

HOMILY

The homily -- or sermon -- begins the “Responding to the Proclaimed Word” section of the liturgy. Sermons have been included in the Eucharist since the 1549 Prayer Book. But that was not always the case. In the middle ages, preaching was so irregular that some localities legislated that sermons be preached -- between one and four times each year!

For time’s sake, an actual homily is not included in the Instructional Eucharist video. But you will likely recall that it is common for preachers to begin a sermon with a short prayer or verse of scripture, often accompanied by the sign of the cross. This custom goes back to a time when sermons were delivered outside of the Eucharist, either shortly after it or at an entirely different time. These introductory devices survive today, and provide an opportunity for us to center our thoughts, not to mention a cue to sit down. However, separation or distraction between the Gospel and the sermon is to be avoided, since the sermon is a direct response to the Gospel. And so, any pre-sermon prayer is best kept short and formulaic.

In preparing this Instructional Eucharist, the Liturgical Committee leaned heavily on “Celebrating the Eucharist,” an excellent resource by Episcopal liturgist Patrick Malloy. About homilies, Rev. Malloy writes:

“[The homily] is a prophetic, contemplative grappling with how God is acting in the assembly’s particular time and place in light of God’s action in the biblical record. The sermon explores how, by virtue of baptism, the assembly has been called to participate in God’s ongoing saving work. How is God in Christ, present in the church through the Spirit, continuing the saving work exemplified in the biblical texts? The task of the preacher is not to answer this question definitively. Rather, it is to invite the assembly to hold in tension the ancient record of God’s action, the current situation of the world, and the hope celebrated in the Eucharist. In the sermon, Bible, liturgy, and life are entwined.”

At Trinity, a period of silence is traditionally kept after the sermon. Rev. Malloy explains the importance of this post-sermon silence: “Deep realities and significant challenges do not settle into the heart and mind quickly or easily. Whether the members of the assembly find themselves more comforted or convicted, they deserve a time for listening to the Mystery reverberating among them after the sermon.”

For many of us, the sermon is a time when we are not just educated, but fed and inspired. It is the prototypical response to the Word. We value professional, competent preaching. But responding to the Word is not the exclusive domain of ordained clergy. All of us as baptized members of the Body of Christ are called to respond to God’s Word. The First Letter of Peter explains how we are, in fact, all members of the priesthood of God: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Complete deference to clergy to provide theological reflection and response to the Word carries with it the danger of stunting the spiritual growth and responsibility of the priesthood of all believers.

We are all called to respond to God’s Word, proclaiming by word and example how God called us out of our own personal darkness and into God’s marvelous light. How might we, both as individuals and as a community of faith, more deeply respond to God’s Word? What kind of “response” is God asking of us?

NICENE CREED

The Nicene Creed is one of the earliest summaries of the Christian faith, and dates back to the Council of Nicea in 325 of the CE, with later amplifications made at the Councils of Constantinople in 381 and Chalcedon in 451. At those councils, bishops from the whole church gathered to discuss and decide upon the most important aspects of the Christian faith. Thus, the Nicene Creed was born.

At the present time, many if not most liturgists in the broader Anglican Communion support removing the Nicene Creed from the Eucharistic liturgy. Among the several rationales, perhaps the most important is the fact that the Church's "creed" is first and foremost the Eucharistic Prayer itself: nothing, even something as familiar and beloved as the Nicene Creed, should challenge the primacy of the Eucharistic Prayer. That understanding served the church very well for the first three centuries of its existence. On a more practical level, the Nicene Creed tends to disrupt the flow of the liturgy by placing a somewhat mechanical proclamation of faith between the poignancy of the sermon's conclusion and the intimacy of the Prayers of the People.

The Creed itself can be divided into several sections. First, we acknowledge our belief in each aspect of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We then proclaim a series of beliefs: in one catholic (or "universal") Church; in baptism as the means of forgiveness; and in resurrection and the life of the world to come.

In the recorded liturgy, the version of the Nicene Creed that we use is from Enriching Our Worship. It is the only prayer in the recorded service not from the BCP. This version of the Creed has several noticeable differences from the BCP version, with which many of us are more familiar.

First, the EOW version of the Creed contains more expansive language than the BCP version. For example, it is said that Jesus "became truly human" rather than "was made man." The awesome miracle of the incarnation is Christ taking human form, not Christ's specific gender. Similar expansive language is used to eliminate gender identity from the Holy Spirit.

The other significant difference in the EOW version of the Creed involves the language about the Holy Spirit. The third council of Toledo in Spain in 589 introduced the *filioque*, or "and the Son" language, modifying the Creed to proclaim that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." This clause was not included in the language of the original Creed, and the *filioque* has never been accepted by the Eastern church or approved by a General Council of the

church. The EOW version of the Creed omits the *filioque*, and restores the Creed to its original wording.

Some of us may struggle with certain portions of the Creed, as we question whether we truly believe each and every word that we proclaim. The Creed can seem like a rigid test of our faith, a formula designed to measure if we really believe everything that we are “supposed to.” Without contradicting any part of the Creed, it is important to remember that as with all religious speech, the Creed is an attempt to express in human language what is ultimately beyond the scope of human understanding. The Creed should not be viewed as a loyalty test, ruling us “in” or “out” depending on how strongly we affirm each and every phrase. Rather, it is an expression of what we just experienced in response to the proclamation of the Word.

A few points about gestures associated with the Nicene Creed: At the words, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,” some people choose to make a profound bow. This gesture is in response to the willingness of God to humble Godself for the sake of humanity, and to take on human form. It is called “the divine condescension.” By bowing, we express our awe and gratitude for this act of divine humility.

At the end of the Creed, at the mention of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come at the end, many people cross themselves. This gesture has ancient origins, and is found in the rubrics of some, but not all, liturgical resources. Its meaning is unclear, but perhaps implies that we are sealed by the Cross against the dreaded day of judgment.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The Prayers of the People have been included in liturgies since at least the second century. In the early centuries of the church, the Prayers came after the lessons, sermon, and Creed, and prior to the exchange of the peace. After being moved to other parts of the service over the centuries, including within the Eucharistic Prayer, the Prayers were restored to their historic position by the 1979 BCP.

The rubrics set forth six categories of need that are to be included in the Prayers: the church; the nation; the world; the local community; the suffering and troubled; and the departed. The BCP offers six different forms for the Prayers of the People. But they are just that: forms. The rubrics permit any of the forms to be used, and also allow that “adaptions or insertions suitable to the occasion may be used.” Congregations are even permitted to draft their own Prayers of the People, as long as the Prayers address the six categories of need. In fact, many liturgists recoil at the thought of parishes using the stock, standard prayers with no adaptation or creativity. Such fluidity makes the Prayers vibrant and dynamic, much like the Church itself.

Having said that, the following is a description of the six forms of Prayers of the People contained in the BCP:

Form I contains biddings (or invitations) addressed to the assembly in the style of a litany, with a repeating response (“Lord, have mercy”), followed by silence.

Form II contains biddings, addressed to the assembly, with a time of silence after each when the members of the assembly may pray silently or aloud.

Form III is a responsive reading, alternating between the leader and the assembly, concluding with open or “extemporary” prayer.

Form IV is a series of prayers, each followed by silence and a repeating versicle and response (“Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer”).

Form V (which is used in this liturgy) is a litany addressed to God with a repeating response (“Kyrie eleison” or “Lord have mercy”), followed by silence. Notice that in Form V, each prayer follows a pattern: first, the subject of the prayer; then the thing prayed for. For example, we pray “for this congregation,” and then continue, “that we may be delivered from hardness of heart.”

Finally, Form VI is a responsive reading, alternating between the leader and the assembly.

In the recorded liturgy, the presider introduces the Prayers of the People with a sentence of invitation: "In peace, let us pray to the Lord, saying, 'Lord, have mercy.'" Thereafter, the Prayers are led by a lay person, and the presider joins with the assembly in responding to the Prayers. Note that during the Prayers the presider faces the Holy Table which represents Christ, through whom our prayers are addressed to God in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the presider joins with the people as responder rather than leader. At the conclusion of the Prayers, the presider prays a concluding collect or, in this service, a concluding doxology.

During Rite I, the person leading the Prayers of the People introduces them by announcing: "Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church and the world." The familiarity of those words to many of us masks their daunting demand. Quite naturally, we think of intercessory prayer from our own perspective: not just what we need, but what those we know and love might need. But how do we move beyond ego-centric prayer, to broader prayer for the needs of the whole Church and the world? Again: daunting. What kinds of needs exist from the perspective of children, of young adults, of new families, of retired people, of people in the later stages of life? Each of those different groups likely perceives very different needs. And age or stage in life is just one of countless variables that, when applied, changes perspective on need. How do we even begin to consider what the needs might be of people who differ in significant ways from our church family? Can we even pretend to know?

The Prayers of the People are not prayers about those in the assembly or for those in the assembly, but rather prayers by those in the assembly. The Prayers of the People offer the opportunity -- and the challenge -- to respond to the proclaimed Word by praying for not just our own needs, but for the needs of our friends, our neighbors, and for the needs of those who have no one to pray for them.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

The catechism, or "Outline of the Faith," in the BCP states that in coming to the Eucharist we should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people. Ideally, this self-examination and repentance should be

done before the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday, the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, most liturgists consider penitence and kneeling to be out-of-tune with the liturgical intention of Sunday worship. The BCP provides penitential material for Sunday largely as a remnant of the medieval obsession with sin, judgment and guilt. The rubrics allow that “on occasion, the Confession may be omitted.” When and why we do so is an area perhaps ripe for further exploration.

The presider begins this section of the liturgy with a preparatory sentence, from St. Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews in this service, and follows by inviting the assembly to confess their sins. The presider speaks the invitation in the first person plural (using “us” and “our”), to demonstrate that they will be joining with the assembly in the confession.

After the invitation, the rubrics provide that “silence may be kept.” This period of silence is crucial for us to engage our hearts and minds in a genuine act of penitence. It should be lengthy enough that the prayer of confession that follows will emerge from a genuine and concrete awareness of failure to fully live the baptized life. It is traditional that the assembly kneel during the confession.

The BCP and other church-approved resources provide several versions of the confession. In the one we use today, we confess sins that we have committed by thought, by word, and by deed. We confess not just that which we have done, but that which we have failed to do: in other words, sins of commission and sins of omission. And we confess that we have failed to honor the first and great commandment -- to love God with our whole heart -- and the second -- to love our neighbors as ourselves. These several areas should give us ample opportunity to reflect on and acknowledge our shortcomings.

And yet, we keep in mind the words of the initial sentence from Hebrews at the beginning of the confession: “We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.” It is therefore with confidence that we draw near to the throne of grace, faithfully prepared to receive God’s mercy.

Following the confession, the presider looks out to the people and proclaims the absolution. This fulfills the commission Jesus gave to his disciples: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." The presider traces the sign of the cross over the assembly as the absolution is spoken. Many people choose to cross themselves as these words are read.

PEACE

The exchange of peace comes at a pivotal point in the Eucharist, standing between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Table. Although it sometimes feels like a break in the liturgy, it is in fact an integral part of the liturgy.

In early church liturgies, the peace was shared at the conclusion of the liturgy of the Word, after the catechumens were dismissed, as the peace was not exchanged with those not yet baptized. In the early centuries of the church, the Eucharistic Prayer with its allegiance to Christ and not emperor was considered so subversive and dangerous that it was too risky to include the unbaptized in this part of the service. The emperor had spies among Christian communities who wanted to root out those with loyalties to Christ, and so only those who had been thoroughly vetted and then baptized were permitted to remain for the Eucharistic Prayer. The peace in its historic setting really means, "I trust you to keep my identity secret, and not to give me up to the authorities."

In the fifth century, the peace was moved to the time of the breaking of the bread, as an immediate form of preparation for communion. The BCP allows it to take place at either time, but the placement we use today -- following the confession and absolution -- is by far more common, and emphasizes the exchange of peace as an act of gratitude for God's unearned and undeserved forgiveness. The words of absolution and reconciliation are thus tied to the gesture of reconciliation, the exchange of peace, which immediately follows. The peace is a ritual sign that the assembly is reconciled, following the confession and absolution, and can approach the Lord's Table in good conscience.

By exchanging the peace, we acknowledge one another's dignity. It is a gesture of equality and mutual respect, rooted in our shared humanity and the bonds forged

by a common baptism. The exchange of peace also recalls the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

There is a natural tendency to use the peace as an opportunity to seek out friends or loved ones and connect with them. But in the Body of Christ, such distinctions are irrelevant. It is just as well, if not better, to embrace -- figuratively if not literally -- whomever happens to be near you during the peace.

The rubrics offer no guidance on how to exchange the peace, other than the general statement that "the Ministers and People may greet one another in the name of the Lord." Being mindful of boundaries and personal space, the words and gestures we choose to share the peace should strike a balance between impersonal distance and personal intimacy. The reverent bow necessitated by the current pandemic captures the spirit of the exchange of the peace perhaps better than a formal handshake or a loving embrace: a bow acknowledges and reveres the other, and allows us to connect and to reciprocate.

Notice that the presider opens his arms expansively when proclaiming, "The peace of the Lord be always with you." This is not to be mistaken for the prayerful *orans* position we see at other points in the Eucharist. Rather, the presider's position imitates the kind of reaching out that one might do to an approaching friend.