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Gathered for God

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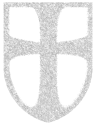

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Chapter 1

Gathered for Ritual

The most common act of worship you are likely to experience in the Episcopal Church is the **Holy Eucharist**. The word *eucharist* means "thanksgiving." On any given Sunday in most Episcopal churches, you will find a group of people giving thanks over a simple meal of bread and wine. Christians have done this in some form from the earliest days. In fact, biblical stories that try to convey that Jesus is alive often describe people sharing a meal.

None of this is surprising. Jesus was a real human being. He learned and laughed and cried and taught and loved and got in trouble with those in power and finally suffered an agonizing death. He ate and drank with all kinds of people, often offending the rigid sensibilities of his day about who was acceptable or not. After his crucifixion, the community

of friends and followers that had gathered around him did the same things. They continued to share the meal where Jesus had promised to gather with them.

Back to Emmaus

One of the most precious stories in the Bible is about two friends of Jesus who left Jerusalem on the afternoon of his resurrection, headed to a place called Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Were they trying to get out of Dodge? Were they afraid the authorities might come after them next? Were they just trying to escape their grief that Jesus was gone?

We don't know, but Luke tells us that as they walked along swapping stories, a "stranger" comes alongside them, somebody who knows nothing of the stories they share. "Are you the only person who's been in Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened?" they ask. "What things?" says the stranger. The story turns almost comical here, a little giddy. They tell him all about Jesus and what has happened, their hopes and dreams about him, the possibility that he was the one to rescue them from the terrible oppression of all that imperial Rome represented, and now all of that is dashed on the cross.

The story goes on. It's getting dark. They come to an inn and beg this stranger to come join them. Suddenly, the table starts to turn. The stranger they've invited to be their guest suddenly becomes their host. He takes the bread, breaks it, and with stunning speed, they get it. Jesus has been walking

with them all this way, unrecognized. It wasn't their ideas that revealed him. It wasn't some miracle, nor was it some test they passed. It was the action of breaking open that loaf. It was the breaking open of their lives.

Those two would never be the same again. The story says they got up and ran back to the one place in all the world they probably thought they would never see again: Jerusalem. They went back to the scene of their grief and despair, back to the other friends of Jesus with the message that grief and despair isn't all there is. They went back with a word of hope. They went back with a bewildering experience of joy and a growing conviction that there isn't any hunger God can't fill.

Emmaus is the pattern for what still goes on in church, what happens whenever Christians gather to break bread. In the Holy Land, six miles or so outside Jerusalem, there is a town named Abu Ghosh. It is one of the traditional sites that many Christians through the centuries have identified as the biblical Emmaus. In Abu Ghosh there is a remarkable church building that dates from the Crusader era. Named the Church of the Resurrection, it is now part of a Benedictine monastery.

One of the church's most striking features is its interior walls, which are covered with hauntingly beautiful frescoes, images of biblical scenes, angels and saints. There is a mysterious air about these frescoes because most of the faces have been erased. They were removed when the building was held by Muslim believers, since Islam prohibits any visual portrayals of God or saints.

To gather for the Eucharist in this church today is to be surrounded by the faceless images of ancient, faithful people. Standing there, you have the sense that these people could be anyone, including us. We are, after all, living the pattern they laid out all those centuries ago.

A Container for the Holy

While we can't know precisely what happened in these earliest experiences, we do know these encounters were so powerful that in some sense they launched the whole Christian movement. The first Christians kept the meal that had transformed their lives and allowed it to take a particular shape. Regular, repeatable gestures, prayers, stories, even the way the food itself is shared—all of that can be described under the heading of **ritual**. Ritual exists to provide a container for an experience of the holy—something that may have taken your breath away—so that others might encounter it, too. Ritual is the art of inviting people to be changed.

We call Christian ritual **liturgy**. The Greek word *leitourgia* meant something like a public work at private expense. In ancient Greece for instance the *leitourgia* referred to public service performed by wealthy citizens for the sake of the common good.

Originally, the Greek word from which we get the word **liturgy** could refer to public service performed by wealthy citizens for the sake of the common good.

Today in church you will often hear the word liturgy defined as the "work of the people." This definition is usu-

ally aimed at reminding worshipers that every member of a worshiping assembly has a part to play, an active role in making the act of worship happen. In the Episcopal Church, as in other liturgical churches, worship is not just about the preacher and whatever edifying thing he or she may have to say. It's not all about *the* minister. Rather, there are many ministers: readers, musicians, distributers of the bread and wine, ushers, priests, deacons, and more. It takes all of them to make this public offering.

This is why it is increasingly common to hear Episcopalians talk about the priest who is leading an act of worship as the **presider**. The Book of Common Prayer uses the term "celebrant" for this person, but in a real sense, every person who attends the gathering is a celebrant—we are all celebrating this liturgy—or more accurately, it is Christ himself celebrating it in and through his people. We all celebrate; one of us presides.

This dynamic relationship is clear in the dialogue at the opening of the prayer over the bread and wine:

Priest: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Priest: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them to the Lord.

Priest: Let us give thanks to the Lord.

People: It is right to give God thanks and praise.

This dialogue is like a series of questions and answers between priest and people. In effect, the priest is asking the permission of the whole assembly to continue the prayer in its name. When the people say or sing "Amen" (which may be related to a Hebrew word meaning truthfulness) at the end of the whole prayer, they are affirming the truth of what has been prayed. We might translate Amen as "So be it." This ritual meal takes the whole congregation to make it so.

Making Believe

Ritual is the subject of this book. We are made for ritual. Human beings are symbol-making creatures. If we don't have healthy rituals, we will invent others, good or bad. Think of the highly ritualized behaviors of the professional football game, or the elaborate symbols and initiation rites of sororities and fraternities or the alarming rituals of urban gang culture. Ritual is part of being human.

Christian ritual, the liturgy of the church, is meant to be an invitation to an encounter with the dying and rising Christ, an encounter that can change us and send us to do God's work in the world. While Christians have no exclusive claim on how God chooses to be revealed in this world, we believe that this encounter and this possibility happens reliably, according to the promise of Jesus, in the midst of those who have been made members of Christ's Body through the water of baptism (more on this in chapters 2 and 8).

The Episcopal way of being Christian is a very practical one. We do not ask people to believe (more on *that* word too a little later) elaborate ideas about God or the Bible or Jesus before they can be counted members. To belong to the Episcopal Church you must simply do what the church does. The church gathers; that's what the word "church" means. The word "**church**" in the Bible comes from the Greek word *ecclesia,* from which we get words like "ecclesiastical." It means "to be called out," as a gathering. And when the church gathers, it gathers for a purpose; it gathers to do something. It's provocative, but you might call our approach to the Christian faith "make believe." Make. Believe. Make it real. Put it into practice. "Show me." Act like Jesus. Do what he did. Be his hands and heart right now, right here, in this world with its horrors and hungers and heartaches. What follows is something about the art of gathering and making believe.

GO DEEPER . . .

1. Remember an experience so powerful that it took your breath away. How do you keep the memory of it alive? How do you communicate its power to others?
2. What rituals have you participated in, past or present? How have those rituals affected you as an individual? As part of a group?