

finding our identity \* painting the gospel \*  
searching the stacks \* engaging the text \*  
leafing through history \* sacking the monasteries



*"Darkness into Light" by Ruth Councill; used by permission*

by Adam Thomas

A six-week exploration of our faith and practice

exploring our faith \* praying without ceasing \*  
shaping our lives \* evoking the holy \*  
giving our thanks \* choosing to love



# Following Christ

by Adam  
Thomas

A six-week exploration of our faith and practice

## Course Outline

### *The Concept*

The Christian faith has a complex past, a dynamic present, and a hope-filled future. To understand where we (as followers of Christ) are journeying, we must be aware of where we've been, practice our faith in our daily lives, and allow ourselves to be open for encounters with the living Christ in our midst. Through brief historical study, engagement with the Bible and theology, and discussions of liturgical and spiritual disciplines, students will explore their identity as followers of Christ as expressed by the faith and practice of the Episcopal Church.

### *The Goal*

The goal of this course is to offer students a set of tools, a base of knowledge, and a joyful desire to become enthusiastic and attentive followers of Christ.

### *The Course Objectives*

*This course is designed to:*

- Explore the concepts of identity in Christ and discipleship
- Raise a student's awareness of the history of Christianity
- Increase a student's facility with the specific vocabulary of the Church
- Help students raise questions they have always wanted to ask
- Engage students who exhibit various learning styles
- Help students recognize the presence of God in their lives
- Offer a foundation for further biblical inquiry
- Introduce many and various topics and offer resources for further independent/group study

*This course is not designed to:*

- Fill students' heads with facts about Christianity
- Be an exhaustive study of all things Christian
- Present a diet version of Christianity or make discipleship easy to swallow

### *The Dates for the Course*

This course will meet during spring of 2013 (dates below). Meetings will usually go from 7-9pm. The Confirmation service is Saturday, June 1 (time TBD) at St. Paul's Cathedral (138 Tremont Street in Boston).

## *Course Topics*

### Session 1 (April 24, 2013): Finding our Identity

Introduction to the course. Discussion of our goals for the course and why we are involved. Exploration of identity as followers of Christ.

### Session 2 (April 24, 2013): Painting the Gospel

Looking at various images of Jesus. Discussion of how we think of him and how we have been influenced in this thought. We will also talk about the Gospel.

### Session 3 (May 1, 2013): Searching the Stacks

Looking at the contents of the Bible. What is it? How has it come to be in the form it's in now? Overview of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

### Session 4 (May 1, 2013): Engaging the Text

Exploring various ways to study the Bible including *Lectio Divina*, Midrashic inquiry, and reading aloud/performance.

### Session 5 (May 8, 2013): Leafing through History

A quick overview of the first 1500 years of Christianity. We will touch on some high (and low) points in our ancient and medieval history.

### Session 6 (May 8, 2013): Sacking the Monasteries

A slightly less quick overview of the last 500 years of Christianity. We will touch on the Reformation, and focus on the Anglican experience in America after the Revolutionary War.

### Session 7 (May 15, 2013): Exploring our Faith

This is theology day! We'll talk briefly about the Trinity and salvation. As you can imagine, we could talk for years about this stuff, so this will just be a taste.

### Session 8 (May 15, 2013): Praying without Ceasing

This is our day to discuss prayer. We will explore both formal spoken/silent prayer, listening and responding to God's call, and various spiritual practices.

### Session 9 (May 22, 2013): Shaping our Lives

The first of three sessions about our worship experience. Discussion of how our worship helps us organize our priorities and live the life to which God calls us.

### Session 10 (May 22, 2013): Evoking the Holy

We will look at various objects we use in church and talk about the associations we make about them. We will also discuss the sacramental nature of worship and our lives.

### Session 11 (May 29, 2013): Giving our Thanks

Discussion of the concept of thanksgiving, which undergirds our worship and lives. We will also compose a Eucharistic prayer (I hope this is fun; I've never tried it before!)

### Session 12 (May 29, 2013): Choosing to Love

Discussion of the Baptismal Covenant and the gifts God has given us. How love and service are synonymous in a Christian context.

# Finding our Identity

John 2:3

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to them, "They have no wine."

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## REFLECTION

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"Let me see some I.D."

"Yessir."

I have had this exchange a handful of times with police officers and one very friendly Texas state trooper. They, of course, want my driver's license, registration, and proof of insurance so they can go back to their cars and run me through their databases looking for past infractions while I'm sweating through my palms and my stomach feels like I just swallowed several gallons of quick-dry cement and my mind is racing in compound-complex run-on sentences such as this one. *A warning. Yes, officer. Yessir, no more rolling stops. Yessir. Thank you. You too.*

But the words they use are telling: "Let me see some I.D." Some identification. Really, they just want my name and some corroboration that the picture next to the name matches my appearance. They ask for my identity and I give them a plastic card with my name on it. Surely, there is more to my identity than the information listed on that card. And this is where the "mother of Jesus" comes in. (Take a quick glance at the verse in the gray box above.) Here we have a character who is never named, whose identity exists solely in her relationship with Jesus.

Now, we know her name is Mary, and in all likelihood so did the writer of the Gospel according to John. But neither in this scene nor in John 19:25-27 (her only other appearance) is she called by the name we know from the other three accounts of the Gospel. Instead, she is always identified as the "mother of Jesus."

Think of a time you were misbehaving as a child. Remember one of your parents saying to the other, "Tell your son to eat his zucchini" or "Tell your daughter to pick up her shoes." The exasperated parent was identifying you as the child of the other parent; the former was stressing your relationship with the latter. By refraining from calling Jesus' mom "Mary," John emphasizes her relationship with Jesus.

The mother of Jesus had a role of singular honor in Jesus' life: through her womb, the Word was made flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory. By identifying her as the "mother of Jesus," John reminds the reader that the Incarnation did, indeed, happen. Emphasizing this relationship of mother and son gives us cause to celebrate because it recounts the joyous message that the Son of God humbled himself and took on human likeness.

The identity of the mother of Jesus depends completely on her relationship with Jesus. How much of our identities depend on our relationship with him? Jesus is always calling us into a deeper relationship with him, so our identities as his followers depend on the depth to which we are willing to go. We can stay on the beach, letting the surf tug at the soles of our feet. We can wade into the shallows until the edges of our swimming suits get wet. Or we can swim out so that our feet are no longer touching solid ground, trusting that Christ will keep us from drowning, will be the air we breathe as we descend into the untold fathoms of his love. I don't know about you, but this is the relationship I both long for and dread at the same time.

I pray that as we grow in the knowledge and love of Christ, our relationship with Christ will become close enough that people will identify each of us as a "follower of Christ" before they even remember our names.

Imagine if the police officer asked for my I.D. and I handed him a card that said:

*Adam Parsons Thomas,  
A follower of Christ:  
Who is husband to Leah,  
Who strives to dive deeper into Christ's love;  
Who needs to be reminded that all his gifts come from God and should be used for God's glory;  
Who enjoys writing and composing songs on his guitar;  
Who is learning everyday what it means to be a priest in God's church;  
Whose not-so-secret ambition is to be a part-time play-by-play announcer for ESPN;  
And whose identity is still being shaped by God and his response to God's movement in his life.*

What would your card say?

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## EXERCISES

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Imagine the I.D. you give to the police officer does not contain your height, eye color, and organ donor status, but various ways you might describe yourself. List five to ten and try to put them in order from most to least applicable or from most to least important. Does "follower of Christ" appear on your list? If so, where?

*(NOTE: Please be honest. No one will be angry or disappointed if it's not on your list or is at the bottom. Look back up at my list. This is an illustrative best-case scenario: rarely is "Follower of Christ" in so prominent a position on my list either. If you are taking this course, you at least have some desire to bump it into the top ten at some point.)*

What are some goals you have for this course? What are you trying to get out of it? What do you have to offer the rest of the group?

What is something you'd like to cover but are not sure we are going to do so?

# Painting the Gospel

Matthew  
16:13-15

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”  
And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah,  
and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”  
He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

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## REFLECTION

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Have you ever noticed that none of the people who wrote the Gospel ever takes the time to describe what Jesus looked like? In Mark’s account of the Gospel, Jesus comes onstage nine verses in, ready for a dunk in the river. The text says simply: “In those days Jesus came up from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” The next verse could read: *Jesus, a strapping fellow, a shade over six feet with a ruddy complexion, a nest of a beard, and dark hazel eyes, was coming up out of the water when he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* The next verse could read like this. But it doesn’t. The Evangelists (one term for the authors of the Gospel) seem singularly uninterested in offering up any details of Jesus’ physical appearance.

This, of course, has not stopped people throughout history drawing, painting, and sculpting images of Jesus. The earliest paintings we still have around come from ancient catacombs where worship services were held in secret. These pictures usually portrayed Jesus as the good shepherd, and they appear to modern eyes as cartoonish – obviously, the artists were not trying to go for physical accuracy. As the centuries progressed and Christianity became first tolerated, then acceptable, then (in some cases) compulsory, images of Jesus appeared in mosaics, frescoes, statues, illuminated manuscripts, and stained-glass windows. Artists depicted him as a king and a judge (and sometimes still as a shepherd). During the Renaissance, Jesus often wore period costume, making him look more like a gentleman of Verona than a first century Jew. At some point, it became fashionable for Jesus to wear a beard; at another point, a serene, starry-eyed expression.

Enter Warner Sallman, who in 1941 painted arguably the most famous portrait\* of Jesus ever: amber background fading into brown; Jesus in three-quarter profile shown from the shoulder up; the flowing locks, the beard, the serenity, the multiple light sources. For many people, especially American baby boomers, this *is* what Jesus looked like. The portrait was so ubiquitous for so long that it almost took on canonical significance, as if it were *the* authorized image of Jesus agreed upon at the Council of Nicaea. People have been cast to play Jesus in films based on this image – just look at Jim Caviezel in *The Passion of the Christ*. Honestly, what self-respecting casting director would hire an actor who couldn’t grow such a nice dark brown beard?

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\* You can view this painting here: <<http://www.anderson.edu/sallman/headofchrist.html>>

I know this sounds like I have a vendetta against Warner Sallman. I don't...truly, I don't. I think his painting is quite nice, though I personally think Jesus looks a bit dull, like he's waiting for a traffic light to change. My opinion aside, the point is this: we, as a culture, have developed such a clear picture in our minds of how Jesus of Nazareth appeared. This clarity comes from centuries and centuries of images; from all the nauseatingly banal Tiffany stained glass in the windows of our churches; from a single authoritative, iconic portrait painted nearly seventy years ago. But this clarity, this consensus, is completely and utterly baseless. Our "clear picture" of Jesus was created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.

More than anything else, aggregate historical imagination has contributed to the development of our enduring image of Jesus of Nazareth. This imagination has fed off of the racial and cultural markers of myriad societies, the political and economic status of the Christian religion during various periods, the value of visual art for disparate sects of Christianity, and the technology, proficiency, and goal of the artist or craftsman.

In one image Jesus may wear pantaloons and a feathered hat; in another, he may wear a jewel-encrusted tunic and crown; in a third, he may wear the ever-popular toga/sash/sandals combination. In the majority of images, there's a high probability that Jesus "looks like me" – both "me" in the sense of the artist's race and culture and "me" in the sense that the person writing this is white, male, of Anglo-Saxon heritage, with brown hair, who could probably grow a nice beard if he could get past the "itchy stage."

Our penchant for recasting Jesus in our own images and for relying on the aggregate historical imagination should give us pause. There's obviously no way a first century Jew looked like a guy whose ancestors hail from Kent, England. Nor does the simple fact that something is both aggregated and historical infuse it with validity.

I'm not saying that we need to throw away all our pictures of Jesus and smash all our stained glass. I'm far from an iconoclast. What I am saying is that we develop awareness of where we come from, not to discount or disconnect that past, but to integrate it fully into our interpretive arsenal. When we discover that no words in the Gospel ever describe what Jesus looked like, we can begin to ask why our images of him look the way they do. Then we can ask: What else have we taken for granted?

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## EXERCISES

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Based on your knowledge of the Gospel, why do you think Jesus attracted such a following? Was it his message? His appearance? His charisma? His (*fill in the blank*)?

People have different understandings of Jesus based largely on their own needs. Who do you need Jesus to be? What do you need Jesus to provide? Is he that person and provider? Should he be?

What image of Jesus have you seen that you find the most persuasive or captivating? What makes it so?

# Searching the Stacks

Psalm 78:4

We will recount to generations to come the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD, and the wonderful works he has done.

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## A HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT

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In the middle of the second century, a guy named Marcion took his Bible and tore out most of the Gospel according to Luke and some of Paul's letters. He stapled these together and chucked the rest in the dumpster. Marcion had decided that the "god" who created the world was evil because the world sure wasn't doing him any favors. The other god, the real "God," was Lord of the "spirit world," totally alien from our world, except for that thing about sending his son here. The trouble was, that's not what the Bible said. So, Marcion, with a stockpile of misplaced entrepreneurial zeal, made up a new one.

Well...that's not actually what happened. You see, the "New Testament" as we now have it wasn't compiled yet. Christians and various derivative groups had been writing letters and gospels and stories and strange things called "apocalypses" for a hundred years. Some circulated widely, like the ancient equivalent of viral YouTube videos. Others stayed put in the community which produced them. Some were attributed to Jesus' apostles or their associates. Others were written by that guy with the hair and the thing. Some espoused doctrine that both created and helped support the emerging theological position of the "Church." Others claimed "secret knowledge," known only to the few who could get into the metaphysical country club.

The viral papyri attributed to an associate of Jesus and espousing sound theological views eventually became what we now call the "New Testament." The other stuff -- the classified documents, location-specific texts, and the ones written by that guy -- predictably faded into obscurity.

Okay, let's go back to Marcion. Since there was no list (or "canon") or authoritative texts, Marcion felt entitled to make one up that suited his own viewpoints. When he threw the Hebrew Scriptures and many of the viral papyri into the rubbish bin, the leaders of the Church said something to the effect of, "Hey, you can't do that!" And Marcion shot back, "Too bad, suckers."

At that point, those leaders decided that a list of their own would probably be a good idea. But, things moved slowly in the ancient world, so the top 27 texts were not finalized until the end of the fourth century (and even then, there was still some dispute between the Eastern and Western churches). But, I get ahead of myself. Let's back up a bit.

With Marcion's heresy forcing the Church to respond with its own canon of authoritative texts, scholars began compiling lists. Certain texts were shoe-ins. First and foremost, the Hebrew Scriptures (which became known as the "Old" Testament) were never in question because these texts were the Bible for the people who wrote the rest of the Bible. Second, the letters of Paul (the



most virulent of all the viral papyri) and the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, along with the Acts of the Apostles (which is sort of *The Godfather II* of Luke's Gospel). The Gospel of John was on the bubble at times because some of the heretical groups loved it. But, it made the cut partly because its "high Christology" helped the Church's position on the divinity of Christ.

Over time, the New Testament canon solidified with 27 texts. The four accounts of the Gospel came first, as they narrated the reason why the rest of the texts exist. Then the Acts of the Apostles propels the canon into the letters of Paul (strangely enough, appearing in descending order by length). After Paul, Hebrews begins the section of various texts addressed to a wider audience (the "catholic" epistles). Appropriately, the Revelation to John ends the canon.

The compilation of the New Testament from viral papyri to authoritative text speaks to us today of the value of various viewpoints within a larger structure. Unlike Marcion, who depleted the message until it said only what he wanted it to say, the 27 canonical texts present myriad experiences that coalesce into the great message of the love and grace of God. From an early time, the Church valued several different expressions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because it realized that one text could not contain such overwhelming truth and beauty. What is striking about the compilation of the canon is that the Church exhibited pretty startling ecumenism over a long period of time as the churches from both far-flung places and major cities shared their experience of the God made flesh in Jesus Christ.

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### SOME EXTRA STUFF

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The Hebrew Scriptures (known by most Christians as the "Old Testament") are broken into three groups: the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), the Prophets, and the Writings. Jewish people order the books in their Bibles (also known as The Tanakh) differently.

The Bible is really a library, not a book. It was written by many people and communities over several centuries.

The Bible is written in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and a teeny tiny bit of Aramaic. The Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures is called the "Septuagint" and was compiled in Alexandria, Egypt in the third to first centuries, BCE. It is usually abbreviated "LXX" (Roman numeral for 70, which is the number of books in the Septuagint).

The New Testament quotes the Hebrew Scriptures extensively. Many of the quotations are slightly inexact, showing that the New Testament writers were quoting from memory.

The "Apocrypha" is a set of texts associated with the Hebrew Scriptures that some Christians accept and others reject in their Bibles. Anglicans (of which Episcopalians are a part) read these in worship, but do not raise them to the level of the rest of the Bible.

# Engaging the Text

1 TIMOTHY  
4:13

Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.

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## THREE INTERPRETIVE PRACTICES

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### Lectio Divina

*Lectio Divina* means “divine reading.” This is an old monastic practice in which scripture is read prayerfully with much silence for reflection. This form of study draws interpreters to a particular word or phrase in a passage that speaks most to them. Then they focus on that particular word or phrase, holding it in their minds as they pray silently. *Lectio Divina* is all about slow, measured reading in a spirit of contemplation. If you find yourself running to and fro with too many things on your plate and not enough time or energy to accomplish everything, then taking a half hour to engage in *Lectio Divina* can bring you back to a calm center.

Here’s how to do it:

- Begin with a short prayer asking God for guidance.
- Pick a short passage of scripture, not more than a dozen or so verses.
- The Gospel is often the richest part of the Bible to explore with *Lectio Divina*, but it is certainly not the only section that can be studied this way.
- Read your passage aloud slowly with concentration.
- Sit in silence for a minute (I mean a full minute—it’s a lot longer than you think)
- Read the passage again. Notice any words or phrases that shimmer for you.
- Sit in silence for another minute.
- Meditate on that word or phrase for as long as you need to. Say it in your mind or aloud. Pray to God using that word or phrase.
- Read the passage a third time, re-inserting your word or phrase back into the passage for safekeeping.
- Sit in silence for another minute.
- Thank God for God’s presence in your life and in your study.

*Lectio Divina* can be done in groups. Ask different people to read the passage aloud, and have one person be the timekeeper for the silence. Relate to one another the words or phrases that shimmered for you and discuss them during the meditation phase.

### Midrashic Inquiry

“Midrash” is an ancient way to engage the text. The Hebrew Scriptures cover events in broad strokes—and they must, for centuries pass at the turn of a page. Civilizations rise and fall. Kings are

crowned and dethroned. While the New Testament covers a much shorter period of time and examines the lives of fewer people, there is hardly space on the page to paint events in detail.

Midrash adds the detail. The outline of events or the suggestion of a character appear in the text, and the interpreter deepens the story and the characterization. For example, in Luke 7, a woman comes to anoint Jesus' feet while he is dining at the house of a Pharisee. Who is this woman? We know from the text that she is a "sinner." What might that mean? What was she doing before coming to the house? What does she do after her encounter with Jesus? By engaging in Midrash, the interpreter has the opportunity to explore these questions.

Midrash is all about using your imagination. You delve into a character or situation described in brief in the text, and you naturally imbue the story with a little bit of yourself. At the same time, the text speaks to you, thus you create a conversation with the scripture. In this conversation, the Holy Spirit is present, fueling your imagination.

A few things to consider when you use Midrashic Inquiry:

- Is your character a main one or a bystander? There is more freedom when your character is an "extra," but more guidance if your character is in the "main cast."
- Examine a story from multiple points of view: male and female; protagonist and antagonist; old and young, etc.
- Employ various literary devices: write poetry or a one-act play or a short story.
- Use both first and third person perspectives.
- When you've gotten good at Midrashic Inquiry, try to do a Midrash as Jesus (this is tough because he's a pretty complicated guy!)

### Performance

Scripture is dramatic, but rarely does this drama surface when someone is reading during worship. Too often, readers deliver the text in a monotone, with little thought or emotion. Performing the text as if it were the script for a play offers the interpreter the chance to make all the decisions one must make when acting on stage. Should this line of dialogue be delivered softly or loudly? Should this character be angry or desperate? Should this action be bold or meek?

Performing the text gives the interpreter creative license to experiment with dialogue, movement, and interaction with the environment. This method gets interpreters up out of their chairs and moving about as they explore the text.

A few things to consider when you perform the text:

- Performing the Bible may feel strange at first. Don't let the "holiness aura" surrounding the text keep you from experimenting with it.
- Go ahead and be really loud if the situation calls for it.
- There is very little stage direction in the text, so you will have to invent most of it for yourself.
- Try to tell an entire story by yourself: be the narrator and all the characters.
- Also, try to tell a story with friends, each taking a different part.

# Leafing through History

BCP 288

Let us hear the record of God's saving deeds in history, how he saved his people in ages past...

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## A WOEFULLY ABRIDGED TIMELINE

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### Date Event

- 64 Rome burns down. The crazy Roman Emperor Nero begins a longstanding habit of blaming Christians for every bad thing that happens to the Roman Empire. Around this time, tradition holds that the Apostles Peter and Paul executed in Rome.
- c. 155 Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, is martyred under the Emperor Trajan's guidelines for dealing with "atheists." Christians were considered "atheists" because they didn't worship the Roman Gods. Persecutions were sporadic over the first few centuries of Christian history.
- 270 Antony decided to become a hermit and runs off to the desert so he won't be disturbed in prayer. His example becomes quite trendy, leading to the development of monasticism.
- 313 The soon-to-be Emperor Constantine has a vision to put the first two letters of "Christ" on his shield before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. He wins the battle, becomes Emperor, and promulgates the "Edict of Milan," which ends the persecution of Christians.
- 325 The Council of Nicea convenes, the first "ecumenical" council of bishops from near and far. Among other things, the council rejects Arianism and affirms the Trinitarian doctrine that Christ is "begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."
- 387 Augustine of Hippo (after many years of disappointing his mother, Monica) converts to Christianity. His writing becomes the basis for the Western presentation of theology.
- 405 Jerome finishes the "Vulgate," the Latin translation of the Bible, which becomes the industry standard until those Protestants started reading in their own languages a thousand years later.
- 432 Patrick, once taken captive by Irish marauders, returns to Ireland as a missionary and leads many to the Christian faith, including several local kings. Nowadays, people get pinched if they don't wear green on his feast day.
- 451 The Fourth Ecumenical Council convenes in Chalcedon and affirms the doctrine that Christ is both fully God and fully human. The Council is wisely silent on how the heck this works.

- 529 Benedict of Nursia founds his monastic order (the “Benedictines”) and writes the “Rule” that becomes the standard for Western monasticism. Unlike those pirates, his rule is more than just “guidelines.”
- 590 Gregory the Great becomes pope. He earns his nickname by advancing the power of the papacy. Tradition says that a little bird taught him some music called “Gregorian chant.”
- 732 Charles Martel leads the winning side of the Battle of Tours, which halted the Muslim invasion of Europe. The Muslims retreat to Spain and hang out there for a long time.
- 800 Charlemagne crowned Emperor by Pope Leo III, a sign of the power of the papacy, which rose and fell over the years. Charlemagne is the forerunner of the “Holy Roman Empire,” which existed in one form or another for about a 1000 years beginning in the mid-900s.
- 1054 The Great East-West Schism, centuries in the making, finally happens. The Catholic church develops in the Latin-speaking West, the Orthodox church in the Greek-speaking East.
- 1095 Pope Urban II proclaims the First Crusade to wrest the Holy Land from the hands of the Muslims. Over several hundred years, the crusades caused a lot of senseless death and achieved no lasting objective.
- c. 1150 The universities of Paris and Oxford are formed, leading to renewed scholarship, theological inquiry, and fledgling scientific enterprise.
- 1206 Francis of Assisi renounces his wealth and, to punctuate his point, removes all his fancy clothes in front of the bishop. His early followers embrace a simple life of poverty. Francis had a love for nature, which is why so many Christians have his statue in their gardens.
- 1215 The Fourth Lateran Council affirms the doctrine of “Transubstantiation,” that the bread and wine mysteriously become the actual Body and Blood of Christ during the Eucharist.
- c. 1380 John Wycliffe is exiled from Oxford for such strange positions as (1) the Bible should be translated into the vernacular and (2) Christ is present in the Eucharist, but it’s still bread. Basically, Wycliffe showed up for the Reformation 150 years early.
- 1456 Johann Gutenberg’s printing press produces the first printed Bible. All the monks copying the Bible by hand in scriptoriums across Europe cheer. (Okay, I made that last sentence up.)
- 1478 The Spanish Inquisition begins under Ferdinand and Isabella. The Inquisition uses brutal tactics to root out heretics and force the conversion of people of other religions. 500 years later, Monty Python spoofs the Inquisition. (“Our chief weapon is fear! Fear and surprise!”)
- 1517 Martin Luther nails his 95 theses (points of contention with church practice) to the church door in Wittenberg, inadvertently sparking the Protestant Reformation.

# Sacking the Monasteries

THOMAS  
CRANMER

“Forasmuch as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished; for if I may come to the fire, it shall first be burned.”

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## TWO KINGS, TWO QUEENS, AND AN ARCHBISHOP

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The airbrushed version of the story goes like this: King Henry VIII needed a male heir. His wife had only managed a daughter and things were looking bleak on that front. Henry fell in love with another woman who surely was young and fertile enough to produce a son. In order to legitimize any children of the second union, Henry needed to remove his first wife from the picture. The pope wouldn't grant an annulment. So, in 1534, Henry directed Parliament to approve his divorce and proclaim him the “supreme head of the Church of England.” Without the pope's interference, the Reformation in England could start scrubbing the grimy Romish doctrines from the walls of a truer Christianity.

Of course, the airbrush was invented to hide blemishes and make people look glossy and even-coloured. Let's take another pass at the story: King Henry VIII needed a male heir. His wife had only managed a daughter and things were looking bleak on that front. Annulments were not uncommon at the time, but Pope Clement VII balked because Rome needed the friendship of Spain, whose ruler Charles V did not want to see his aunt, Henry's wife Catherine, be humiliated. So, Henry took matters into his own hands for political, rather than religious, reasons. You see, the Reformation was lumbering toward its third decade on the continent, but Henry appeared immune to its effects. Indeed, at a time before all the business about divorce, the pope had proclaimed Henry a “defender of the faith.” When the 1534 acts of Parliament established Henry as the head of the Church of England, the monarch envisioned a sort of Roman Catholicism minus the Roman bit.

The reformers interpreted Henry's break with the pope as an opportunity to install Protestantism on the island. Henry's dissolution of the English monasteries fueled the reformers' hopes because the monasteries were bastions of papal influence. But the reformers only saw what they wanted to see. Henry dissolved the monasteries not to signal new reforms, but to consolidate his power and to refill the royal coffers with the assets of the rich monastic lands. With an unsympathetic monarch and infighting among various Protestant groups, reform in the English Church would be slow in coming and would never reach the full break with Roman Catholic doctrine that happened in many places on the continent.

This is not to say that Henry never waved the flag of reform. Rather, his support for the myriad religious flavors being tasted on the streets of London shifted depending on winds of the current political moment. Henry was a political realist: he sought advantage with little regard for principle. In direct conflict with this realism, Henry was also a glutton: his royal appetite for food, alcohol, and women was the stuff of legend. Indeed, when Henry died, he probably looked something like Jabba the Hutt.

The task of reconciling Henry's gluttonous appetites, political maneuvers, and religious position fell to Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer favored incremental reform of the church, and over time, his subtle influence over the king pushed England toward an unique experience of the Christian faith, both like and unlike Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

In his thirteen years as the head of the Church of England, King Henry married five more times, divorced twice (Catherine of Aragon, Anne of Cleves), and executed two of his wives (Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard). His gluttony and penchant for disposing of his wives make it remarkable that the church he accidentally started turned out as well as it has. Okay, moving on.

Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, finally produced a male heir before she died, but King Edward VI was never a picture of health and outlived his father by only six years. In that time, Archbishop Cranmer invented something that has defined the Anglican Church ever since: the Book of Common Prayer. The first edition, appearing in 1549, was Cranmer's English synthesis of various traditional sources. This first book was decidedly Roman Catholic in tone, a fact that led to a second, much more Protestant, edition three years later.

When Edward died, his successor hit the reset button on reform in the English Church, and she hit it hard with blood and burning. Mary Tudor, Henry's first daughter and a staunch Roman Catholic, repealed the reforms made since 1534 and relentlessly sought to purge England of all Protestant influence. During her five-year reign, England once again affirmed obedience to the pope. As with most everything else in these tumultuous decades, religion and politics once again danced clumsily with one another. Mary's allegiance to the pope was borne not just out of religious zeal, but also to secure Mary's status as a legitimate heir to the throne. Mary burned several hundred people at the stake including our old friend, Thomas Cranmer.

Mary's reign was fierce but short. Upon Mary's death in 1558, her half-sister Elizabeth ascended the throne and reinstated the religious policies of her father and brother. Like Mary's, Elizabeth's legitimacy as heir was tied directly to the version of history that the ruling religious class embraced. In 1559, Elizabeth issued a third edition of the Book of Common Prayer. This edition combined the varying theology found in the first two books and birthed the Anglican tradition of navigating the *via media* (the "middle way"). Elizabeth reigned more than forty years, during which the Church of England established its own identity separate from but related to other expressions of Christianity. Her demeanor and bearing were the antithesis of her father's; indeed, she was known as the "Virgin Queen," and she makes for a much more appealing spiritual founder of the Anglican Church.

So, the beginning of the Anglican Communion, of which the Episcopal Church is a part, is predicated on a great historical irony. The whole messy business began when Henry needed a male heir. In the end, his female heir solidified the new Church as one of the major expressions of Christianity in the world.

\*Justo Gonzalez's *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. II functioned as my fact-checking device.

# Exploring our Faith

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

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## THREE PHRASES FROM THE CREED

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### ...of all that is, seen and unseen

What I'm about to write ignores the fact that the Nicene Creed was originally written in Greek and then translated into Latin and then translated into English. Don't panic – the following is about the current English grammatical structure of the phrase, which is influenced by, but not chained to, the original language.

Do you see that little comma between the words “is” and “seen”? Yes? Good. Now, think back to all the times you've ever heard the Creed recited during church and ask yourself if anyone has ever acknowledged that comma. No? Didn't think so. The sentence usually sounds like this: “...maker of heaven and earth, of all that-is-seen-and-unseen.” But the sentence actually reads: “...maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, [slight pause] seen and unseen.” I imagine you are now rolling your eyes at my disconcerting attention to inane details.

This detail may seem inane at first, but I assure you, it's not. For now, let's ignore the phrase “seen and unseen” because it gets entirely too much attention when Creed-speakers unwittingly barrel through the defenseless little comma. With what are we left? “Maker...of all that is.”

*Maker...of all that is.* This “is” is the most important linking verb in the history of linking verbs, and probably other verbs, as well. We believe that God made all that *is*. Put another way, we believe that God is the very ground of our “is-ness” – or, to use a not made-up word, our “being.” [Disclaimer: The rest of this section assumes the reader knows the unwieldy conjugation of the verb “to be.”] In Exodus 3, Moses asks God what God's name is. God responds: “I AM WHO I AM.” This awkward English rendering of the Hebrew preserves the root of God's divine name, which is the verb “to be” (*hayah* in Hebrew). When Moses asks God what God's name is, God responds with something like, “I have being and I bestow being and that's all you need to know.” Look at the word “being.” Now add a hyphen: *be-ing*. The noun “being” is disguised as a present participle verb, a verb of continuing action. This points to the eternal continuity and abiding presence of God, who is the very ground of *be-ing*.

All grammatical gymnastics aside, the point is this: God created all that is, and creation's existence depends on God's continuing presence. As small bits of that creation, we receive our *be-ing*, our identity, our life from the foundation of that *be-ing*, the Holy One we call God.



### Through him all things were made

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... Through him all things were made.” Okay, since I failed to return to the original Greek in the last section, I feel I must make up for it. John begins his Gospel account with this poetry: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life...”

You’ll notice that word *be-ing* from the last section crops up several times in just these few sentences. We said that God is the foundation for *be-ing*, and now we discover that the “Word” is responsible for translating that *be-ing* into life. Here’s the Greek bit.

The “Word” is the translation of the Greek word *logos*, from which dozens of English words take their root. Every time you see *-ology* at the end of a word (zoology, biology, epidemiology), that ending comes from the Greek *logos*. “Logic” also springs from this root. When something is “logical” it is ordered, it makes good sense. This is a good entrance into one understanding of *logos*. John says that the Word was in the beginning with God and through the Word all things were made. This “Word” is the “logic” behind creation, the “organizing principle” through which creation has come into being. In Genesis, God speaks creation into being (“Then God *said*, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”). God uses *words* to organize creation, and John identifies “The Word” as God the only Son, who is incarnate in Jesus Christ.

So, the “Word” is creation’s logic or organizing principle. Creation, therefore, is not haphazard or accidental. You might be tempted to ask a question about “Creationism vs. Evolution.” But the unhappy dichotomy between these two positions breaks down when we see creation as both organized and continuous. My college chaplain was fond of saying: “If God stopped speaking, the world would stop turning.” The implication is this: the “Word,” the logic of creation continues to underpin and give life to all that *is*.

### ...he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man

As I said above, John identifies “The Word” as God the only Son, who is incarnate in Jesus Christ. “Incarnate” means “become flesh” (the *-carn* in the word is the same root as in the word *carnivore*, “meat-eater”). John’s use of “Word” connects to a strain of thought coming out of the Hebrew Scriptures. The “word of God” appears whenever a prophet is granted a new prophecy (*The word of God came to so-and-so...*). The Hebrew word for “word” (*davar*) means much more than the stuffy English equivalent. We think of “word” as something on a piece of paper or something spoken aloud. In Hebrew, however, the “word” is something that *happens* to people. It is an event, an action that calls for further action. When John uses the Greek form of “word” (*logos*), he purposefully links it back to this Hebrew understanding. The “Word” becoming flesh and dwelling among us is the ultimate example of the “Word” *happening*.

Here’s the thing to remember: the “Word,” through which God speaks creation into *be-ing*, is life-giving. Without the “Word,” life would not exist. When the “Word” became flesh in Jesus Christ, God gave us the gift of seeing how life is meant to be organized, meant to be lived. This means that the words Jesus speaks provide for us the means by which to organize our lives *in order* to be in deeper touch with God. The “Word” became flesh and lived among us. And now the “Word” continues to speak life into the world, disclosing the glory that is full of grace and truth.

# Praying without Ceasing

1 THESS.  
5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

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## REFLECTION

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Eustace and Jill Pole are trying to escape a mob of bullies at the Experiment House, their ghastly boarding school. Jill has been crying, and the bullies can smell tears from hundreds of yards away. From their hiding spot, the two targets hear the angry shouts of the searchers. Eustace looks at Jill and wonders aloud if they might be able to escape to That Place. He begins calling out, “Aslan, Aslan, Aslan!” Jill follows his example: “Aslan, Aslan, Aslan!” The bullies draw near, and Eustace and Jill scramble through the laurels and up a steep slope. The weathered old door in the wall is always locked, but this time – miraculously – the knob turns. And the two children step into Aslan’s country.

Immediately after they arrive, Eustace falls off a cliff, but a lion arrives just in time and blows him to safety in Narnia. The lion – naturally – frightens Jill Pole. She tries to slip away, but the lion begins questioning her. Her showing off caused Eustace’s fall, she confesses. For that display of pride, the lion gives her a task to perform. “Please, what task, Sir?” asks Jill. “The task for which I called you and him here out of your own world,” says the lion. This response puzzles Jill. Nobody called them. They called out to – Somebody – a name she wouldn’t know. Wasn’t it she and Eustace who asked to come?

“You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you,” says the lion.

The lion is Aslan, and the task on which he sends Jill and Eustace makes up the story of *The Silver Chair*, one of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. This exchange between Aslan and Jill Pole from the beginning of the tale illustrates most vibrantly the foundational principle of a life of prayer. *You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you.*

The Catechism\* in the back of the Book of Common Prayer states: “Prayer is responding to God, by thoughts and by deeds, with or without words.” When I first read this definition, I was flabbergasted. I had never thought of prayer as anything more than asking God for stuff. *God, please give me a kitty that doesn’t scratch me. God, please help us win our soccer game. God, please make Grammy not sick anymore.* Now, please don’t misunderstand, I am not condemning this form of prayer. There are many kinds of prayer, and they all have fancy names like adoration, oblation, intercession, petition – you get the idea. Rather, the popular definition that prayer is “asking God for stuff,” is several bricks up from the foundation.

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\* Also called “An Outline of the Faith,” an Episcopal F.A.Q. Most people know it as the thing you read when the sermon is *really* boring.

That foundation is, of course, God. More precisely, the foundation of prayer is God's presence in our lives and call upon our hearts. "Prayer," says the Catechism, "is *responding* to God."<sup>\*\*</sup> Think of prayer as a phone call. We never dial the number: we only have the option to answer the phone when it rings. When we choose to answer, we enter into the relationship that God yearns for us. Prayer is another word for our part in our relationships with God.

Of course, the phone call is not a perfect metaphor because God is always present in our lives and always calling upon us to serve God in the world. In this context, Paul's directive to "pray without ceasing" seems less unrealistic. Our striving to respond to God's perpetual call in our lives *is* prayer. The collection of our words and deeds that emanate from our relationships with God *is* prayer. Anything we do in response to God's movement in our lives *is* prayer. While prayer comprehends the kneeling-beside-the-bed-at-bedtime image that many associate with prayer, the act of praying is so much more expansive.

Monastics down through the ages have understood this. Even the lowliest jobs at the monastery – peeling potatoes or weeding fields – were prayer. Monks prayed many times a day in their chapels, but the labor they performed in the meantime was prayer, too. While we don't have strict priors delegating our labors, we can still import the monastic example into our lives.

Look at your day, your week, your year. How do your engagements and actions display your response to God's movement in your life? As a student, God calls you to learn about yourself and the rest of God's creation. As a member of a family, God calls you to love and enjoy and forgive your parents and siblings. As a servant of God, God calls you to discover and enact that one way in which you can better the lives of those around you. When we respond to God in all these areas of our lives, we pray. We affirm our relationships with God. We live the abundant lives that Christ gives to us.

"You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you," says Aslan to Jill Pole. "We love because he first loved us," says the writer of the First Letter of John. Likewise, we pray because God first called us – called us into the expansive, abundant relationship with God. What will our response be?

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## EXERCISES

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What is your definition of prayer? How do you pray? When? Where?

Using the expansive definition of prayer as response, how do you respond to God's call in your life?

Do you practice any spiritual disciplines that help your life of prayer? If so, what are they?

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Italics mine.

# Shaping our Lives

COL. 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

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## LITURGICAL LIFE PRINCIPLES\*

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Our worship, which is grounded in the Holy Scriptures and our evolving liturgical tradition, shapes our lives. If you've been going to church for your entire life, you may not be aware of this fact. Most of us, for one reason or another, do not have perfect attendance, so we have the dual experiences of living our lives with and without the shaping power of the liturgy. As we discuss the liturgy, I invite you to reflect on the differences you've seen in your life when the experience of God in worship has and has not influenced your life.

**The Arrival** – The cross is carried into the church, followed by the torches, choir, and altar party.  
*The faith of the cross invites us to live while acknowledging the reality of suffering and death.*

**The Collect for Purity (BCP 355)** – This prayer prepares us for the work of the liturgy.  
*God wants to do the work; God wants us to let him.*

**The Gloria (BCP 356)** – The song of praise that orients our hearts toward God.  
*In worship we recognize what matters, and we start to sort out what matters in our life.*

**The Greeting (BCP 357)** – “The Lord be with you...and also with you.”  
*In the Christian Liturgical Greeting, we invoke the Creator of everything that is to be a part of each other's endeavors.*

**The Collect of the Day (BCP 357)** – The prayer that changes every week that “collects” the important themes for the day.  
*We focus on different aspects of [healthy and authentic living] at different times of the church year.*

**The Lessons and Sermon** – The “lectionary” is the three-year cycle of readings that covers large parts of the Bible. The four lessons usually include a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms, the New Testament, and the Gospel.  
*The nature of the God seeking to transform us is the one revealed in the Eternal Word, conveyed to us in the Written Word, and made present to us in the Proclaimed Word.*

**The Nicene Creed (BCP 358)** – We respond to the Word of God by professing our faith.  
*We trust the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth to transform us.*

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\* With much gratitude, I borrowed the principles gleaned from each movement of the liturgy from the Dean of my seminary. Ian Markham's new book, “Liturgical Life Principles” is an incredible presentation of how the liturgy shapes our lives. I commend the full text to you.

**The Prayers (BCP 383-393)** – We pray to God for ourselves and our neighbors, both near and far.  
*We give God our worries. And by bringing the worries of the world to God, we begin to locate our own worries.*

**The Confession of Sin** – We corporately confess our complicity in the sins of the world.  
*Transformation doesn't happen overnight. There will be struggles and areas that we must continue to let God work on.*

**The Peace** – We offer each other the peace of the Lord and mend our broken relationships.  
*Rather than harboring anger or resentment toward others (both past and present), we need to let the peace of the Lord bring a calm that enables growth.*

**The Offertory** – We give our gifts back to the God that gave them to us.  
*Things (material possessions) make us worry about the wrong things.*

**The Sursum Corda** – The priest asks the permission of the congregation to pray on its behalf.  
*Be grateful for all the things we simply assume.*

**The Sanctus** – We sing the praises of God with all the “company of heaven.”  
*Others have gone before; we are in good company.*

**The Benedictus** – We echo the words said as Jesus entered Jerusalem.  
*Even though people can be wickedly fickle, God is constantly willing to work on their lives.*

**The Words of Consecration** – We recount the “Last Supper” and Jesus’ institution of the Holy Eucharist, also known as “Communion.”  
*In moments of betrayal, pain, and death, authentic living is made possible.*

**The Acclamation** – We proclaim that Christ is active in our lives today.  
*When life is difficult, we should remember that we are all part of a cosmic drama that receives the love of God in Christ.*

**The Epiclesis** – We pray to the Holy Spirit to indwell the bread and wine so they may be to us the Body and Blood of Christ.  
*There is a moment of divine grace found in the miracle of the sacrament that makes all the difference to our living.*

**The Lord’s Prayer (BCP 364)** – The “Prayer Christ taught us,” versions of which are found in both Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts of the Gospel.  
*If we let God transform us, then we will start wanting and praying for the things that God wants us to have.*

**The Fraction (BCP 364)** – We break the bread, symbolizing the sacrificial love of Christ.  
*Brokenness can be the key to life.*

**The Postcommunion Prayer (BCP 365-66)** – The prayer that sends us out into the world.  
*This service has made a difference. Equipped and ready we can live a changed life.*

**The Blessing** – God blesses us to be blessings in the world (Gen. 12:2)  
*We are guaranteed the presence of God during the struggles of the next week.*

# Evoking the Holy

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

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## REFLECTION

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Episcopalians are often accused of being too brainy, too intellectual. We think too much. We get caught up in the space between our ears and forget about that throbbing muscle in our chests. These accusers are correct up to a point: we do not check our brains at the door. Jesus asks us to love the Lord with all our mind, as well as our heart and strength. But our intellectual engagement with faith is only half the story.

You see, worship in the Episcopal Church is quite sensuous. Don't get me wrong – I'm not talking about the Harlequin romance definition of the word. Our worship is sensuous in that we employ all our senses to encounter the presence of God. We *hear* the Word of God read and proclaimed. We *see* the stained glass and changing seasonal color palates. We *smell* the incense puffing from the thurible.\* We *taste* the bread and wine. We *touch* one another in the handshake or embrace of the peace of the Lord.

To engage all of our senses, we use *things* in our worship. We use candles, books, and bowls. We use bread, wine, and water. These things are all incredibly – laughably – ordinary. Nothing about a loaf of bread is inherently special. Hand me a loaf of bread, and I might feed the birds or save it and make French toast tomorrow morning. (Actually, if you know me, the most likely scenario is that I'll eat the loaf right then and there.)

So, how does the loaf of bread, which was one of a hundred bar coded loaves at the grocery store, transform from a laughably ordinary carbohydrate delivery system to a holy vessel of Christ's presence? The bread moves from its ordinary location on the shelf in the store to its new, strange location on a linen-draped table in a church. The bread behaves quite normally, sitting there waiting to be eaten.

But the table and the action done to the bread and the people watching the action are not normal. The table is abnormal because it has several tablecloths covering it, some ornate, some plain. The action is abnormal – whoever talks about a loaf of bread before they start slicing it? And the watching is abnormal – unless you're in the studio audience for Iron Chef, who joins dozens of others in watching someone prepare a meal?

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\* The metal censer on the chain that you swing to disperse the perfumed smoke; sort of like a liturgical yo-yo.

So the bread is laughably ordinary. But the situation is not. The juxtaposition between the normal loaf of bread and the strange way it is being treated invest the ordinary with new meaning. This new meaning turns the bread into a *symbol*. Now, before we go any further, I want to dispel from your mind any notion of the phrases “it’s *only* a symbol” or “it’s *merely* symbolic.” Symbols are woefully misunderstood things in American culture – like soccer and irony. A symbol is an object that points beyond itself to a deeper truth. Too often, “sign” and “symbol” are used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. A stop *sign* lets you know you are supposed to brake at an intersection, but that’s all it tells you. The red octagon doesn’t compel you to ruminate on why you should stop. But a symbol – the cross, for instance – stirs within us all of the historical and theological and emotional resonances of the truth to which it points.

Okay, so the bread is a symbol. It connotes the bounty of harvest, the fruits of the earth, the goodness of creation, the nourishment of our bodies. And when we put it on that table, and a priest (in the presence of God’s people) asks God to indwell that bread with the Spirit of Christ, the bread becomes a special sort of symbol called *sacrament*.

God moves within us, spurring us to love, praise, act, pray, serve. Outward connections with our inward spiritual lives are called sacraments. These special symbols take the ordinary things we’ve been discussing – bread, water, even our own actions and personhoods – and set them ablaze with physical and emotive evidence of the presence of God.

When we participate in the sacraments, we ourselves become sacramental symbols of God’s movement. Our service to God points to the deeper truth of God’s creation of and love for the world. Worship nourishes us for our role as bearers of God’s image, as vessels of the light of Christ. We enter church as normal, ordinary people, like the loaves of bread on the grocery store shelves. We leave church transformed by our sharing in the presence of Christ with one another. Over time – months, years, lifetimes – the transformation helps us to realize that what we mistook as “normal” was really quite miraculous and extraordinary.

All of the normal, everyday things we use in church gather new meaning when we employ them to worship God. The candle becomes the light of Christ. The bowl becomes the vessel for the waters of baptism. The bread and wine become the Body and Blood. Likewise, we – as sacramental beings – discover new meaning for our lives when we come together to worship the Lord.

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## THE SACRAMENTS

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### **The Big 2**

Baptism

Eucharist (Communion)

### **The Other 5**

Confirmation

Reconciliation of a Penitent (Confession)

Marriage

Holy Orders

Sacrament of Healing (Unction)

# Giving our Thanks

John 6:11

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

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## REFLECTION

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The situation looks hopeless. The odds are twenty to one against, and one-third of their party has just been revived after being mostly dead all day. Westley, Inigo, and Fezzek peer furtively at the newly improved defenses of the castle gate. They have only Westley's brain, Inigo's steel, and Fezzek's strength against 60 men. "If I had a month to plan I might come up with something," says Westley. Then, half to himself, "If only we had a wheelbarrow, that would be something." It turns out, upon second thought, they do have a wheelbarrow; and, upon third thought, a fire-resistant cloak. With this rather odd pairing of materials, they break into the castle, save the princess, steal the prince's beautiful horses, and make a daring escape. On the walltop overlooking the castle, the three heroes make their plan. Here's the progression as I see it: they state the problem (breaking into a castle guarded by sixty men); they say what they do not have (a month to plan); they re-examine their assets (a cloak and a wheelbarrow); they overcome the problem even though their assets are meager.\*

A similar progression, with an all-important extra step, happens when Jesus feeds the five thousand people (as told in Chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John). A large crowd is following Jesus because they like a good spectacle. Jesus has just healed the man at the pool of Bethzatha, so the crowd knows they won't be disappointed. Jesus goes up the mountain with his disciples and looks down, surveying the vast multitude spread out below him. They could ignore the crowd, and, judging by Philip's response to Jesus' question the disciples probably wanted to. But Jesus does not give them that option. Instead, he states the problem: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip (characteristically for this Gospel) answers a different question than the one Jesus asks. He says what they do not have: "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Then Andrew re-examines their assets: a little boy has five barley loaves and two fish. Notice how wildly inadequate this amount of food is for so many; I bet Andrew felt foolish even bringing it up.

But Jesus seems to think this very foolishness is just the sort of thing needed to solve such an intractable problem. So he takes the loaves and fish and then adds the all-important extra step in the progression. *He gives thanks.* He gives thanks even though he has a loaf per thousand people. He gives thanks even though the situation seems impossible. He does not let the apparent meagerness of his resources dictate whether or not he offers thanks to God. He gives thanks, and the crowd eats, and the disciples gather up twelve full baskets. The crowd is looking for a spectacle and they get such a grand one that they try to take Jesus and make him king.

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\* *The Princess Bride* (1987); dir. Rob Reiner. Watch this film ASAP if you've never seen it. In fact, just go home right now and watch it. I'll lend you my DVD.



Let's take another look at the giving thanks. The special word for The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion is "Eucharist." (N.B. "*Eucharist*" *comprehends the entire Sunday worship experience, but we are focusing here on the second half, the meal.*) When we worship God by sharing this meal, we pray to Christ to somehow enter the bread and wine. Then we break the bread and share the cup, thus sharing Christ with each other. And our eyes are opened to the reality that the love of Christ is inside us and is made known in the sharing of community and love with each other.

The fancy word "Eucharist" is a much less fancy word if you happen to be both from Asia Minor and two thousand years old. This strange looking word simply means "to give thanks." So, when we come together to share the meal, we are coming together to give thanks to God for all the blessings God has bestowed upon us. The fact that this intentional thanksgiving happens in a community reminds us that we must share our blessings just as we share the body and blood of Christ. And it is the very dwelling of Christ in us and we in him that sustains us as we share with others.

When I give thanks to God for the blessings and gifts God has given me, I must remember that thanksgiving is the catalyst for sharing. If I do not share my gifts with others, then I have not truly thanked God for them. Let me say that again, make it plural, and italicize it so you don't miss it: If we do not share our gifts with others, then we have not truly thanked God for them

Sometimes, these gifts may seem meager or inadequate. But those are the times we must remember that Christ is there with us, giving thanks for us, and breaking us so he can share himself through us.

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### COMPOSING A EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

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**Sursum Corda:** ("Lift up your hearts"); All Eucharistic Prayers begin with this exchange.

**Thanksgiving for Creation and God's Revelation:** (sometimes including a "proper" preface based on the liturgical season); We begin at the beginning and move forward in time.

**Sanctus:** ("Holy, holy, holy..."); The three times "holy" is the Hebrew way to make a superlative.

**Thanksgiving for Redemption:** We thank God for the salvation of the world.

**Institution Narrative:** The story of the Last Supper and warrant for our action.

**Anamnesis:** A special form of remembrance in which we participate in the event we remember.

**Oblation:** We offer the gifts God has given us back to God.

**Epiclesis:** We pray for the action of the Holy Spirit.

[**Benefits** of both Christ's work and Communion]

**Doxology:** Finishing the prayer with praise to God.

# Choosing to Love

GAL. 5:13

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love become servants to one another.

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## REFLECTION

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Last session, I began with an illustration from *The Princess Bride*, and it seems once you get me going, I have trouble stopping. Here's another one. At the beginning of the film, Buttercup commands the farm boy, Westley, to do several menial tasks – polish her horse's saddle, fill buckets with water, fetch a pitcher. Each time, he responds, "As you wish." In time, Buttercup realizes that "As you wish" is Westley's way of saying "I love you." This discovery, of course, leads to a sunset kiss, a leave-taking to seek fortune across the sea, a supposed death, and (eventually) a harrowing reunion, a second separation, another supposed death, a rescue, and (finally) an escape together from the homicidal schemes of the evil prince.

"As you wish," says Westley before doing Buttercup's bidding. Too remove any mystery from where this lesson is going, let me put it bluntly: his actions display his love. He serves Buttercup, and the love that prompts this service stirs in her, as well, though the words "I love you" are never uttered.

You see, saying "I love you" is all too easy – just three little monosyllables. *Subject, verb, object.* Meaning it is the hard part. I could say, "I'm going to eat eighty-seven hotdogs in twenty minutes," but (unless I conveniently morph into a hundred pound Japanese man) there's no way I mean it. But you could drive one of those Wide-Load trailers with half a mobile home on it through the gap between what we say and what we mean.

Too often, the abused wife returns to her husband because "he says he loves me." Too often, the college freshman wakes up crying the next morning, after being duped by "I love you." Too often, "I love you" hurts more than it heals. The abusive husband and the manipulative scumbag weaponize the phrase, with no thought to its destructive consequences and their own dormant culpability.

This is where action comes in. This is where service separates truth from manipulation. You may be tempted to say that action is needed to *prove* that a spoken "I love you" is real. (If this were the case, there would still be myriad jousting tournaments throughout Christendom.)\* Rather, active service is a spontaneous *symptom* of love, and one that often removes the necessity of speaking the words aloud.

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\* I'm sure we could come up with some modern analogs. However, I beg you to concede the point.

Loving and serving – we really mustn't separate the two. Love expresses itself not in poetic protestations, but in holding the beloved's hair back when she's bent over the toilet with stomach flu. Love waits all night in the hospital room, visits the prisoner, builds affordable housing, donates mac & cheese. Love gets its uniform dirty.\*\*

The Baptismal Covenant is the Episcopal playbook for turning love into action. One of the promises echoes Jesus' great commandment: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

Will you serve? *I will, with God's help.* How will you serve?

Will you love? *I will, with God's help.* What will your love impel you to do?

God has given gifts to each of us so that we might enrich the lives of those around us. The ability to love is one such gift. The desire to serve is another. Paired with these gifts are those sets of talents unique to each one of us. When we combine our unique giftedness into that sacred body of which Christ is the head, there are no limits to what we can accomplish.

On Sunday morning, God nourishes us when we share the body and blood of Christ. Then God orients us toward the door at the back of the church and the world waiting beyond. We pray, "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to *love* and *serve* you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord." God sends us out to love and to serve. I pray that we can, with God's help, respond, "As you wish."

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### SPIRITUAL GIFTS

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Complete the following sentences as you reflect on the gifts God has given you.

1. Someone I trust once told me that I was good at...
2. I have practiced and studied to become better at...
3. I know I am skilled at...
4. I find the most joy when I am...
5. I am frightened or disturbed when...
6. My heart goes out when I see someone suffering from...
7. When I pray, I notice God pushing me toward...

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\*\* Have you ever noticed that there are certain baseball players who, no matter what, end the game with grass and dirt stains all over their uniforms?

