

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

One of the spiritual redwoods in my life is a woman I met soon after I came to the Episcopal Church more than thirty years ago. She's a member of my parents' generation who has lived through more personal grief than most of us can imagine: her first husband left her while she was pregnant with their first child. Her second husband, a wealthy farmer, lost everything during the agricultural crash of the 1980s, and when he died, left her with nothing. One of her sons was murdered in a random, unsolved incident. A beloved daughter-in-law, one of my closest friends, died of leukemia. All but one of her children, and more than one of her grandchildren, have dealt with substance abuse and addiction, multiple bad choices, and their own stories of adversity. Now in her eighties, my friend is coping with health issues and the loss of her independence. Throughout all of this, she has remained firm in her faith and faithful in her church attendance and her personal ministries, always finding joy and strength in her relationship with our Lord. She is a remarkable woman!

She is also the mother of six boys, which in my book makes her even more remarkable. She doesn't dwell on all the hard things that have happened in her life or theirs, doesn't even talk about those things except to her closest friends. But I have heard her remark on numerous occasions that while she was raising those boys Sunday mornings were almost impossible to get through. Trying to get them all dressed and ready to walk out the door on time tried her patience, the thirty-minute drive to church was tense beyond measure, and as she walked into the church each week she gave thanks for the prayer of confession that allowed her to unburden herself to God about all the ways she had lost her cool with her boys before she got to church. The absolution after the confession freed her to worship God with the loving heart that is so much a part of her.

Many of us will agree that Sunday morning has a different tone and intention than any other day of the week. Whether we're employed or retired, raising children or living in an empty nest, the weekday schedule doesn't apply on Sunday mornings. And regardless of where we are in our lives and routines, there's an underlying awareness that we're coming to church to worship God and to receive the living bread that came down from heaven as Jesus speaks about in today's Gospel. Sunday is not an ordinary day, and everything we do on this day prepares us to be fed with the true and life-giving food and drink, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Newcomers to the Episcopal Church—and by newcomers, I mean those who, like me, have come in the last thirty years or so—may not appreciate how much our liturgy has changed from the way Episcopalians practiced their faith before the 1979 Prayer Book that we use today. The most significant change was the addition of Holy Eucharist every Sunday instead of only once a month, a change that wasn't embraced by all Episcopalians! But there have been other, more subtle changes over the years, beginning with the ways we prepare to worship and receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. In former times, almost everyone arrived early to spend time in prayer and silent reflection before the service began; you could hear a pin drop before the priest spoke the first word of the liturgy. Many women covered their heads and on the days when communion was offered, those who planned to partake of it didn't eat until after they received it—the holy meal was their first bite of the day.

Although not all of us continue to practice these specific acts of piety, there are those who still do, and as a community we honor and respect their needs. As our service begins we continue to prepare for the wonder and mystery that awaits us with songs of praise—both sung and unsung—and with prayers, the reading of scripture, the sermon, and except during Easter, the prayer of confession and absolution that free us from the guilt we feel because of things we've done or haven't done, both small and big. Confession and absolution allow us come to our Lord's table with clean

and contrite hearts, remembering two things that are critical to our faith: Jesus loves us and Jesus forgives us. Perhaps that's why the early church chose the word "eucharist" to name the celebration of Christ's sacrifice. "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving," and our thanksgiving is what brings us to the altar. But there are still a few things to take care of before we get there.

First is the Peace. There was a time in our churches when the priest said "the peace of the Lord be always with you," the congregation responded, "and also with you," and nobody moved a muscle. Later, folks would shake hands with the people around them, and then, one day, there came the practice of exchanging the peace with everyone in the church or at least with our friends, as we do at St. Francis. Realizing that practice is here to stay, I'll remind you the peace is meant to be more than a way to welcome guests and visitors, and more than a way of sharing Christ's love with others. It is yet another way our hearts are prepared to receive Christ. When we exchange the peace with someone, we're saying that we want for them the best and most important gift God has given us: the peace we know because God's son came to live among us, to teach us how to live with each other, and most importantly, to teach us about sacrificing ourselves for others. This is especially important when we're crossways with someone. Sharing the peace with those we love isn't hard; sharing it with someone we're angry with or with whom we don't agree calls out the best in us as Christians. The peace is a way for us to make amends, so that there is no malice or anger in our hearts when we receive Christ.

Next, of course, is the offertory, that time when we give back to God the treasure we've received through God's grace, by offering to God the first fruits of our life and labor and the gifts of bread and wine that will be sanctified by the Holy Spirit to become the spiritual food of the Body and Blood of Christ. We ask God to bless the gifts we bring, remembering that we received them from God in the first place. And then we begin the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving. Although the Eucharistic prayer is prayed by the priest alone, it's done on behalf of every person who will receive the sacraments, even those who are unable to be present. And regardless of the form that is used, there are common components in each, including remembering our Lord's last supper with his disciples and asking God's blessing on the bread and wine that unites us with Christ. Then, finally, we come to the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ.

When I was growing up, the church my family attended observed the Lord's Supper in what seemed to be a more casual way than we do here. I don't remember the words of consecration said by the minister, but I distinctly remember going to the communion rail, where I served myself a tiny square of unleavened bread and a thimble of grape juice. It seemed to be no big deal as I remember it, especially on Christmas Eve, when communion was "drop-in" with no formal preparation or celebration. Both are important, crucial really, because what we take away from our Lord's table is more meaningful because of what we've done to prepare ourselves. And despite what we may have been taught, it is in fact a celebration—not a solemn, sad event, but a thanks-filled occasion for joy—every time we celebrate it. It *is* a big deal—awesome, mystical, mysterious and holy.

For me, personally, the most special, the most humbling, the most precious time of my week is when I place the body of Christ in your outstretched hands. It is the time I feel closest to God—when I read on your faces all that you bring to Christ—love, joy and happiness, grief, sorrow and worry, even anger or a sense of separation; it's a welcome opportunity for me to remind your children how much Jesus loves them, to comfort you when you're sad or discouraged, to see the love of Christ on your faces and in your eyes. It creates a bond between us and I could not be more thankful for it.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." These words are not only a promise of what is to come; they are the promise for our lives today and everyday. So let us come, with joy, to meet our Lord. *Amen.*