holy Spirit can reliably be expected to show up. My theology professor at seminary asked me a telling question about my congregation a few months after I was ordained: “Is there an atmosphere of expectation before the service?” Thirty years on, I’ve never heard a better way of discovering whether or not a congregation was in good shape. By probing worship on high days and holy days, Lisa Fischbeck digs deeper and deeper into the soil from which renewal comes. Sit in your worshiping congregation, and your worshiping congregation will teach you everything.

This is, finally, a book of prayer. Prayer is the moment our full humanity meets God’s full divinity. Jesus is the definitive embodied prayer, because he is fully human and fully divine. Again, the conventional way to pray is to go into a quiet room, close the door, close your eyes, and wish for something to happen. This is a much more incarnate vision of prayer than that. Here the ordinary meeting and greeting, preparing and tidying, handshaking and hugging all become part of what we mean by prayer. Like in Montessori schooling, our attention is quickly directed to the precious quality of the materiality of our lives. We hold things in two hands, trusting that if we do simple things well, greater things will be revealed through them.

Together, wisdom, renewal, and prayer constitute the fruits of forty-two years of the author's experience of the Episcopal Church, and decades of ministry within it. Lisa Fischbeck's book crystallizes that experience and makes it available to God's church. She has done a beautiful thing. She has described how humanity comes face-to-face with God.

Samuel Wells
January 2021

Preface

In the chapel of the monastery of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, at the conclusion of the eucharistic prayer, the presider raises the consecrated bread and wine and declares to the people, “Behold what you are.” The congregation replies, “May we become what we receive.” The exchange, derived from the writings of St. Augustine some sixteen hundred years ago, reminds those who have gathered that through their participation in that liturgy, they will become the Body of Christ that they already are. More and more.

Liturgy expresses what we believe and forms what we become. It is a public and communal act, open to all. It often happens in a church around the Eucharist on Sunday but can significantly happen on other occasions and in secular spaces as well. Increasingly, it happens online. In the church’s liturgy, whenever and wherever it happens, we are called together by God to be and to become the Body of Christ—the church.

Behold What You Are is written to open up the possibilities of liturgy and liturgical awareness, in the church and of the church, Sunday by Sunday, lifetime by lifetime. Writing started long before the Covid pandemic, but the dramatic shift to online worship occurred as the deadline for the manuscript loomed. Surprisingly, the concepts and practices encouraged for in-person worship readily translate to worship online. With thoughtful reflection and intentionality, the public expression and formation of the Body of Christ in liturgy can be more vital for all.

This book is the result of forty-two years of life formed by the liturgy of the Episcopal and Anglican Church. I write as a woman who was initially drawn to the Episcopal Church on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The St. Alban’s chapel at

the Canterbury House there was beautiful and simple, intimate, and informal. My questions and my doubts were welcomed, and the liturgy brought the faith to life for me and allowed me to claim that I could be a Christian. As I moved from Texas to Virginia to North Carolina, I experienced the worship, fellowship, and organization of the Episcopal Church more broadly. I explored the church on other continents and dug deeply into the roots of the church in England. The liturgy nourished, sustained, and excited me season by season, year by year.

This book is especially born of the last eighteen years of my life as a missionary priest, a “planter” of a twenty-first-century expression of Episcopal Anglican tradition at the Episcopal Church of the Advocate in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Launched in 2003 with the support of three established parishes and a bishop who encouraged us to be rooted in the traditions of the church but not bound by them, The Advocate emerged as a faith community with a lively, engaging, and participatory liturgy.

This book tells the story of that emergence, and also the foundation on which it was built. Parts of *Behold What You Are* will read as a refresher for some and news to others. Sections will be confusing to some readers and exciting to others. The book is presented with a desire for Episcopalians and those of the liturgical sacramental tradition to robustly engage in the planning and practice of the liturgy. My intention is that readers will grow more and more aware of the power of that liturgy to express and form the people of God as the Body of Christ, given for the world, loving God and one another with forgiveness, sincerity, and joy.