

PROCLAIM!

SHARING WORDS, LIVING EXAMPLES, CHANGING LIVES

Marcus George Halley



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INTRODUCTION

I GREW UP IN CHURCH.

My fondest childhood memories are associated with church if for no other reason than that church occupied such a prominent place in my life that most of my childhood memories, good or bad, bear some association. Not only were Sundays strictly for church (and I mean *all day*—two services in the morning with Sunday school in between, followed by lunch at church, and often some other service at a neighboring congregation in the evening), but church also seeped into the other days as well. Wednesdays were for Bible study, Saturdays were for intercessory prayer and probably choir rehearsal. By the time I reached young adulthood, I was thoroughly church-ed but spiritually starving.

Some of my worst childhood memories are also connected to church. In many ways, it feels like I crawled into my adulthood, desperately seeking the spiritual nourishment that I had been denied as I came into the awareness of my sexuality. For reasons that continue to elude me, there are those who think God so fragile or grace so miniscule and scarce that it is their job to hoard it and protect it rather than lavish it upon all they meet. I knew I wasn't welcomed in the church of my childhood, but even though I left, the rhythm of Sunday-keeping was so strong, so naturally engrained in the rhythm of my life that I kept going to church. For years I visited church after church, never really finding a place to land for long.

All of that began to change the moment I walked into an Episcopal church in Charlotte, North Carolina. For this Southern-raised National Baptist, the words of the liturgy were expansive and pointed to a whole new world, one where mere mortals dared to approach the mystery of God holding confidence and humility, where the full witness of Holy Scripture was heard, where we embraced a connection to an ancient church that was charging headlong into the uncertain future, where simple creatures of bread and wine were deemed worthy enough to bear the actual presence of an infinite God. That first experience at the Eucharist broke my world open in ways I am still working through.

As I sit down to write this book, I am a decade into my journey with God through the Episcopal Church. I've worshiped with and served the church in the South, Midwest, and Northeast. I've raised my hands in a charismatic atmosphere, genuflected during a service of Eucharistic Adoration, sung Taize hymns around a campfire, and everything in between the matrix of wonder, love, and praise. After years of ministry and worship in the Episcopal Church, ministry that involves teaching and preaching, creating and presiding over communal worship, writing and thinking deeply about the intersection of evangelism and mission, I have come to see that what initially drew me to the worship of the Episcopal Church was something more than expansive words and beautiful ritual. What I hungered for then, and hunger for now, is an engagement with the Risen Christ that is more than an isolated moment of personal piety. I yearn for an experience of Christ that has the capacity to change me and to change the world. I want an encounter with Christ that actively participates in the continued work of Christ in the world—reconciliation, peacemaking, justice, and mercy—as we await the fullness of God's reign on earth. True, authentic Christian worship is more than a refuge from the woes of the world. It is an active engagement in the new-making of the world. It is an episode of the crashing-in of God's reign of love, a community called together by God's grace despite the tilt toward estrangement and division that plagues our broader world. It is a moment where the Church can name and claim that the Christ that has come to us, and who promises to come to us again, continues to come to us in Word and sacrament.

As a practitioner of liturgy, I have also seen that we cannot take certain assumptions for granted anymore. In a culture that transmits less and less memory of Christian practice from one generation to another, and with that practice coming under understandable scrutiny for the ways in which it has either ignored (or in some cases perpetuated) oppression and injustice, we must reclaim the importance of public liturgy as our collective worship of God that participates in the mission of God by inviting us to share in dynamic love that exists within God. For too many, the liturgy has become a hermetically sealed moment of personal piety, a one-hour experience on Sunday morning that has little to nothing to do with living into the

kind of movement Jesus started. It has become too small to have anything of value to proclaim to a world in desperate need of God's saving presence.

In my view, the work that Episcopal Church has engaged under the leadership of the presiding bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, has been to reclaim the value of proclamation. Our challenge in this moment seems to be responding to an initiation to go deeper in every way—deeper in discipleship, deeper in love, deeper in relationship with others. Tools like “The Way of Love” offer individuals and faith communities the tools necessary to plumb the depths of our baptismal vocation to follow Christ by inviting us to live a life that is shaped by practices such as turning toward Christ, learning about the life and way of Jesus, engaging in public worship and private prayer, and other practices. Presiding Bishop Curry has said that these practices can “train up the spirit to follow in the way of Jesus and to look something like Jesus” (Way of Love Video, Youtube). This invitation to Christian discipleship invites us to do more than simply show up on Sundays and give money. This is an invitation to believe that if this Jesus stuff matters at all, we have to get serious about practicing it. If we desire a fuller experience of the reign of God, we must enact it in our lives: we have to go across boundaries to build relationships with people who experience life differently than we do; we must seek to be a blessing to all those with whom we come into contact; and (lest we forget) we must take rest as a spiritual practice seriously.

Proclaim! is about taking this work seriously. Specifically, this is a book that holds the belief that our liturgy—our collective and public worship of God that participates in the mission of God by inviting us to share in dynamic love that exists within God—is intended to so thoroughly saturate us in God's grace that we radiate grace and love in the world. Public worship is itself an engagement with God's mission and propels us into the world empowered by the Holy Spirit to *continue* our engagement with God's mission. The coming together of the community of the faithful around Word and sacrament sits at the inflection point between being gathered and being sent. Something happens when we come close to God. Like Moses, like Mary Magdalene, like Paul, coming close to God has consequences and the invitation we are offered in public

worship is to not leave the same way we came. Being gathered and being sent are two sides of the same coin of God's mission of reconciliation.

It is called *Proclaim!* for two reasons. First, the fact that we gather at all, especially on a Sunday, makes a public statement about what we believe and how we view the world—through the lens of our Lord's resurrection. Regardless of how others see the world, disciples of Jesus Christ are invited to see the world through the ongoing reality of God's new-making. Second, how we worship makes a proclamation about who we are, whose we are, and how we are to live in the world. The patterns, the rites (words), and rituals (actions) teach us to ask a different set of questions than we might otherwise ask and to make a new set of connections between God's ongoing work and our daily lives, thereby strengthening our ability to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as apostles sent by God into the ordinariness of our world.

As a leader in a faith community, I am aware of the incredible paradigm shift this book will be for many. The shift from faith as a set of ideas privately held by individuals who perform their personal piety before the God of their own understanding back to the idea of faith as an ongoing life lived before God within which the regular gathering of an individual with the collective community of faith is an essential component to engaging in God's mission is immense. I happen to also believe that it is key to participating in God's mission. As Bishop Ian Douglas, Bishop Diocesan of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, says repeatedly, "God has always had the Church God needs to be about the mission of God. The question is, will we be that Church?" To be *that* Church, I believe it is important to reclaim public liturgy as something more than a collection of individual relationships with God. Public liturgy must say something about God, not only to those in the room, but to those *not* in the room. It must speak the truth of God's reconciling love and break through the din of apathy, the cacophony of prejudice and oppression, and dreadful chords of isolation and alienation that threaten to break apart the fragile bonds of humanity.

The purpose of this book is to help make disciples out of people for whom public worship is either rote and unremarkable or tedious and inconvenient. This book draws connections between the practices of public worship and aspects of our ordinary lives in order to help us engage in

public worship and private prayer with more attention and intention. The Bible suggests that we live in a paradox, that the kingdom of God has both come near to us and is easy to miss as we walk past it unaware. My hope is that this book will help us pay attention to the ways the kingdom of God comes close to us in public worship and shows us how to recognize the signs of it elsewhere, thereby making us participants in God's reconciling work. To do this, I've arranged this book to first explore what I mean by "God's mission" and then to explore the various ways the individual parts of the service of Holy Eucharist, the primary service of public worship for many Episcopalians, breaks open a new facet of God's mission.

My understanding of worship is shaped by regular practice of the Holy Eucharist as outlined in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. If you are familiar with the pattern of the Eucharist, this book will feel familiar to you because it uses that shape in order to provide a new interpretive lens through which we might see the liturgy differently. If you are unfamiliar with this pattern, this book might serve as a roadmap for that experience as well as an invitation to navigate the pattern in person in community. Regardless of whether you share the Eucharist weekly, monthly, or at some other interval, Christians across denominations gather, listen, respond, remember, share, and go. The idea behind that pattern is to not only serve as a formation tool for those interested in deepening their understanding of the Eucharist, but also to highlight the eucharistic shape of our lives—the ordinary and often unremarkable ways we gather, listen and respond, give of ourselves, and ultimately share grace with one another in ways that destroy injustice and invite us to experience episodes of God's reign. Even if you do not regularly share in the Holy Eucharist, you can benefit from understanding how the rituals and rites associated with this liturgy illuminate practices of peacemaking, community-building, and justice-seeking in our lives.

This book is for people who are deeply interested in revival—personally and in their faith communities. It is for practitioners, planners, and students of liturgy. It is for spiritual seekers, those who, like myself, found the Episcopal Church after a period of wandering and who want to go deeper. It is for those who are interested in the work of peacemaking and justice in the world and who are unsure about the intersection

between the work that is the passion of their heart and their relationship with God, who is the lover of their soul. It is for those who want to engage in the spiritual practice of evangelism, but aren't sure they have the tools, knowledge, or awareness to engage that work meaningfully. My hope is that this book will invite you to consider deeply where you see connections between our worship and the world, to discern what this connection asks of you, and then to make choices that propel you in the direction of God, who is already out there in the world making all things new.

I am grateful for the work of Ruth Meyers, particularly her book *Missional Worship Worshipful Mission*, which has been an amazing guide through my thoughts. Having met Dr. Meyers a few years ago at a conference on prayer book revision in Sewanee, Tennessee, I was heartened by her encouragement to continue thinking deeply about this intersection and what resources a renewed life of the Spirit might offer me. In addition to the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, her book, which follows the pattern of the Eucharist, along with Derek Olsen's *Inwardly Digest*, serve as the theological grounding for this book. I encourage you to read both of them as well.

I remember that day all those years ago when I took my first steps into an Episcopal Church. I could never have guessed in that moment, but that day was the beginning of a new phase of my journey with God, one that has continued to change and shape me for the work to which God has invited me. Change is hard, and formation is oftentimes painful, but the result is a life that is more attuned to purpose and mission, one shaped around the reality of the cross, and one that sounds like the gospel.

This stuff works.

The Christian life can be more than mere words and ritual. It can and, in my opinion, should be about being found by the love of God and then choosing to respond to that love by growing up into it, into what Paul the Apostle calls "the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). Liturgy opens us up to the "breathless beauty" of the "singing of angels," an experience that Howard Thurman suggests places a crown over our heads that we will spend the rest of our lives trying to grow tall enough to wear (Howard Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger*). Changed lives cannot help but proclaim the Good News of God in Christ—in word *and* deed.