

# Rediscovering Eucharist: Collects and Genuflects

Second Sunday After Epiphany

January 14, 2018

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Over these next several weeks we are thinking about our patterns for worship, why we do what we do and how these habits form us.

We begin almost every week with a prayer very similar to Samuel's. We are told the word of the Lord was rare in Samuel's day. It might be better translated precious. The idea is of something that is highly valuable due to low supply. When God spoke, the boy mistook the voice of the Lord for the voice of Eli and ran to Eli saying, "Here I am." After three times, Eli realized what was happening and reoriented Samuel to God, telling him to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Our opening prayer is a similar reorientation. We turn away from the stresses and temptations and anxieties of life. And we say together, "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." It is our way of saying, "We are paying attention. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."

We call this prayer the Collect for Purity. Yes, the word looks like collect. Episcopalians came from the Church of England, so we speak British sometimes. A collect collects and focuses our attention toward God. We pray many collects from the Prayer Book. In addition to this Collect for Purity, there are collects for every Sunday, for every holy day, for special services and seasons, and for the people the church remembers as saints or holy people, like Martin Luther King.

Thomas Cranmer wrote many of the collects we still pray today. Cranmer was the Archbishop of Canterbury who edited the first Book of Common Prayer in English in 1549. Before that, the prayers of the church were in Latin and most people couldn't understand them. Cranmer wanted the church to share prayer in common. He didn't invent the collect, but he solidified the pattern, and it is a helpful way to pray. You see the pattern in two collects we prayed today. Collects begin by addressing God and naming something about God's character or actions in the world. After focusing our attention on God, then we ask God to do something. After that we praise God again and conclude with Amen, which in our church we almost always say together.

Here's the interesting thing about the Collect for Purity. In the Latin services, it was originally prayed by the priest privately, before the start of the service. Cranmer made it a public prayer, something the whole congregation would hear.

And that was one of the main goals Cranmer had for the Prayer Book. He wanted people to participate in the liturgy. By the 1500's, the point of worship had basically become show up and watch what a priest was doing. But Cranmer had studied the worship of the early church. He knew those first Christians were deeply involved in worship. He tried to restore that sense of participation, sharing together in the praise of God.

People from more spontaneous traditions are sometimes a little suspicious of collects and other written prayers. They may seem formulaic, or rote to some, as if we are simply reading, not really praying. But that's not true. Trust me - Episcopalians pray in lots of ways, together and alone, with published texts and with sighs too deep for words. But the collects and other written prayers teach us. They help us enter the conversation together. They are like Eli giving Samuel something to say in the presence of God. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.

Another practice that sometimes throws people off is our choreography. If your grandmother pinched you for squirming during church it can seem a little strange to see people standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, shaking hands during the peace, and moving their arms about every which way. What's that about?

Before describing some of these actions and the meaning behind them, let's turn to today's reading from Paul. I know many might prefer not to. This is one of Paul's R-rated conversations. Sadly, this passage and others like it have often been used to layer a veneer of guilt over one of God's most beautiful gifts - the physical side of who we are.

So let's be clear about what Paul was trying to say. The word for fornication here is *porneia*. Yes, that does mean what it sounds like. In our day, *porneia* would equate to the porn industry, to sex trafficking of all kinds, sexual harassment and assault, promiscuity without love and commitment. The loving commitment of two mature people is not *porneia*, but anything that exploits and harms bodies is. Keep in mind, Paul lived in the Roman Empire, where religious temples were places of prostitution, where conquering armies raped men and women to humiliate them, where relationships between adults and children were common. Corinth had a particularly bad reputation. It was a port city, the New Orleans of its time.

When Paul wrote about shunning fornication, he was telling Christians to shun the culture around them that exploited people's bodies. And why? Because your bodies are members of Christ. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. To a world that exploited bodies, Paul reminded Christian people, You were bought with a price. You are servants of God, valuable enough for Jesus to give his body. Therefore, glorify God in your body.

That is the spirit behind all the bowing and kneeling and waving we do. We are not showing off liturgical dance moves. This is about embodying worship, bringing our love for God from our heads and hearts into our skin and bones and offering God all of who we are.

So just a few words about some of the gestures you see in worship. These are not required. They are not mandated by the Book of Common Prayer. No one is watching and there are no style

points. But we commend some of these actions because they help us remember who God is and who we are.

So, first, the genuflect and the bow. To genuflect is to touch the right knee to the ground while keeping the body up in a reverent way. I admit I've never learned to do this gracefully, so I don't do it often, but you might see people doing it on their way to or from the altar. It is sort of like the curtsy, except it shows respect for something even greater than the Queen. The genuflect is a sign of deep respect for the presence of Christ in the bread and wine and in our prayer together.

Likewise, the bow is another sign of respect. We don't bow that often in western culture, but bowing is very common in the East. Some bow when the cross passes by. Some bow deeply toward the altar when entering or leaving this space or when passing by the altar. Some bow during the parts of the creed that talk about the Incarnation, or when we praise the Trinity at the end of a psalm or hymn, or whenever the name of Jesus is said or heard. Some bow deeply, some make a simple nod of the head. The bow simply acknowledges God's presence among us and all that God has done for us.

The sign of the cross is another gesture with rich meaning. It can be made in different ways. One way is to join the three fingers of the right hand and touch the forehead, chest, left shoulder, and right shoulder. Many do this when the Trinity is mentioned, like in the opening acclamation Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some will make it at the mention of the resurrection of the body in the creed, or after the confession when we hear the reality of God's forgiveness. There's a point in the Eucharistic Prayer when we ask the Holy Spirit to fill us, in addition to filling the gifts of bread and wine. We often make the sign of the cross there to acknowledge that we are the Body of Christ for the world.

Another sign of the cross is a simple cross with the thumb. You see this most often at the gospel reading. As the gospel is announced, many will cross the forehead, and the lips, and the heart, in effect saying, "May these words be on my mind, on my lips, and in my heart."

Whenever we make the sign of the cross, we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. But we also remember and renew our baptism, when we were sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. So many will touch the water in the font and make the sign of the cross on their way in or out of this space.

A word about kneeling. It is easier if you hold your back straight. If it hurts your knees, please don't do it. It is fine to sit. Many kneel to pray privately before the service begins, which is why we try to be quiet in this space, to give everyone some quiet time with God. We may kneel during the prayers of the people, the confession of sin, and the postcommunion prayer. In many places, the custom has been to kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer, as a sign of penitence for the sins of the world that led Jesus to the cross. But it has become more common recently to stand during the prayer, as a sign of unity and thanksgiving. Standing was actually the practice in the early church. The whole congregation stood with their hands raised like this, offering themselves

to God. I will usually ask us all to kneel or sit during Lent and stand during Easter. The rest of the year, we tend to kneel or sit at the 8 am service and stand at the 10:30.

So why do we do all of this? Why do we pray these beautiful written prayers? Why do we enter in procession and sit or stand or bow? Why do we mark ourselves with the cross? And why do we do these things here – surrounded by candles and flowers and linens and stained glass?

It is because we are being trained for something more.

This weekend, our nation remembers the witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the movement which cost him his life. Before Rosa Parks sat down on that bus, before friends tried to sit together at lunch counters, before Dr. King and John Lewis walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, before the Freedom Riders boarded Greyhound and Trailways, they were all spiritually trained. They were trained to take insults and beatings and respond with love. They were trained in their minds and hearts to love their oppressors. They were trained in their bodies stay still and resist the urge to fight back. Their spiritual training prepared them for what they would face. That training allowed the movement to endure.

This is our training ground. Worship prepares us in our minds and bodies to live as God's people in a broken world. We come from chaos and see order and beauty. We come from division, and pray the same words together. We come from experiences that may devalue us and remember we are marked as Christ's own forever. We come from conflict and extend a hand of peace. We come from service to lesser gods to kneel and bow before the Lord our maker. We come from individualism and become community, the body of Christ for the world God made.

In a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery in 1955, just before the bus boycott began, Dr. King preached a sermon on worship. In it, he praised Catholic worship, which means he would have liked Episcopal worship, too. He said, "On many occasions I have been in Catholic churches and it felt as if the very atmosphere blew the wind of the holy spirit."

But the point of worship, he said, is this. "If worship does not cause us to serve our fellow man in every day life and see the worth of human personality then the whole process is as 'sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.'"

May what we pray and do in this place cause us to serve others and see the worth of every human being. Amen.

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<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/worship-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

