CHAPTER SIX

BE ON YOUR WAY

This is true worship. Worship isn't vapidly stroking God's ego as though God has low self-esteem and created us to remind him how great he is. But real worship, true worship is to be the creature of God's creating living into the terrifying beauty of what's possible without what's possible being fettered by what's come before.

—Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor and author[1]

I have been watching a show called *You, Me and the Apocalypse*. In one of the episodes God appears before a weeping pregnant nun to console her. The nun immediately grovels in the presence of the most high God—who, by the way, appears as an old woman. (I love this show.) God tells her to stop groveling and wonders out loud why we think this is so necessary. Of course this is a nod to the old Monty Python sketches, where God frequently speaks to people in a similar manner. Appearing before the knights of Camelot in *Monty Python's Holy Grail,* for instance, God says to Arthur: "Oh, don't grovel! If there's one thing I can't stand, it's people groveling."[2] I think we come by the idea that God wants us to grovel from our deep tradition of worship and stories like Moses and the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–2). We think that loving God is synonymous with worship. Or, put the other way around, when we worship God, we believe we are fulfilling our invitation to love God.

Let me be clear about our gathering as Christians and as Episcopalians specifically. We believe that what is essential is gathering weekly as the first

followers of Jesus gathered. This is part of how the church remains tied to the society of Jesus followers. We also believe that when we gather we "unite ourselves with others to acknowledge the holiness of God, to hear God's Word, to offer prayer, and to celebrate the sacraments" (BCP, 857). I know the power of worship and the transformation of lives that does actually take place in worship of all kinds within my own denomination and believe this must be true elsewhere.

Our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer actually has very little description of our customs and what is to take place in worship. There is no mention of vestments or processional items, for instance. There is very little description about where people are to sit and how many hymns are to be sung. There is no mention of a building. Even in our service to bless a new sanctuary, there is not much to it. Yet we have overlaid the Prayer Book's very brief liturgical sketch with a whole host of inherited traditions. These inherited traditions have become liturgical and institutional narratives that define what makes us Episcopalians and Christians and our lens for reading Scripture. They cloud our understanding of what faithfulness actually requires. Our inherited traditions become what the church is about and some of us zealously defend our particular tastes as if they were ordained by God himself.

Jesus has quite a bit to say to those that lead worship about how worship itself can be a slippery slope. Like a Sinai prophet, he challenges the religious leaders of the day to see how they have lost the way—focusing on religiosity and practices within their buildings. Jesus indicts religious leaders who love titles instead of friends (Matt. 23 and John 15). We are not made to serve the religious order.

This is not an occasional assertion of Jesus. He constantly invites friends to sit at the table together. Jesus points out that the religious leaders will divide up traditions and separate the righteous from the unrighteous (Luke 11:42-44). Religious leaders will take pride in occupying the places of honor in worship. Have you noticed how this is physically made real in our worship space, with the altar area reserved for a few individuals? Jesus challenges the religious leaders of his day by calling into question their assumption that acts of worship make them better than others, less sinful, more righteous (Luke 18:9–14). In fact, religious leaders are likely to think their acts of piety have completed all that has been asked by God, meanwhile behaving horribly in the rest of their life (Matt. 23). Jesus reminds the religious leaders that their

offerings actually belonged to someone else, the people who underwrite their religious system.

The story of the widow's mite is a great story about how the economy of religious organizations work. Then there is that great passage in Matthew 17:24–27, which describes religious leaders as earthly kings. They have replaced God and take up a tax for their sustenance like other kings of the earth. Jesus tells his disciples that God does not tax his family, but religious leaders always take from others. So, Jesus says something like, "Go to the sea, cast a hook, you will catch a fish and in its mouth you will find the money for the tax. Give that to them." Such a comment about the tax being found in the fish's mouth is not simply a literary device of the author or a sideways comment by Jesus.[3] This is no mere parable but a powerful message. Jesus is saying that those who follow him, who are "brethren," are a new order. They are free from the tax not because Jesus doesn't like the idea of the temple and its false suzerainty and dubious economy. He is saying quite specifically that this is not how God's society of friends is going to function. Jesus is clear that his ministry and the ministry of the community that comes after is to be free of such transactional systems of faithfulness.[4] The fish and the coin are a new and fresh perspective that held the religious priorities of Temple Judaism lightly, while inaugurating a new society with great sincerity and truth.

Those who follow Jesus will be the "last, the least, the lost, and the little, all of whom are key in the stories of grace he will tell."[5] These are not people who are somehow on the edge of the new society but central to it. The new society will divorce itself from the transactional society of the old temple ways.

Jesus constantly seems concerned that religious leaders are so busy with the work of worship and religion that they simply aren't with people (Matt. 9). This is especially true when it comes to sitting, eating, and being in relationship with those considered unworthy. Worship of God and the focus on the temple creates a number of assumptions about how we might respond to God for the mighty acts done on our behalf. The problem is that because of our church lens, we read these as concerns of Jesus about other people and not us.

Let's take the story of the transfiguration, for instance. This is a passage that appears in Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9. The story comes shortly after the revelation that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to die. Jesus heads up a high mountain with a few friends: John, Peter, and James. Jesus is "transfigured" there. He is changed and his face and clothes shine dazzling white. This

is a mystical event of great power where the disciples see Moses and Elijah (two great Sinai prophets) standing there with Jesus. They are clear that this is a great sign, a revelation, about the person of Jesus. Peter says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matt. 17:4). Immediately, their human nature kicks in to make a holy shrine because of their experience. They would build booths; people would come and visit. Here on this mountain people would come to worship Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But Jesus heads back down the mountain. We don't get much from Jesus, only that the real work isn't happening on that mountain. He goes right down the mountain and begins a ministry of healing in the town. We see very clearly that the ministry is among the people who are in need of God.

In Matthew's Gospel, a man had gone to the disciples, but they couldn't help. Jesus says, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me" (17:17). It is as if Jesus says, "Look, you guys want to go around and replicate a new system of religion, build booths, and set up pilgrimages. The work of this community I keep teaching you about is in the midst of the people." This is right before the wonderful passage where Jesus rebukes the idea of a religious ingathering and sends Peter to go find a fish with a coin in its mouth. In every passage the disciples are to listen to Jesus, follow Jesus, and do what Jesus tells them to do. It has always struck me as funny that Jesus does not say, "Great idea. Let's build a building where people can come and worship God; after all that is the highest form of love." But instead Jesus takes them out into the world to be with people. So, I have always found naming a church "The Church of the Transfiguration" a bit odd given the story. Jesus's ministry of loving God is always in the midst of helping people.

I will talk a bit about the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well later, but I do want to pause here to point out what Jesus says specifically about worship. This is from John 4:19–23:

> The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him."

Jesus's words highlight the difference between the coexisting Sinai and temple traditions. But we might well ask, then where are we to worship? If loving God is not primarily done on Mount Zion in Jerusalem or on a high hilltop Sinai shrine, then where? Jesus is clear that loving God is done by being present in the lives of people . . . down the mountain. And worship is doing the work of God in Christ Jesus.

This last point is very clear when we examine how the word "glory" is used as a term for offering worship. In Matthew 5, glory is given in Jesus's work undertaken by the disciples. We are not to be like Solomon's Temple in Zion but like lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28). When the disciples want to sit and be worshiped on either side of Jesus, he tells them that they have misunderstood. Worship is found in the service to the least (Mark 8). Doing secret good things for others is appropriate worship and gives glory to God (Matt. 6:2). The devil offers Jesus people to worship him, to give him glory, but Jesus says worship God only (Luke 4:8). Good works are ways of worship. When Jesus raises Lazarus he does so as a work of bringing glory to God (John 11). In these instances the term "glory" is a form of worship or giving attention to God. Glory is attributed to God when mighty works are being done in God's name. The very incarnation of God in the world is an act that draws people to God. When the disciples actually do the work of the kingdom, they are making Christ present in the world and this is an act of worship.

The Book of Common Prayer says that this work of glorification or adoration is not done to gain something, but to enjoy God's presence. Jesus completely and continually reorients this work of love, glorification, and adoration to people and the relationships between them.

When we as Christians gather in God's name, we do so in order to be in the presence of God and to be in the presence of one another. And we must be very cautious that we do not repeat the idea that we are made solely for the worship part of this equation. About sixty years from the birth of the church, a great early church theologian, Ignatius of Antioch, wrote: "No longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death."[6] Ignatius is clear that people should gather on Sunday, always with a bishop and priest,

and in a building with an altar. The tradition around a building and altar and priest grew very fast. The people are to live for the high feast day of Sunday. Today we shame Christians who do not attend on Sunday—especially soccer moms and dads. We continue this very high tradition. I am not arguing that we shouldn't have church on Sunday. I am arguing that Jesus had something to say about what happens when humans become servants of religion.

You may remember the story. Jesus and his followers were walking in a field of grain on the Sabbath day. As they made their way, they became hungry and took some grain, plucked it, and ate it. The religious leaders of the day argued with Jesus, stating that his followers had broken the Sabbath law by working. Then Jesus says the opposite of what Ignatius says. Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Lord's Day, Sunday, is made for the people and not the people for the Lord's Day. Jesus is Lord of every day, all six days and twenty-three hours of the rest of the week in fact.

We easily turn stories about Thomas the doubter into symbols that shame people who miss Sunday worship. The disciples were gathered in the upper room for fear of the Jews (John 20:19–29). They are there on the first day of the week—Sunday. Jesus comes to them. Gives them his peace. Thomas is not there. They go tell Thomas about this. Thomas is there the next Sunday and gets to meet Jesus. Reading this story through the lens of the institutional church automatically reinterprets the story to be about gathering: those who believe are the good ones; those who don't believe and who aren't in church have something wrong with them that we must endeavor to correct. Thomas has a fault because he is not there. The disciples are good. Thank goodness they tell Thomas and he comes the next week to see Jesus. We are good because we can be like the disciples and bring others to Jesus in church. It gets very weird very quickly—and it is not the meaning of the narrative. The story of Thomas is not a story about getting people to come to church so they may believe. It is a story about a scared group of friends who are hiding in an upper room. Jesus appears and gives them peace so they can get on with the work Jesus gave them to do. A young layman recounts a very powerful sermon preached by the Rev. Martin Fields (now Episcopal bishop of West Missouri). In the sermon Fields quipped about this passage, "They were afraid of one Jew in particular: Jesus." They had denied him; they had not been present in his suffering; they were not out in the world doing what

Jesus had invited them and taught them to do. They were together on Sunday not because it was a feast but out of fear.

Not unlike Peter at the Transfiguration, we who serve and represent the institutional church have made the story of Thomas about something completely different. It is not a story about how Christians are to gather. Jesus came there, calmed their spirits, gave them the Holy Spirit, and literally kicked them out of the room. In Acts 8 we have a different story . . . but the same results. Whenever the disciples are content with following and hanging out together ("disciple" means "follower"), God sends Jesus or the Holy Spirit to kick their butts back out into the world. Every disciple is called to learn how to go and be an apostle. To leave and go out into the world. The only reason to come into a community is so you can learn how to leave it and do the real work of worship—being with Christ in the world around us. This is how we show that we love God—we go and love people, heal people, care for people, live with people, eat with people. We go and discover where Jesus is in the world and join his work there.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians (2:5), writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Cynthia Bourgeault suggests that these words "call us up short as to what we are actually supposed to be doing on this path" of following Jesus. She writes, We are not "just admiring Jesus, but acquiring his consciousness."[7] This is both a consciousness and an outward living, both an inward grace and outward sign. Jesus says he is the vine, we are the branches. Jesus abides in God, and we abide in him. This oneness brings about fruit of relationships and ministry. This is about friendship between God and Jesus, Jesus and his followers, his followers with the people around them. God chooses us, to love us, to care for us, to call us friends. We are to choose others, not wait for them to choose us. We are to go out and be in the world and love it as God loves it. There is a very real sense in the Gospel of John 15 that God is one with Jesus and vice versa. Jesus invites us to have the same relationship with him and, therefore, with God. It is not enough for us to simply worship the one who abides with God, but we are to abide with God too. We are talking about more than simple imitation. Jesus is one with God. We are to be one with God. Jesus is one with us. We are to be one with others.

The incarnation itself is God's love. Our response, our embodiment of the incarnation in the world, is our love for God. Our incarnation of God's

love continues God's outpouring of himself into the world. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans 8:38–39, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is the abiding that Christ invites us into—abiding with others. To abide is to experience a mix of God's love for us, God's love of Jesus, and Jesus's love of God (the Holy Spirit), Jesus's love for us, our love of Jesus. All of this is for the sake of the mission of God in the world, the grand gathering together of God's people into the bosom of Abraham as the Scripture imagines. All of this abiding and gathering happens so that the love of God and our love of God might be multiplied and amplified throughout all creation.

Bourgault says this isn't just some teaching. We are not looking at a text and seeing simple "proverbs for daily living" Jesus wants us to come and see. Jesus wants us to follow him out into the world. Bourgault writes, "He's proposing a total meltdown and recasting of human consciousness, bursting through the tiny acorn-selfhood that we arrived on the planet with into the oak tree of our fully realized personhood. He pushes us toward it, teases us, taunts us, encourages us, and ultimately walks us there."[8] To follow Jesus out into the world, we must recast our following as something much more than the fulfillment of the institutional church's dreams of flourishing: its idea of holiness and healthy church attendance. Such walking and living and loving and dying cannot happen within one hour plus some additional coffee time in a parish hall. I am not meaning to say that God is not present in those moments, acting in worship or healing the pains laid at the altar on Sunday mornings. I am saying that God does not limit the work and mission of the church to that hour and that space within a building's confines.

There is a very real fellowship intended here, and out in the world. There is a very real response invited. God intends this love to overtake the world and to be the core of the relationship of all who follow him. God intends for the work of "loving God" to be manifest in a way of living that is predominately found in the sacramental relationships of one human being in touch with another human being. Not for a moment or an hour, but over all of time. Theologian Katherine Grieb writes, "In response to God's love there is an imitation of Christ, not of just doing but of being with people in their own

passion, in their own broken lives."[9] We are to be immersed in the life of others as God was immersed in humanity in the person of Jesus. God's mighty act of resurrection and the defeat of death will come as gift not for those who worship on Sinai alone or at its shrines, nor on Mount Zion; instead it shall be in the neighborhoods, around fires and with others, at table with bread and wine, on the streets of towns and the roads in far off lands. God loves us and we are forever linked. To love god will mean to love others, regardless of who they are. This is the most difficult part, I am afraid. God in Christ Jesus came for the ungodly . . . the very people we are afraid we might meet out there in the world if we leave our booths and sanctuaries. It is one thing to say that we as a church organization exist for sinners and the ungodly and trust that they will find us inside our abode. It is quite another thing to leave the safety of our building and property and to actually venture into the world and be with people we do not know. As one parishioner said without shame, "Why would I want to meet the people who live around my church?" Why? Because to do so is to risk the intimate love of Christ. It is to be seen with people who we are not comfortable being with. We may be concerned of what others will say or how this will affect our reputation.

Let us be clear though: Christ died for the ungodly.[10] Paul is clear in Romans 5:6 and 4:5 that Christ indeed dies for the sinner. God proves his love and unity with us by coming while we were still far off, while we ourselves were living imperfect lives, unrighteous lives. God acts on our behalf not because we have reached some kind of perfection but in order to grab us. This is a kind of "extravagance," says Grieb. Paul sees this love as an outpouring of God for all people. This is not some odd little piece of Scripture or theology. It seems that way only because we constantly hear about God's love in the midst of our community. So we easily transliterate the words to be about those present. Episcopalians have a Eucharistic prayer in our prayer book used when we share bread and wine together on Sunday:

> On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."
>
> After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many

> for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me"(1 Cor. 11:25–26).[11]
>
> We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.
>
> Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.[12]

We might well ask who are the "we" and the "you" and the "us." In the context of Sunday morning liturgy these words are very powerfully received by those in the pews as being about "them"—the faithful gathered. In our religious settings, the "we," "you," and "us" are narrowly focused. These words are not only about the them in the faithful "them" in the pews. These words are prefaced by this *very* important narrative: "He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world."[13] We must read these words in the context of the whole world. The action of Jesus is an action for the whole world, for the goodly souls gathered on Sunday morning and the ungodly who are not. That is rather harsh, but it is exactly the point. We see everything within a bifurcated world organized by the needs of our religious institution, so all we see are the faithful and the ungodly. Paul reminds us, as does the whole of Jesus's own ministry, that God loves all. God intends unity with God's creatures. This is the ministry of Jesus and it is the way we are to respond to God's action and minister as Jesus. Moreover, if I am honest, there are many days when I am the ungodly one. Jesus, within the prophetic tradition of Sinai, reminds us that loving God is about being and living in the world. Living in response to God's love, it turns out, is what it is all about.

The model of Christian itinerancy I am sketching here could suggest and even provide unintended religious dressing for late capitalism's scorn of sacred sites. One of the fundamental indictments of modernity, by John Milbank, Charles Taylor, Catherine Pickstock, and Wendell Berry, among others, is the way that it atrophies and destroys our communities through the traumatic substitution of virtual (nonmaterial) space. The immanent frame and modern

truth-speak is endlessly colonizing, schismatic, and violent in its destruction of sacred place. It leaves us like the damned in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, hopelessly separated from each other by great distances, virtual and real.

So let us get clear about what I am proposing. I am not saying we should discard our spaces and buildings. I am saying that we must reclaim an itinerant mission and, in so doing, make more spaces holy by our presence as the body of Christ within them. Our goal is not to enter into and then leave community, but to expand and rescale the community until it encompasses the whole of humanity. So when we leave, we are taking what we had inside with us to the outside. These are false dichotomies, of course, but they are important in a world that claims privatized faith and religion. Our work is to make, with Christ, the whole of the outside and inside the same—spaces where people are at home in the kingdom of God, experience boundless love and genuine belonging, and ultimately find themselves for the first time in Christ. In this way, what we are doing then really is blessing and naming space.

The work of the itinerant church is to help people in the world come to concrete terms with their differences—rehistoried, rerooted, stewards of a specific, endlessly unique patch of soil. The old Anglican way of saying this was to know that the curate was the one placed for the "Cure of Souls" in a demarcated, geographic area, expressed through the liturgy of Beating the Bounds of the Parish. Anglicans have always practiced a spirituality of place, a sacramental localism, sprung from our agrarian origins. This is not a neo-dominionism or new colonialism, but is simply to see creation itself (cosmos and universe) as the sacred space of God.

Here is one final story in order to understand that Christ is inviting us to see that loving God means to be out in the world working as Christ. Jesus appears in Galilee on a mountain to his disciples (Matt. 28:16). Immediately they begin to worship him. I can imagine Peter saying, "Now, finally, he is risen, here is a great mountain, much better than the last one, here we should build a great shrine." But Jesus does not let them stay. In all of the resurrection accounts not once does Jesus say to them, "Stay here." Even when he says "wait," it is "wait until I send you." Jesus, who lived his life as a traveling prophet of God, always tells them to get moving, to be on their way. On this mountain there is no different message. They are to go out into the world. He does not tell them to go out and build little sanctuaries. He does not go out and tell them to build baptisteries. He tells them to go. Go and be with

people. Teach people to go out into the world like I taught you. Teach them to love God by loving one another. Jesus promised them that no matter where they go, no matter what challenges they face, no matter their success, or their death—he would be with them. Jesus will be with them when they leave the mountaintop and go out into the world. Loving God means leaving our ideas of church-confined worship behind for an itinerant life on the road.