

Proper 4B
June 2, 2024

St. Paul's Port Townsend
Instructed Eucharist at both services

1 Samuel 3.1-10
Ps 139.1-5, 12-17
2 Corinthians 4.5-12
Mark 2.23 – 3.6

Before I went to seminary, I took a summer class at Seattle U titled "Ecclesiology" which is the study of the Church. The professor asked the students to bring with them their denomination's doctrinal documents. That was easy enough for the Catholic students who had access to all manner of magisteriums, encyclicals and papal bulls from across the centuries. But what of The Episcopal Church? I panicked and called the Canon to the Ordinary in the bishop's office. What documents do we have? Why don't I know about them? Where do I find them?

She waited for me to settle down and said something to the effect of: "We have the *Book of Common Prayer*. All our theology and everything we believe about God and Jesus can be found in there." It is the most concise and authoritative document we have and has stood the test of time since Thomas Cranmer wrote the first one in 1549. Certainly, we have "updated" it over the centuries, with the one in your hands being the most recent total revision in 1979. To be sure, some people dislike the changes with deep passion and, although it is not officially permitted, there remain people steadfastly using the 1928 prayer book not only at home but in Sunday worship.

An Instructed Eucharist such as we are having today often culminates an Episcopal 101 class for new Episcopalians or those wishing to be confirmed or received by the bishop. Much of what is found in the BCP can be found in other denominational worship such as the Lutherans Book of Worship. But there are distinct differences between so-called "mainline" churches, i.e. ELCA Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics.

We baptize babies and adults as do Roman Catholics and Methodists but Baptists do not. We ordain women as do most Lutherans, but Catholics do not. We have bishops and ecclesiastical authority but Presbyterians do not. We proclaim a Trinitarian God but Unitarians do not. Yet we all consider ourselves faithful Christians.

Hearing today's gospel about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath, and his questions, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill on the Sabbath?" made me think of how Jesus broke the laws which were narrow and not life-giving. The Rev. Ellen Richardson comments, "These are compelling depictions of why 'the law' could either be a life-giving source of joy and instruction or a life-demeaning source of judgment and an onerous burden."

We have a couple very clear examples of not following the law, i.e. in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and this is a good day to bring them up. Does the law give life or take it away?

You can look it up later, but one thing the BCP clearly says is, “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion.” The conversation then surrounds the necessity of baptism as entrance to Communion. Many of you may remember the days when confirmation was also required to receive communion. That requirement came out with this 1979 revision. But the baptism mandate stayed in. And General Convention has said “no” to changing it ever since.

Catholics also require baptism and many evangelical traditions require adult or “believer” baptisms. The debate then, which we won’t get into today, is whether baptism is the means OF unity or the means TO unity. You hear the quick answer to that from me every Sunday: “Wherever you are on your walk in faith, you are welcome at this Table.” I come down on the side of communion being a means TO unity and all are welcome. Some call it Eucharistic hospitality; not being gatekeepers to this sacrament of Christ’s life and resurrection, placing no barriers between a person and the life-giving gifts of Jesus. If you come to the rail and put out your hands, I’m going to give you Jesus.

But, I am breaking my ordination vows because I promised to adhere to the doctrine and discipline of the Episcopal Church. So was Bishop Rickel when he authorized an “open table.” Not every diocese allows for this, based on the particular bishop and their view of this ecclesiastical disobedience although many clergy practice an open table the way many Catholic priests quietly welcome non-Catholics to communion.

Are rules meant to be broken? Women have been ordained for nearly 50 years because some renegade bishops broke the rules until the rules were changed. Civil rights laws were enacted when people sat wherever they wanted at the lunch counter or on the bus. How often have you experienced a rule or law that got in the way of what you believed was the right thing to do?

That is the bottom line in our gospel reading today. Were those rules about not picking grain or healing on the Sabbath not the rules?? That’s what we have rules for, right? It is at the heart of Jewish tradition, ordained by God. Can human need supersede religious prescription? [Bruce Epperly]

One of the questions we might ask, and perhaps Jesus did, too, is “Does this practice or tradition or demand give life or take it away?” Even David ate consecrated bread from God’s shrine when there was no other food as he fled King Saul. People and their needs are more important to God than rules. The very honest and legitimate question is: What would Jesus do?

The Episcopal Church has faced fallout from ecclesiastical disobedience since before it officially authorized same sex marriages in the church in 2015. However, the prayer book says very clearly that Holy Matrimony is between one man and one woman. It has sent parishes and dioceses with their bishops away from the Episcopal Church claiming we are apostate. So all of us ordained people, including bishops, who marry “two people” joyfully and without hesitation, are technically in violation of our ordination vows. Each of us has had to decide, to ask the question, which kingdom do we choose? That of the *Book of Common Prayer* as the authority of the Episcopal Church which we hold in highest regard, or do the pastoral concerns of equality and Christ’s boundless invitation to love outweigh “the law?”

Here we are at the beginning of Pride Month. This Church, this diocese, this priest, and, I believe, this parish, say: Of course we marry and bless and ordain all people. Jesus would have to work through 2000 years of changing thought on human rights and love, but I completely believe that if he were with us in this place at this moment, he'd break this rule, too.

Not everyone sees it that way, of course. Faithful people disagree. And yet, as Joe Kay wrote, the entrance to God's kingdom isn't religious rules or doctrines. Our hearts are the door and we enter and enact God's kingdom through love and love alone. We listen for the voice of God, just like the boy Samuel did.

Conflicts arise in the path of discipleship. Structures of religious custom and tradition originally designed to praise God and serve humanity, can become corrupted and cruel. Therefore, occasions arise in which both the flourishing of human life and maintaining tradition cannot be preserved unbroken. It is never the wrong day to do good.

The Table is open. Love wins. Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.

Gail Wheatley+