Chapter 13

Gathered Together in Unity

The Creeds

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 232

Rules are funny things. To see a list of rules is to see a list of problematic things that people have done. As a way to understand the odd list of rules that appear in Saint Paul's letters to the church, one of my seminary professors offered this example. Suppose that thousands of years from now, archeologists excavated a public swimming pool. The purpose of the large concrete hole in the ground might not be clear, but archeologists would know two things based on the list of rules posted near the hole. It was not a place intended for running or diving. And they would also learn that people both ran and dove, hence the need for the rules against such actions.

Creeds are not laws but rather rules of faith. Creeds are, as the prayer book's Catechism says, "statements of our basic beliefs about God" (851). Why do we

have these particular statements? At various times, the church has been racked by controversy, and so its leaders have met to settle basic questions of faith. Thus we have creeds, or summaries of the faith. Creeds speak especially to those matters that were controversial at the time they were written, and most of those controversies were related to belief in the Holy Trinity. Our creeds, therefore, mostly speak about God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many other important items of faith are left out, vital issues such as war and peace, the role of clergy and lay people in the church, protection of the vulnerable, or the sin of great wealth. So we turn to the creeds to find our bearings on who God is, but we also must realize that other very important matters of doctrine are not settled in our statements of faith.

We use two creeds regularly in our worship. On Sundays and Major Feasts, when we celebrate Holy Eucharist, we say together the Nicene Creed. When we say morning or evening prayer, baptize new Christians, or bury the dead, we say the Apostles' Creed.

According to tradition, the twelve articles of faith in the Apostles' Creed were written by the apostles themselves, with each apostle contributing one statement. Scholars today generally believe this is not how the creed arose, but there is wide disagreement as to its age or even whether it is more ancient than the Nicene Creed. The most important thing for us to note is that the Apostles' Creed is deeply connected with Holy Baptism. From very early times, this creed was used as new

Christians were baptized. Today we continue this practice by incorporating the Apostles' Creed in our Baptismal Covenant in a question-and-answer format whenever we baptize someone or renew our baptismal promises. The Apostles' Creed is also used when we pray the Daily Office (see Chapter 9), especially in morning and evening prayer. Finally, we use the Apostles' Creed at funerals. Thus the earthly pilgrimage of a Christian begins and ends with the Apostles' Creed.

In this chapter, we will step through the Nicene Creed, because the Nicene Creed is largely an expansion of content similar to what the Apostles' Creed covers. If you are curious about the individual statements or articles of the Apostles' Creed, just look for the corresponding line from the Nicene Creed in the explanation below.

The Nicene Creed is named after Nicea, the place where the church held an ecumenical council (worldwide gathering of bishops) in the year 325. In response to certain divergent beliefs about Jesus, the bishops at that conference ratified the Nicene Creed. This was later modified and extended in 381, and this version is essentially the one that Christians around the world have said for more than 1,600 years and still say each Sunday.

Our creeds teach us about our faith in God. All the major creeds are organized along Trinitarian lines, so there are sections on God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The creeds generally do not delve into other matters. May Christians fight wars? Who may be ordained or married? These and other

important matters of faith are not resolved by the creeds. Instead, the creeds focus on the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. They focus on God the Father as creator of all that is. And they articulate the nature and role of the Holy Spirit. Especially in the Nicene Creed, words about the relationship of the Triune God (God in three persons) have been chosen very carefully. All this is designed to help us avoid saying or teaching things that would lead to error. For example, if I overemphasize the humanity of Jesus, then he is no longer God and thus cannot be proclaimed as the savior of the world. Conversely, if I overemphasize Jesus' divinity, then his humanity could be seen as an illusion and thus God has not dwelt among us as the scriptures say.

More than one person has observed that it is a good thing the Nicene Creed comes right after the sermon in our eucharistic celebrations: If the preacher has gone off the theological rails, the creed gets us back on track. The creed does indeed remind us each week of what the church teaches and how we ought to believe, but it is more than that. Coming shortly before our gathering at the altar, the creed can also be understood as a reminder of who God is—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as we ready ourselves to feast on Christ's presence. As a corrective against the possible idea that our celebration is all about us, the creed puts us in mind of the eternal nature of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just a nice guy who shows up when we say some prayers; he is the only-begotten Son of God, loving us and all of creation from before time, redeeming not only those we can see around

us but also those in all time and space. The creed reminds us of the big picture, the biggest picture.

People will sometimes wonder about one line or another in the creed. "I'm not sure about the virgin birth." "Is God really almighty?" "What does it mean that Jesus will be our judge?" At times, these questions are whispered furtively, as if no one else in the congregation asks them. But of course, people who take their faith and their intellect seriously will inevitably have serious questions about our faith and our world and our place. Many of these questions have an underlying question, "Do I really have to believe all this stuff we say?"

We can and should use our intellect to probe the depth of our faith—how, why, what, where, when, whom—but we should also be ready to join our voices with those of every generation who have taught the core beliefs of our faith. One way to understand the creeds' function is through the allegory of a yardstick. We can use the creeds to measure what we hear and determine if it represents the teaching of the church. If, God forbid, a preacher says that Jesus did not rise from dead at Easter, we can immediately reject this as false teaching, because the creeds—universal statements of faith—are so emphatic that Jesus was indeed resurrected from the dead. This does not mean that we cannot ask questions about exactly what happened on Easter morning. In fact, a close reading of the gospels reveals that Jesus' own disciples were confused after Jesus was raised from the dead. Who wouldn't be?!

If you are interested in exploring questions of faith, a good resource is *Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus*, which is all about the importance of wrestling with our faith. *Faithful Questions* also offers some guidance on important questions such as who Jesus is or what happens when we pray. This book is published by Forward Movement and is available from Forward Movement or your local bookseller.

The Nicene Creed

So let's take a look at the Nicene Creed. This will necessarily be a very brief survey. For a more detailed treatment, we recommend *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* by Luke Timothy Johnson.

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

The opening of the creed is not too complicated, really. We assert that God the Father made all that is, everywhere. Saying that God made everything has significant implications for how we treat the world we live in, as we'll see in Chapter 21. We might also note that this version of the creed, from Rite II, has us saying, "We believe," which is how the oldest versions of the creed read. Later, much of global Christianity preferred "I believe" and you

can still find that version in our Rite I liturgy. While "we" emphasizes our common profession of faith, it avoids personal accountability. To say "we" emphasizes that we are stating not just our own beliefs but saying the beliefs of the whole church. This might help us along sometimes if we personally struggle with parts of the creeds, knowing that we are really articulating the ideal faith of the whole church. On the other hand, when I say "I believe," it reminds me that I take ownership of my own life of faith and beliefs. Try the creed using both voices and consider the advantages or disadvantages of each.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

Nearly every sermon I've heard about Jesus is about his earthly life. And yet the creed has eight lines about the eternal life of Jesus Christ. Everything in these lines from the creed happened before Jesus was born. To make these claims emphasizes the vastness of God's love for us. To echo Saint John's words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God..." (John 1:1) is to see Jesus not just as a person who lived in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago but as the crux of God's salvation history for all creation and for us.

It may be risky to privilege one phrase over another, but the words "of one Being with the Father" are especially important. This means that Jesus Christ and his Father are peers and of one kind. In simple, practical terms, to say that Jesus and his Father are of one being prevents us from wrongly saying that Jesus is lesser than the other persons of the Holy Trinity.

Some of the phrases here ("Light from Light") are responses to specific controversies that raged in the ancient Byzantine world when the creed was composed. These words and phrases are well worth exploring in depth, but for now, we can stand back and note how the Jesus of the creed is far vaster than the warm, fuzzy Jesus we sometimes imagine.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

This set of lines says much about Jesus—and about us. Why did Jesus come to dwell with us? "For us and for our salvation." How was this accomplished? "By the power of the Holy Spirit." And of course, we cannot overlook the gift of Mary in all this. No shy, retiring woman, Mary boldly said "yes" to God's invitation to bear God in Jesus Christ into the world. Because of our awe at God taking on human flesh, it has long been traditional, among some Anglicans, to bow or even genuflect as these words about the incarnation are sung or spoken.

Several years ago, I was teaching a basics class in a congregation, and it occurred to me to ask a question. "Can anyone say what 'incarnate' means?" Silence. No one had any idea. Incarnate is actually a very important word. (And this is a good reminder that we shouldn't idly repeat rote liturgical phrases; we should make sure we know what we're saying!)

Incarnate comes from the same root as *con carne* that you might have seen in a Mexican restaurant's menu. With meat. To say Jesus is God incarnate is to say that Jesus is God enfleshed. This takes away any possible idea that our God is remote from us or somehow does not understand the human experience.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again

in accordance with the Scriptures;

Pontius Pilate was an official of the Roman empire. His story is told in all four gospels, and there are mentions of him elsewhere. It's positively extraordinary that only he and Mary (the Mother of God) are named in the creeds. Only two humans are mentioned; Mary brought Jesus into this earthly life, and Pilate played a key part in ending Jesus' earthly life. By repeating Pilate's name every week, we are reminding ourselves of the historicity of Jesus Christ. Pilate is a real person whose identity and existence are archeologically verifiable. Pilate is a real person, tainted by the same sin and fear that inhabit us all. We invoke his name week after week, grounding Jesus in historical reality and exposing

the painful gulf between our sins and fear and God's love and hope.

We profess that Jesus died and was raised to new life. This is one of the central claims of Christianity. Apart from a claim of his resurrection, we might make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is merely a teacher. Without this claim that Jesus really died for us, we might make the mistake of thinking that God's love for us is limited. Dying for another is an ultimate expression of commitment, and Jesus' death proves God's commitment to us and our salvation.

he ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,

and his kingdom will have no end.

Many Episcopalians don't make a big deal about the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Many churches don't even have a midweek service to mark this central event, which occurs on a Thursday forty days after Easter Sunday. In the ascension, Jesus returns to heaven to dwell with God. Perhaps we don't celebrate the ascension more because we are stuck on the mechanics of the event rather than the why of it.

Just before he returns to God, Jesus blesses his followers. He promises that the Spirit will abide with them—and thus with us—as Jesus' ministry continues. The ascension is in some ways the beginning of our own earthly ministry of being

Christ's hands and feet in our world, ministering to the world in his name.

The creed then moves into a part about judgment. Comfortable people don't like to think about judgment and consequences. But put yourself in the place of someone born in Darfur or someone whose family was extinguished in the Holocaust or another of the too-many genocides of the last hundred years. Righteous judgment may look very different for those who endure more evil than most of us can imagine.

Universalism—the idea that everyone is judged favorably, that there is universal salvation—works best for those who do not want to face consequences. But the teaching of the gospel is clear: God will one day judge us and all people. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man gives us insight into this judgment (Luke 16:19-31). In the parable, a rich man refuses to help a beggar named Lazarus. When the rich man and the poor man die, the rich man discovers that he is consigned to a life among flames, while the poor man has been taken into paradise. The rich man asks if the poor man can help him, but he is told that he has already enjoyed pleasure in his earthly life and will get no help in eternity. Like the rich man, I have routinely walked past the poor and needy, ignoring their pleas. For me to speak of judgment is to speak of the judgment I will face for failing to honor Christ in the most vulnerable people. Our prayer can and must be for mercy, for ourselves and our whole world.

We will be judged—but by God (and not one another!). Fortunately, God's judgment is above our

"pay grade" so we can focus on our own salvation while yearning for God's mercy.

> We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
>
> who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
>
> With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
>
> He has spoken through the Prophets.

The third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is oft-neglected. We tend to pray to God the Father or God the Son much more frequently than we pray to God the Holy Spirit. Only once a year, on the Day of Pentecost, do most of us turn our gaze fully to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the "giver of life" in that the Spirit was present from the moment of creation and continues to be one of the ways God animates us with God's presence. The creed reminds us, in case we forget, that the Spirit is itself worthy of worship and praise. Finally, the creed emphasizes how the prophets through time have been the Holy Spirit's voice. This is important both because it reminds us that the Spirit is eternal—and not just in our present—and that God sometimes chooses to speak through people. You can read more about the Holy Spirit in Chapter 23.

> We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
>
> We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This section of the creed has one of the most controversial lines. In the original version of the Nicene Creed, the Spirit was said to proceed from the Father. Period. Several centuries after the creed was ratified, the church in Europe began to insert another phrase, "and the Son." To untangle this controversy would require another book, so we'll just say this. Whether or not "and the Son" is added has an effect on our understanding of the relationship among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. To say from whence one proceeds is to describe the source of power and being, and this affects the relationship among the persons of the Trinity.

Proponents of each position will make a case that "their" position is the only possible correct one. Anglicans have gradually begun to move toward the more ancient line. The bishops of the Anglican Communion have urged all Anglicans to omit "and the Son" in future prayer books, and, indeed, our own Episcopal Church has omitted the phrase in the *Enriching Our Worship* supplemental worship materials. It's all very complicated, but we mention this because wars have been fought over this and because the language varies somewhat in modern liturgy as this controversy continues to play out, thankfully without bloodshed.

Here we profess our faith in the church universal. We call the church holy, because we believe that Jesus Christ himself is the head of it, and that we, his disciples, carry on his ministry under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We call the church catholic, because despite our many differences, nearly every Christian recognizes the baptisms performed by nearly every other Christian. We call the church apostolic because we are bound to teach and to practice the tradition that was handed down to us, continuing all the way back to the apostles.

And we end our recitation of the Nicene Creed with a statement of hope, hope for an eternal life with God.

The creeds are somewhere between rules of faith, doctrinal statements, poems of belief, and aspirational articulations of what we hope all Christians will confess as their faith. The language is meticulously precise and yet comprehensible by anyone. If the creeds seem elusive, give them time. If it seems that you have mastered them, give them even more time and study. Our creeds are gifts: They teach us about our faith, and as we study them, enrich and expand that very same faith.

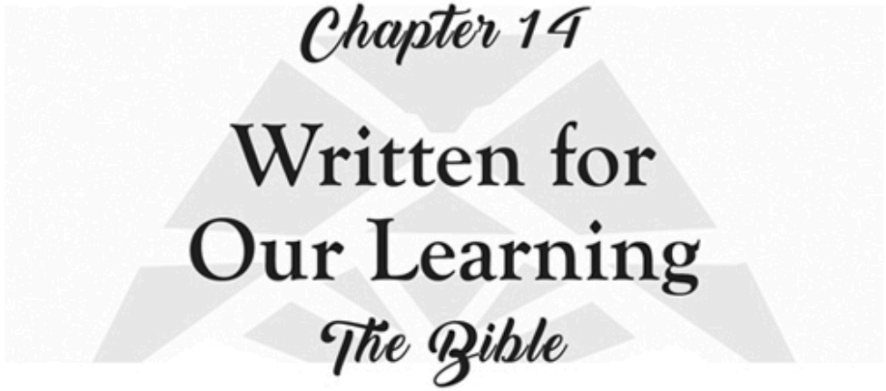
For Reflection

- Christian practice has varied with statements of the creed; sometimes the creeds have read "I believe" and sometimes "We believe." What are the advantages and disadvantages to each way of reciting the creed?

- Every thoughtful Christian will struggle with parts of their faith at times. How does saying a creed help or hinder our struggle with faith?

- The creeds address themes of judgment and the end of history, yet these are often not part of our everyday conversations of faith. Why is it important for these things to be in the creeds?

- Look at the Apostles' Creed on page 96 and the Nicene Creed on page 358 in *The Book of Common Prayer.* What do you notice is different between the two creeds? Which creed do you prefer and why?



Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, 236

When filling out paperwork for various church conferences, I am often asked to identify my denomination. Typically, a list features the usual suspects: Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, and so forth. Recently, however, I encountered a list that stopped me in my tracks. Asked to identify my denomination, I was given three selections: Catholic, Protestant, or Bible. I stared at the screen for a long while, torn as to how to identify myself. I wanted to simply type, "Yes!" Yes, I am Catholic, Protestant, and Bible! I needed a fourth option: All of the above.

The truth is, Episcopalians are all of the above. We are catholic (a word which, at its heart, simply means

universal or available to all). The Episcopal Church's catholic identity is expressed through our bishops and sacraments in a way that connects to the historic beliefs and practices of the church from its earliest beginning and united with Christians around the world today. And we are Protestant, incorporating many of the best ideas of the Protestant Reformation into our beliefs and practices, including our assertion that the Bible contains all things necessary to salvation and our belief that both the Bible and our prayers should be accessible to all people. In fact, the Episcopal Church often finds the *via media*, the middle ground between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The via media does not mean "anything goes" but rather the middle way. Being a middle way church means that we embrace the sacramental richness of our Roman Catholic heritage as well as the theological richness of the Protestant Reformation.

But perhaps above all, the Episcopal Church is a Bible church. The Bible plays a central role in our beliefs and practices. Visit any Episcopal congregation on a Sunday and see for yourself: We take reading the Bible very seriously. Our liturgy includes four different readings from the Bible: the Old Testament, the psalms, the New Testament, and the gospel. After the Old Testament and New Testament readings, we proclaim "The Word of the Lord," a reminder that these are not just nice stories but holy, inspired words from God. And the gospel is often given special honor; many churches have a gospel procession, in which the gospel book is carried out into the middle of the church, led by torches and

accompanied by singing. The people in the church typically turn and face the gospel book, a sign that we orient our bodies and our lives around the good news of Jesus Christ.

And the readings are not the only places in which we hear the words of scripture; the words of our liturgy come from the Bible as well. Approximately 70 percent of *The Book of Common Prayer* is biblical quotation—not only does the prayer book include the entire book of psalms, but many of the most beloved and beautiful prayers and responses in the liturgy are also directly from the Bible. Our opening greeting, "The Lord be with you," comes from Ruth 2:4; the Lord's Prayer is from Matthew 6:9-13, the Sanctus or "Holy, holy holy," comes from Isaiah 6:3 and Matthew 21:9, and the words said at every Holy Eucharist are from 1 Corinthians 11:24-25. Further, most of the phrases and images from our weekly collects and eucharistic prayers come directly from the Bible. As Episcopalians, the Bible saturates our liturgy: From the scriptures we read to the prayers that we say, the Bible is deeply ingrained in everything that we do.

On pages 582-808, *The Book of Common Prayer* contains the entire book of psalms, often called the psalter. Singing or saying the psalms as part of individual prayer and corporate worship has been part of Jewish practice for thousands of years and part of Christian liturgy from its earliest days. The version of the psalms in the prayer book comes from the Coverdale translation of the Bible, which

has been used in revisions of *The Book of Common Prayer* since its first version in 1549.

In our current, 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, the psalter is slightly modernized from the original Coverdale version, while retaining continuity with the prayer book tradition. You might notice slight differences between the psalter and the New Revised Standard Version or other Bible translations, but the phrasing and division of the verses makes the prayer book psalter particularly suited to responsive reading and singing. Suggestions for a variety of different ways to sing or say the psalms in worship are included on pages 582-584.

Reading the Bible

The question is not whether Episcopalians read and honor the Bible—we do! The question is instead how Episcopalians read and honor the Bible. We get a glimpse of the answer in a somewhat surprising place—our services of ordination.

Our *Book of Common Prayer* includes three services of ordination: for bishop, priest, and deacon. In each service, the person being ordained makes vows and promises that are specific to the particular ministry. But at the beginning of each service of ordination, all three orders make the same declaration, including this line: "I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things

necessary to salvation..." (526). This declaration is so important that *The Book of Common Prayer* instructs that it must be provided as a printed document, and every ordinand must sign the declaration during the ceremony, in the sight of all present (527).

So, what does this tell us about how Episcopalians read and understand the Bible? First, the declaration begins with the phrase, "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments." This is an important distinction: Many Christians focus heavily on the New Testament, often to the exclusion of the Old Testament. And some Christians give the Old Testament more credence than the New Testament. As Episcopalians, we clearly state that both the Old and New Testaments are Holy Scripture. We don't throw out or dismiss the stories of the Old Testament. God's revelation to humanity begins with Genesis 1:1, and the story of God's great love for us is constant and consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus read, knew, and loved. And thus it speaks to us too.

Secondly, we, as Episcopalians, say that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are "the Word of God." We proclaim this same phrase in worship in response to the scripture readings. Quite simply, this means that we believe the Bible is more than nice stories; it is the Word of God. In the Catechism, we explain this phrase further: "Q. Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God? A. We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still

speaks to us through the Bible" (853). The Bible is the Word of God because at the time of its writing, it was inspired by God and because, when we hear these words today, we, too, can be inspired by God. The answer in the Catechism also acknowledges the human component: Human authors wrote the Bible, and human listeners hear these words today. But the words are not *just* human-composed; they are not simply stories written by humans about God, with no involvement from God. They are, in some mysterious way that we can neither quantify nor understand, inspired by God. So the scriptures are both human and holy; they are written and heard by people. And both those who wrote and those who hear were and are inspired by God.

Finally, the vow taken by ordinands proclaims that the Holy Scriptures "contain all things necessary to salvation." This is important: People don't need any additional knowledge beyond the Bible to learn about God's salvation. As Episcopalians, you don't have to have read or prayed *The Book of Common Prayer* or believe some set of ideas promoted by another book or source. The Bible is our primary text. Can we learn about and meet and experience God in other ways and places? Of course we can! But the additional stuff isn't necessary. The basics of the Christian faith are conveyed in the Bible, and Episcopalians aren't required to believe or subscribe to anything that is not in the Bible.

The Bible, Literally

From the liturgy, ordination vows, and Catechism, we see that Episcopalians take the Bible *seriously.* But that doesn't mean that we read the Bible *literally.*

The truth is, no one reads the Bible literally, even people who claim they do. In John 8:12, Jesus says: "I am the light of the world." If we took that literally, it would mean we believe that Jesus glowed, that he emanated light. If Jesus literally glowed, the disciples never needed light and candles; they could just stand Jesus in the middle of the room and use him to read by! Obviously, Jesus didn't mean this phrase literally. He meant us to hear these words as a gripping image so that we might understand Jesus and his presence in the world in a new way through the metaphor of darkness and light.

There are no literalists of the scriptures. Every reading of the Bible requires us to interpret what we are reading, to decide how we understand the images that the Bible uses, to sift through what is metaphor and what is factual description, what is imagery, and what is command. But even though we don't take every word of the Bible literally (again, no one does!), we do absolutely take the Bible seriously. And we believe that the Bible is both real and true. We believe the Bible contains real stories about real people who had real experiences of God in the real world. And we believe that the Bible is completely, deeply true. The Bible tells us truth about ourselves, about the world,

and about God. Often that truth is told through metaphor and poetry that is not literal, and we might have to wrestle with its meaning in order to fully understand what God is saying to us.

Understanding the Bible seriously rather than literally is hard. We do this work, in part, by learning more about the Bible so that we can better understand and interpret it. For instance, it might help in our understanding if we recognized the Bible not as a single book, but a library or collection of sixty-six books bound in one volume.

The Old Testament, sometimes called the Hebrew Bible, is made up of three main sections: the Torah or Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings.

- **The Torah** (also called the Pentateuch) includes the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

- **The Prophets** include both the major prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the twelve minor prophets, the shorter prophetic books such as Micah and Habbakuk.

- **The Writings** include historical writings, such as Chronicles, poetic writings like the Psalms, and wisdom writings like Proverbs and Song of Solomon.

The New Testament is composed of four sections.

- **The Gospels** include Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

- **The Book of Acts** tells the story of the early churches and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- **The Epistles** feature the letters of Paul and other early Christian missionaries.
- **The Revelation to John**, the final book of the Bible, is the account of John's mystical vision of God's final judgment.

Additionally, Anglicans also include the Apocrypha, a collection of books between the Old and New Testaments (called intertestamental books). These books have been included in some editions of the Bible since the fifth century and were written at the same time as many of the other books in the Bible. The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches both include the Apocrypha in the Bible, although it is not given the same status as the Old and New Testaments, which are agreed upon across denominations. Still, passages from the Apocrypha are occasionally read in worship as part of our lectionary, and our church agrees that the Apocrypha are helpful for instruction and learning.

The books of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Apocrypha were written by different people in different places in different times in different languages. Some of the books were written in Hebrew, some in Greek, some in Aramaic. Not only are the languages different but so too are the genres. The Bible is not all one kind of writing. Some books are history, some are poetry, some are law, some are prophecy, some are narratives, some are letters or epistles. Different kinds of writing occur even within

the same book! From one verse to the next, the Bible can change between poetry and prose, between comparison and command.

All of these variations, including style, tone, and authorship, require careful reading to begin to understand and interpret the Bible. So how do Episcopalians read the Bible? One of the collects in *The Book of Common Prayer* gives us a template for how to understand and interpret the Bible. It says:

> Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (236)

This prayer offers a pattern for how we can and should read the Bible as Episcopalians: It begins with a reminder that the holy scriptures originate and are grounded in God. God caused the Bible to be written. And God did so "for our learning." The Bible was written by God for us. The Bible is fundamentally about relationship; it is a conversation, a communication, between God and humanity. Further, the Bible exists so that we might learn more about God and more about ourselves, about our history and who we are today, about those who have followed God and those who have failed, and about what we are called, as followers of Jesus, to take up and what we are called to lay down.

Learning about God

Believing that the holy scriptures are from God, for us, and written so that we might learn, we encounter the next challenge: How do we undertake this learning? The collect names six specific actions that we can engage the Bible in order to meet God.

Hear: We usually think of the Bible as a book that we read, but this collect reminds us that the first way that we encounter the Bible is by *hearing* it. Before these words were written down, much of the Bible was an oral tradition, stories told through generations so that people would remember the mighty deeds of God. There is a reason that we say the Bible "speaks."

Each week, when we gather together as a community, we hear the Bible read aloud in our service of Holy Eucharist. It is important, as much as we are able, to try to hear the words rather than read them from our bulletins or Bibles. Reading is an individual activity, each person individually focused on her own paper. Listening is a communal activity, the entire community focused on one voice, proclaiming aloud the Word of the Lord. The different voices of the lectors, who read aloud the lessons in worship, remind us of the different voices of the authors of the Bible. Listening to the Bible read aloud can help us hear things that we might otherwise miss or be struck by a familiar reading in a new way.

Hear

The collect reminds us that the first—and primary—way that we encounter the scriptures is to *hear* them in community, in our worship, read aloud and proclaimed as "The Word of the Lord."

Tips for hearing scripture:

- Put down your bulletin and try to listen actively instead of reading. This can be uncomfortable or difficult but keep trying. You can always go home and read the biblical text later; this is the time to try to *hear* it.

- If you struggle with hearing, sit in a place that makes hearing easier, perhaps toward the front. If your church offers assisted listening devices, use them.

- Practice active listening. Really try to focus on what is being said. Close your eyes if that helps you to listen better.

Even struggling to hear, or hearing imperfectly, can help teach us about the beauty and difficulty of the Bible. Which words did you hear, even if you didn't hear all of them? Where did your mind go, if you struggled to keep focus? How can you discipline yourself so that you can both listen and hear better? How does hearing the Bible in community change the way that you understand it?

Read: Of course, hearing scripture read aloud in worship is not the *only* way that we encounter the

Bible. We are also able to read the Bible, for ourselves, as individuals. In our modern world, it is easy to forget how extraordinary and radical this is. For centuries, very few people were able to read the Bible since most of the population was illiterate. And even fewer people were able to afford copies of the Bible, since the Bible was written out by hand on precious materials that were incredibly expensive. For a long time, reading and interpreting the Bible was a privilege reserved for the wealthy and educated elite. Reformers and missionaries have fought and died so that we can have access to read the Bible, in our own homes, in our own languages. Thanks to their work, in our time, everyday people can hold in their hands and read for themselves the Holy Word of God.

Read

To read the Bible, you need a Bible that you can read. If you already have a Bible that you love —read it! If you struggle to read or understand your Bible, try a different Bible. Some people like a translation like *The Message*, which is a modern-day rendering of scripture. Other people enjoy a study Bible, such as the New Interpreter's Study Bible, which includes helpful notes and summaries so that you can learn more about the Bible. If you have a hard time wading through the Bible, try *The Path*! Using excerpts from the New Revised Standard Version, *The Path* presents the narrative arc of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and is published by Forward Movement.

We are expected not only to hear short sections of the Bible read aloud once a week in worship but also to read the Bible ourselves, every day. It is not an either/or proposition but a both/and. We *both* hear the Bible read aloud in worship, *and* we read the Bible for ourselves. We go home during the week and read the same scriptures that we heard on Sunday, perhaps noticing different aspects by reading them on paper that we might have missed in hearing them. We can and should read other parts of the Bible: the context around the passages we heard, in order to fit them into a larger narrative, or other parts of the Bible that we do not hear read aloud in church. It is not enough simply to hear the scriptures read aloud in church on Sunday. We are called to a next step, a deeper engagement—to read the Bible for ourselves, as well.

Mark: Next we are reminded that we don't just read or listen to the scriptures casually or carelessly. We are instead reminded to mark them. Mark, in this sense, means to notice or pay careful attention to something. We shouldn't just skim over the Bible in order to check off "read the Bible" from our to-do list. Instead we are called to give close attention to what we are reading and to notice things that are interesting or confusing, uplifting or upsetting. Reading the Bible with this kind of care and attention is more demanding than simply scanning through the words, but it is also more rewarding. With this deliberate practice of marking scripture, we begin to notice new things in the Bible—and hear the words speaking to us more powerfully.

Mark

Some people like to literally mark in their Bibles, making notes in the margins, highlighting or underlining key words, and writing observations and questions. Another way to be sure you are paying attention to a biblical text is to read it more than once. Read the text the first time and see what word or phrase stands out to you. Read it again and see what else you notice. Read it a third time and see how the text is speaking to you. Coming back to the text again and again is a way to be more deeply attentive to what it says and to what God is saying to you through the words.

Learn: Next, our collect tells us that we are called to learn the scriptures. This is the next step in the process of scriptural engagement. It would be all too easy to hear or read the Bible, say to ourselves, "Huh, that's interesting," and then to stop there. But we are called to more than that. We are called to learn, to change, to grow in response to what we hear and read in the Bible. Learning, in its most simple definition, means to "to gain knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something."

Learn

Most churches have formation opportunities for adults, as well as children. Attend formation on Sunday mornings ("Sunday school") or sign up for a weekday Bible study, book group, or other formation class. We can learn a lot, not only from the Bible but also from one another, when

we remember and treat Christian formation as a lifelong endeavor.

Many wonderful resources are available for learning from the Bible on your own. A good study Bible is a great start. Commentary series can help you go even deeper into God's word. Check out the resource section at the end of this book or ask your priest for suggestions.

When we increase our frequency of reading and engaging the Bible, we gain more knowledge about the Bible and become more skilled interpreters of the sacred text. We learn by reading the Bible again and again... and again and again, always discovering something new. We read the words of the Bible, and then we study them, looking more deeply into the Bible for patterns and connections. We can also put the words of the Bible into practice, learning through experience.

Too often, Christians, perhaps especially Episcopalians, have been taught that "Sunday school" is only for children, and confirmation is graduation from learning in church. Nothing could be further from the truth. Learning is a lifelong endeavor. We are called, as Christians, to constantly learn more about our faith, discovering new ways of understanding the scriptures and connecting to God. The Bible is rich enough that we can learn new things every time we read it, and we can hear God speaking to us in new and different ways.

Inwardly Digest: Encountering the Bible is not just a head exercise, a cerebral process of thinking

and evaluating. The fifth command of our collect, to inwardly digest the scriptures, reminds us that encountering the Bible is a whole-body activity. In our worship on Sundays, we take in the literal food of communion: The bread and wine become the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, feeding us in body and soul. We are also fed on the Word of God. Throughout the Bible, we are told that the words of scripture have a nourishing quality, that they taste like honey (Psalm 119:103). Pastor Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful work *Eat this Book*, explores the words of God to the prophet Ezekiel, when God commands Ezekiel to "eat this scroll" (Ezekiel 3:3). Peterson uses this as a metaphor for the way that Christians are called to interact with the scriptures, the Bible, by taking the words into ourselves, gnawing on them like a dog at a bone, chewing them over and over to see what new nourishment they might offer, what last remnants might cling to the bone. That idea is precisely what our collect proclaims, that we are called not only to hear, read, mark, and learn the Bible but also to inwardly digest it. When we eat something, we take it into ourselves, and it becomes our sustenance and substance. The Bible is meant to act that way in us. We are asked to take the Bible into ourselves, to let it sustain us, and to let it transform us, so that we can become what it proclaims.

Inwardly Digest

This step is, perhaps, the hardest, because it's not an intellectual exercise. To inwardly digest the Bible, we are called to be changed, to be

transformed, by it. When we read the Bible, we cannot merely ask ourselves, "What have I learned?" We instead must ask ourselves, "How am I being called to change?"

Digesting takes time; we have to return to the Bible again and again, to gnaw on it. Inwardly digesting means returning to old passages of the Bible and seeing if they speak to us in new ways.

One way to take the Bible more deeply into yourself, to inwardly digest it, is to memorize it. Pick a favorite verse or verses from the Bible. Read that section again and again every day, until you have learned it by heart. Then pick another one and add it. Soon you will have digested many bites of scripture, and they will empower and nourish you.

Embrace and Ever Hold Fast: Our collect concludes with a final active phrase, "embrace and ever hold fast." This final phrase is not a command but a hope. The Bible is the story of God's great love for us, a story that is full of hope, a story that offers the gift and promise of everlasting life. God's hope is that we will embrace what has been offered. If we take the time to do our part, to follow these actions detailed by the collect, we will hear the story of God, who loves us, who embraces us as God's beloved children, and who holds fast to us, even when we wander and stray. In response, God calls us to reciprocate what God has already done for us: to embrace and ever hold fast the

gift of God in Christ, the blessed hope of everlasting life.

For Reflection

- Have you ever sat down and read all or big portions of the Bible on your own? If so, what was that like? If you haven't, why not?

- Who is your favorite character from the Bible, and why is that person your favorite?

- In response to the biblical readings in worship, we proclaim "The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God." Because we understand the truth of scripture to be contained in the entirety of the Bible, we say this even when the readings are difficult or upsetting. How can we see difficult texts or texts that challenge us as God's Word?

- In our liturgy, we read the Bible from a lectern, using a book "of appropriate size and dignity" so that God's word is proclaimed from a fitting symbol. Many parishes have gospel processions, carrying the gospel book into the midst of the congregation with singing or torches. How do these actions affect our relationship with the Bible?

Chapter 15

Continually Given to Good Works

Salvation and Grace

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

—The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 234-235

Becoming a Christian, and more specifically an Episcopalian, can make you feel like you need a dictionary. Our *Book of Common Prayer* is full of beautiful but not often-used words like inestimable and unfeignedly, oblation and penitent. And churches have their own vocabulary—almost a distinct language: We call the lobby a "narthex," the fancy outfits that the clergy wear are "vestments," and the tabernacle where we keep the blessed bread and wine is the "aumbry." In the beginning, you'll probably have a lot of questions—and may spend some time looking up words in a dictionary or online.

Some of the words we use in church are difficult, not because they are unfamiliar but because their meaning is so rich and deep that they require

exploration and discussion. Salvation and grace are two of these words. They are central to our vocabulary of our faith, and we say them often, yet they can take a lifetime to understand.

If you want to learn about some of the unfamiliar or strange words that we use in church, there are some great resources: Check out the *Episcopal Handbook, An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, or the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* to learn more. The Episcopal Church website (www.episcopalchurch.org) also has a very thorough glossary. Forward Movement offers some pamphlets that are perfect as a resource for you or to share with others. They include: "Episcopal Language"; "Welcome to the Episcopal Church"; and "Customs and Practices in the Episcopal Church." And you can always ask your priest!

Being Saved

I grew up attending a Christian camp in the mountains of North Carolina every summer. It was a wonderful, beautiful place, where I got to do fun things like hiking and canoeing and archery. It was also a holy, inspiring place where I grew closer to God through daily worship, Bible study, and nightly devotions. On Sunday evenings, all of the campers and counselors would gather around the campfire to sing songs, and women from the oldest group of campers would give testimonies. Each summer I heard young women from all different places

and backgrounds speak passionately and powerfully about the ways they had encountered God in Christ.

Over the years, I worked my way up from the youngest group of campers to the oldest, and finally it was my turn. I was expected to stand up in front of my fellow campers and give my testimony. And I had no idea what to say.

My friends and fellow campers had talked about their inspiring stories of being "saved." Some of them told stories of how they had been saved from helplessness or hopelessness. Others told of being saved from addiction or abuse. Some had tangible experiences of the risen Jesus or physically felt the Holy Spirit. Others had traveled with missionary parents to serve the least and the lost in far-flung countries of the world.

I was a middle-class white girl who had an uneventful childhood. I was a faithful Episcopalian more at home with ancient prayers than extemporaneous prophecy. I was the ultimate oldest child—I got good grades, followed all the rules, and never worried my parents. I had never had anything exciting or important happen to me. And as I tried to prepare my testimony, I had no idea what to say. What kind of story did I have to tell?

But as I prayed and read the Bible, I came to a realization: Jesus saved me from believing that I had to be or ever could be "good enough" to warrant salvation. Jesus saved me from believing I had to (or even could) earn God's love by always being perfect. As an overachieving child, my mantra in life had been to work hard, do better, be perfect. But the

gospel of salvation is that there is nothing that I can do (or fail to do) that will cause God to love me any more or any less. I had spent most of my life trying to deserve God's love, believing, somewhere deep down, that I needed to be good and do good things for God to love me.

I meet lots of people who believe the same thing that I did: that they have to earn God's love by working harder, doing better, being perfect. And that belief is debilitating; trying to earn God's love is exhausting. It leads to lives full of endless striving, of always feeling "not enough." Being saved from this futile idea is no less (and no more) miraculous than the many other stories of salvation I have heard over the years. I was enslaved to the idea that I could earn God's love, and I desperately needed to be saved from a life of trying to be "good enough." Being freed from expectations of perfection allowed me to grow more deeply in my faith, to discover the love of God that knows no bounds, to begin to serve God, not out of obligation or fear but out of joy and gratitude. Realizing that I could never be good enough to earn God's love (and could never fail enough to lose it) set me free. The idea that Jesus saves us from trying to save ourselves is a central tenet of our faith. Another word for that is grace.

Grace

In *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Catechism defines grace as "God's favor toward us, unearned

and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills" (858). This definition points us toward a couple of key ideas about grace.

The first is that grace is unearned and undeserved. This is a crucial point yet difficult to fully comprehend. We live in a culture that values pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, and we're often told that "God helps those who help themselves." Yet neither of those ideas are found anywhere in the Bible and are, in fact, contrary to scripture and Christian teaching. People don't receive grace because they behave well or work hard or do the right things. God's grace isn't about us or about our actions at all—God's grace is about God's goodness, God's love, God's favor. Grace is about God, not about us. There is nothing good that we can do to earn God's love, and nothing bad that we can do to stop receiving God's love. Grace is the promise that God's love is a free gift to us, regardless of how badly we screw up or how often we fail to do the good that we intend.

Sit with that for a moment. Let it sink in. God loves you, no matter what you have done or failed to do. There is nothing that will make God love you any more or any less. That, in a nutshell, is grace. It is incredibly good news, for all of us, since none of us is perfect, yet all of us receive God's grace as a gift (Romans 3:23-24).

But here's the catch. The amazing, incredible gift of God's grace is for everyone...not just for you. You receive God's love, even when you don't deserve it.

And so does your enemy, or the person you think is lazy, or the one whose opinion you disagree with. Grace is a free gift to everyone, not just those we like or agree with. Sometimes the hardest thing about grace is believing that God offers it to us, and other times the hardest thing about grace is realizing that God offers it to everyone else too!

Saved From Sin

The unearned, undeserved gift of God's grace is a good thing. Because if we're honest with ourselves, we know that we *don't* deserve the gift of God's love, and that, no matter how hard we might try, we could never do enough to earn it. The truth is, the world we live in is broken. And the people around us are broken. And we, ourselves, are broken.

We are broken because we don't do the things that we know we should do, and we do the things that we know we shouldn't. We act with selfishness, meanness, and judgment. We act out of prejudice or fear or anger. Sometimes it's not our action, but our inaction that is so troubling: we get too busy or too distracted or too tired, and we don't do the good, important, holy things that we know we *should* do. And sometimes, it's not our action or our inaction but our attitude that's the problem. We do the right things for the wrong reasons. Or we might act rightly, while still engaging in uncharitable thoughts. Another word for all of this brokenness, in ourselves and in the world, is sin.

Things Done and Left Undone

Our prayer book defines sin as "the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation" (848). Sometimes we sin through direct actions, such as hurting another person or wasting resources entrusted to us. Other times we sin by failing to act, such as our failure to stand with those who are oppressed. Even something as innocent as buying a new phone could involve sin, because the working conditions of those who made the phone may be intolerable and the raw materials to make that phone might come at the expense of environmental damage in countries we will never visit. It seems that our very participation in life—and in systems of commerce and oppression—can lead us to sin.

I grew up thinking that sinning was pretty much the same thing as not being nice to someone, but sin is much more pervasive than that and much harder to avoid. The reason to avoid sin is that it separates us from God and from other people. To reject sin is to choose union with God and our neighbor. But we cannot do it on our own. We need the free gift of God's grace to avoid sin and to be forgiven from those sins we inevitably commit.

Misunderstanding Grace

Since grace is a gift from God, we might be inclined to see it as license—tacit permission—to do whatever we want. If God loves us no matter what, then as long as we have prayed and asked Jesus' forgiveness, we should be able to do whatever we want and still "get into heaven," right? Well, not exactly.

In the New Testament, we read in the Letter of James,

> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

This is why the second part of the definition in the Catechism says, "by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills" (858). The gift of God's grace is active and powerful; grace works in our minds, our hearts, and our wills to enlighten, stir, and strengthen us. There is an expectation that the power of God's grace working in us will change us, enliven and inspire us, so that we can work on behalf of God's kingdom in the world.

Now, this isn't a tit-for-tat, where God has given us the gift of grace, and we have to spend the rest of our

lives repaying that gift through our service or love or work. That wouldn't be a gift—that would be a loan. Grace is a gift, a free gift. We can't do anything to earn it, and we can't do anything to make God take it away. But we can (and should) live our lives in response to that love. The gift of God's grace is so astonishing that it urges us onward to do good things: not because we have to but because we want to, not out of duty but out of love. In fact, living lives of love and service in response to God's grace is how we were created to live.

As Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:8-10). Paul's words are astonishing. The gift of God's grace allows us to become who we were created to be and to do what we were created to do.

In Genesis, God looked at humanity and said that humans were "very good" (1:31). We were created as good and created for good—living lives of generosity, love, kindness, and joy in relationship to God, humanity, and creation.

Saved for Something

One of the reasons, I struggled so much with my testimony as a teenager was that I had a limited

understanding of salvation. I thought of salvation as being saved from something: People are saved from addiction or abuse, or in my case, from self-reliance and self-sufficiency. And that is certainly true; Jesus saves us from sin and death and from all the other conditions and mindsets that enslave us.

But James and Paul and many other witnesses from the Bible and Christian tradition remind us is we are also saved *for* something. We are saved for abundant life, saved for service to God and God's people, saved for the building up of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. *Sozo*, the Greek word for salvation, contains a wealth of meaning, far beyond simply being saved from hurt or danger. *Sozo* means health and wholeness, wellness in the deepest sense of that word. Salvation in the Bible is about fullness of life.

When we limit salvation and grace to life in heaven, a life free from sin and death, we only get part of the picture. The salvation of Jesus Christ is about eternal life in heaven, but it's also about eternal life that begins now. In the service of Holy Eucharist in *The Book of Common Prayer*, the ministers distribute the bread and the wine while saying this sentence: "The Body (Blood) of our Lord Jesus Christ keep you in everlasting life." Have you ever noticed that verb "keep" before? It might seem like a small word, but it's a big theological statement. "Keep" reminds us that we have already begun experiencing everlasting life—right here and right now. When we are nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ in the eucharist, it is keeping us, sustaining us, in our eternal life, which is already underway.

From the moment that we receive God's grace, we are being saved for something, filled with God's grace that enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills. Our salvation is lived out in this world, as well as in the world to come. The grace of God finds expression in the works that we do in God's name, not because we have to but because we want to, and because God, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

For Reflection

- In the Episcopal Church, we don't often hear sermons about sin and salvation; it's not language that we use comfortably. Why do you think this might be?

- In this chapter we hear about being saved *from* something and being saved *for* something. What have you been saved from, and what have you been saved for?

- There are two aspects of grace that can be hard to accept. One is to actually believe that God loves us, completely, no matter what. The other is that God loves everybody else too, completely, no matter what. How do you wrestle with these difficult aspects of grace?

- Tell a story of a time when you had a personal experience of God's grace.

Chapter 16

Accept and Fulfill Our Petitions

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have promised to hear what we ask in the Name of your Son: Accept and fulfill our petitions, we pray, not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our sinfulness, but as you know and love us in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 394

In a sense, this entire book is about prayer. We have walked through the liturgies, the scripted prayers, of the Episcopal Church. We have reflected on how we pray when we gather as a community for eucharist, baptism, and other special celebrations. And in Chapter 9, we explored in depth the Daily Office, the quintessential "Anglican" way to pray.

But so far, this discussion has been about our "prayers," the specific words and forms we use when we pray. In this chapter we will take a step back and talk more comprehensively about prayer (rather than prayers): what prayer is (and what it isn't), what prayer is "for," and different ways to pray, beyond our church's set liturgies.

According to the Catechism, "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without

words" (856). That's an incredibly broad definition! Prayer includes both our thoughts and our actions; prayer happens both with and without words. Any response to God, whatever form it might take, is a kind of prayer. While it is wonderful to understand the umbrella of prayer as covering a great variety of territory, it can also be daunting to think of prayer so broadly. Luckily, the Catechism continues, describing seven particular kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. By looking more closely at these particular kinds of prayer, we learn about what prayer is and the different ways that we are called to pray.

Types of Prayer

The Catechism begins the description of the principal kinds of prayer with two types that might be unfamiliar. **Adoration** is "the lifting up of the heart and mind to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God's presence" (857). This might be a surprising way to think about prayer, because adoration is less about a specific kind of action or a certain set of words and instead about an attitude, an orientation of our hearts and minds rooted in the enjoyment of God's very presence. This attitude of orientation is related to—but slightly different from—the next kind of prayer. **Praise**, the act of glorifying God because of God's goodness, is a fundamental part of who we are as humans. It is important to note that praise is not offering thanks to God for the things

that God has done for us (that's thanksgiving, which we hear about next). Praise is simply expressing admiration and awe for who God *is.* "We praise God, not to obtain anything, but because God's Being draws praise from us" (857).

The third kind of prayer, closely related to the first two, is **thanksgiving**: giving thanks to God "for all the blessings of this life, for our redemption, and for whatever draws us closer to God" (857). Often, prayers of thanksgiving are more specific than those of adoration or praise; we move from adoring and praising God for God's very being to giving thanks to God for particular things, actions, or experiences in our lives and the lives of those around us.

These first three kinds of prayer described in the Catechism are prayers of joy. This is essential to our practice of prayer, rooting our relationship with God in an attitude of awe, enjoyment, and celebration. Of course, awe and joy are not all of the story. Because we live in a world that is broken by sin, and we ourselves are far from perfect, our prayers aren't exclusively words of celebration and joy. An essential part of prayer is being honest with God about our failures in prayers of **penitence.** "In penitence, we confess our sins and make restitution where possible, with the intention to amend our lives" (857). Prayers of penitence allow us to take an honest look at ourselves, at our lives and our shortcomings, so that we can acknowledge what we have done wrong and strive to do better in the future. In prayers of penitence, we submit ourselves to God, in the promise that God will forgive and renew us, so that we are not defined by the worst parts of

ourselves. It is then, after honestly acknowledging our shortcomings, that we are ready to give ourselves over, fully, to God in prayers of **oblation.** "Oblation is an offering of ourselves, our lives and labors, in union with Christ, for the purposes of God" (857). Out of thanksgiving for all that God has done in and for us, we offer ourselves in service to God and God's purposes in the world.

The last two kinds of prayer described in the Catechism are probably the most familiar. In prayers of **intercession**, we bring "before God the needs of others" (857). Specifically, the forms for the prayers of the people in *The Book of Common Prayer* instruct us to make intercession for: "The Universal Church, its members, and its mission; the Nation and all in authority; the welfare of the world; the concerns of the local community; those who suffer and those in any trouble; the departed" (383). This list reminds us of the breadth that our prayers for others can and should take. Intercession is not merely praying for our family and close friends who have asked for our prayers (though that is important); our intercessions should extend to the welfare of the community and, indeed, the whole world. We are commanded to pray particularly for those who suffer and are in trouble, our immediate friends and family, and those we may not know. In our prayers of intercession, we focus beyond ourselves to the whole human family, a reminder of Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Finally, our Catechism turns to prayers of **petition.** "In petition we present our own needs, that God's

will may be done" (857). Bringing our needs before God is an important part of prayer; God deeply desires relationship with us, and being honest with God about our desires is a fundamental part of our relationship with God. We should not shy away from naming our needs before God in prayers of petition. And yet, as this definition reminds us, petition is presenting our needs *that God's will may be done.*

Too often we approach prayer as though God is some sort of a vending machine, and if we simply "put in our money" (i.e. our prayers), we'll get our candy bar (i.e. whatever we're asking for). The Catechism reminds us that prayer is broader and deeper. We certainly pray to name our needs before God. But we also pray in order to rejoice in God's presence, to praise God's very being, to thank God for the blessings of our life, to ask forgiveness for the things we have done wrong, to offer ourselves more fully to God's service, and to make requests not only for ourselves but also on behalf of the whole world. And in our petitions, we do not pray in order to get what we think we want (for ourselves or others). We pray, just as Jesus himself did in the face of death, that God's will may be done.

One of my favorite ways of describing prayer is by saying that "prayer is a conversation that takes place in relationship." In fact, my relationship with God in prayer is a lot like my relationship with my spouse.

- Sometimes, my spouse and I spend time simply enjoying one another's presence. We don't have to say anything or do anything; we can simply sit in

comfortable silence and *be* together. That's a bit like adoration.

- And sometimes I tell my spouse, through my words or in my actions, that I am deeply grateful, not for something specific he has done but simply for *who he is*: for his generosity and thoughtfulness. I am overwhelmed with gratitude that he is in my life. That's a little like praise.

- It's also important, for the health of our relationship, that I tell my spouse thank you on a regular basis. Sometimes I express gratitude for the big things that he does and sometimes for the little things that are easy to overlook; that's like thanksgiving.

- Often, I need to apologize to my spouse because I've done something wrong or forgotten to do something I was supposed to do. I try (though I often fail) to make those apologies real and not simply lip service; when I've really messed up, I work hard to make it right again. That's similar to penitence.

- When my spouse expresses frustration or is overwhelmed or needs something, I say, "How can I help?" Sometimes I step in and help without even being asked. I offer myself for support and assistance, however I can. That's kind of like oblation.

- And of course, my relationship with my spouse involves asking for things—for myself or for others. When I need help, I turn to my spouse

> for support and assistance. Sometimes that assistance is an action that helps "fix" a problem or achieve a goal. But often the support I seek is advice, reassurance, comfort, and strength in the midst of a struggle. Seeking help from my spouse, whatever form it might take, is akin to intercession and petition.

This is, on some level, what prayer is like—it's a conversation that takes place in relationship. It involves both talking and listening. It involves times of comfortable silence and enjoyment of one another's presence. It involves both words and actions. It involves both offering and receiving help. It involves both giving and taking (and sometimes just being together).

The truth is that my relationship with my spouse (or with any person) *needs* all these different kinds of interaction in order to be healthy. Our relationship would be badly damaged if I approached every interaction with an agenda. It wouldn't be a healthy relationship if I only talked to my spouse when I wanted or needed something from him, if I became angry if he didn't do exactly what I wanted all the time, if I never said thank you or apologized, or if I engaged in daily interactions with a tit-for-tat mentality.

The same is true with our relationship with God. Prayer isn't about one kind of interaction with God; it is about relating with God in the richness of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, petition, oblation, and intercession. Prayer is a conversation that takes place in relationship.

Why Do We Pray?

One of the questions I am most frequently asked as a priest is, "Does prayer *really* work?" Often, this question comes in response to a situation of deep pain: a person has prayed, fervently, for something that didn't happen—perhaps a job promotion that never came or a hope that was never realized or even physical healing for a loved one who died. These questions are painful and difficult; they are questions that believers throughout the ages have asked again and again: When we reach out to God in prayer, does it actually do anything? Does prayer matter?

How we answer that question depends on what we think prayer *is* and what we think prayer is *for.* If we believe that prayer is like a vending machine, where we put in our money and receive a product in exchange, then we become disillusioned when we don't get what we "paid for." If we think that prayer is an assignment at work—something we do in order to earn money or status or acclaim—then we become frustrated when we aren't rewarded for our hard work and good behavior. If we think of prayer as a voicemail that we leave for God and then wait for God to get back to us with an "answer" to our question, then we become angry when we never get a return phone call.

But thinking about prayer as a conversation that takes place in relationship fundamentally changes

the way that we approach prayer, and it changes what "success" looks like. What if the goal of prayer is not simply to put in our money and get what we want but instead to engage in real, deep conversation with God? Then prayer works, not when you get what you want, but any time that you engage in conversation and you find relationship.

Prayer works because it is important, in any relationship, to be honest, to say what we really want and really hope for and really need, and the act of approaching God in prayer, of naming what we yearn for, in itself builds relationship. It works because, in the act of praying, we are changed—we realize that we are not alone, no matter how alone we feel. We find strength or comfort or at least release of the feelings that have built up inside of us. Sometimes, when I'm talking to my spouse, I just need to be "heard." I'll say, "I don't need you to fix this, I just need you to listen." At the end of our conversation, there might not be any change in the situation, in the outward reality of the world; nothing will be "fixed." And yet, the conversation has "worked" because I have been heard. Prayer is often very much like that.

That is not to say that prayer *only* changes us and our attitudes (though if and when that happens, it is a miracle as well!). The witness of scripture is clear that God sometimes miraculously intervenes to change circumstances—God protects the people when leading them out of Egypt (Exodus 14), feeds the Israelites with manna from heaven (Exodus 16), heals the sick and lame (Matthew 9:18-34) and sets prisoners free (Acts 16:25-34). The followers of

Jesus continue to heal people in Christ's name (Acts 5:12-16). The prayers in our *Book of Common Prayer* reflect the reality that we believe God does intervene with mighty action in the world, and we can and should ask for God's presence and power among us.

But just as prayer takes a lot of forms, the outcome of prayer can take many shapes. Sometimes the thing that is changed is the result or the circumstance: the person we prayed for is healed or the deepest desire of our heart is fulfilled. Sometimes the thing that is changed is our attitude or approach; we are strengthened or comforted or better able to face the days ahead, or we are given insight so that we know what we are called to be or do, regardless of the circumstance. Sometimes the thing that is changed is someone else's heart or mind or actions, and that change impacts us. Sometimes the thing that is changed is our relationship with God; we find new ways of relating to God or a new dimension to our conversation and companionship.

Prayer is powerful, but it is also mysterious. We should approach any moral certainties about prayer with fear and trembling. We can do a great deal of damage to ourselves and one another if we pretend to know precisely *how* prayer works—any beliefs or assertions that "it must have been God's will" or "if only I'd prayed more or harder" move prayer out of the context of a conversation in relationship and into the context of an obligation or exchange—a deeply flawed context that damages our ability to relate to God. There are many ways to pray, there are many outcomes to prayer, and everyone's relationship with

God in prayer is different. Much of prayer is beyond both our knowledge and control.

How Do We Pray?

Although we can never know exactly how prayer works, we can (and should) learn how to pray. Prayer, like any spiritual discipline, is a matter of practice. It won't always feel natural the first few times we do it. We might have to experiment with new ways of prayer in order to find the ones that help deepen our relationship with God.

In Chapter 9 we explored the Daily Office, one of the most essentially Anglican ways to pray. And toward the end of the chapter, we pointed you to dozens of different resources within *The Book of Common Prayer* for prayer. But of course, there are hundreds of other ways to pray beyond those found in our prayer book. You can pray by walking a labyrinth, by using rosary beads, or by creating icons or art. You can use different forms for prayer, from the Ignatian concept of Examen to Contemplative Prayer to Lectio Divina. You can pray kneeling or sitting or standing or moving. You can pray in sound or in silence. There is no one-size-fits-all form of prayer. Instead, there are a vast variety of different ways to pray, different methods for engaging in conversation with God.

But whatever method you use for prayer, the important thing is to engage in the relationship, making time and space to meet God in prayer. And there are some specific things that you can do in

order to improve your relationship with God in prayer.

- Start small. If you have never prayed before, it can seem overwhelming at first. If you start out by saying that you are going to do the full Daily Office morning, noon, and night, then you might have set your sights too high (although if you do it—way to go!). The important thing about starting a life of prayer is to start somewhere. It could be grace at meals—every time—or daily morning prayer, or a weekly study session, or any number of things. Choose a prayer discipline that you want to try, and go for it. Commit to doing it daily for a period of time. Then, when you've gotten comfortable, spend more time in prayer, or add another component.
- Show up. If prayer is a conversation that takes place in relationship, then you have to show up so that the conversation can happen! The truth is, God is there—always waiting and hoping we will show up. Perhaps the most important thing we can do is schedule a time for prayer, and then show up—even when other things crowd the calendar, even if it is hard or uncomfortable. Make a space in your calendar (every day) for God. And then follow through on that commitment.
- Keep trying. Relationships are hard work—ask anyone who has been married for a long time! Your relationship with God is no different. There will be some bumps in the road. You might try a prayer practice that you really hate or find that the way you have been praying for a long time

may no longer work for you. Be ready to change your prayer practice and try new things. Ask for help from a priest or trusted friend if you need it.

One of the collects from *The Book of Common Prayer* says this:

> Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. *Amen* (234).

God is always ready to hear us when we pray, longing to give us more than we desire or deserve. It is our turn to engage that conversation, to respond in adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, and intercession to the God who is waiting and yearning to enter more deeply into relationship with each one of us.

For Reflection

- *The Book of Common Prayer* identifies seven different kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, petition, and intercession. Name an example of each type of prayer.

- Which of the seven kinds of prayer is most difficult for you personally? Why?

- Which of the seven kinds of prayer is most comfortable for you personally? Why?

- In this chapter, we talk about prayer as a "conversation that takes place in relationship." Does that definition change how you think about prayer? How so or why not?