

Praying in the Morning
The Rev. Deacon Nancy Casey Fulton
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*Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation. Amen.*

when Henry and I were first dating, I began to grow curious about the church he attended faithfully every Sunday. I had abandoned the Roman Catholic Church when the priest who led our senior retreat told me I was lost if I didn't believe that the bread and wine of communion were literally the body and blood of Christ. At that time I didn't know anything about the Episcopal Church, only that my friend Mary Kay lived down the block from the Episcopal rector and his family. The son of the manse was her good friend, and, in fact, he followed his father's path and became a prominent priest in the national church.

That world—the Episcopal Church—was strange to me, and so I asked Henry to take me to church with him, and he did so without question, I wanted to know what he sought—and what he found—in this liturgy that was “high” compared to the worship of his Presbyterian youth.

On that first morning, I experienced much that was familiar: the priest proclaiming the Gospel, reading the lessons, giving the sermon, and, with his back to the congregation, consecrating bread and wine at an altar pushed to the wall. As in my childhood, I walked up to the communion rail to kneel and receive the bread and wine. This was for me the most natural action of worship, and no one challenged my presence as I opened my hands for communion.

We did not pass the peace as we do with such exuberance today, just as the Catholic congregations of decades ago did not greet one another in the name of Christ. We were instead, the “audience” in a powerful drama. So why did I return to St. John's the following Sunday, and have been here ever since? Honestly, I still don't know after more than forty

years, though I do remember saying after my first Sunday here that this felt like a church where I could grow in both faith and understanding. In this place, I could ask questions and not be threatened with God's anger.

But about the time I first worshipped here, we did begin to ask many questions when the National Church took on revising *The Book of Common Prayer*. And ask questions we all did further into the 70s when the revision of the prayer book led to liturgy affecting what we believed:

- The “new” service of Baptism went beyond the simple ritual of proclaiming the baptized a member of the Church
- It asked us all to pledge to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all peoples, to love our neighbors as ourselves.”
- It challenged us to see our beliefs in a more open light

The struggle to approve the ordination of women, and the acceptance of men and women of any sexual orientation to be included in every aspect of the life of the Church, was sometimes painful. And the use of more inclusive prayers in worship challenged how we viewed our Creator.

Today we will view our faith in a different way, one that harks back to the Monastic tradition of prayers for every hour of the day. A long-held tradition claims that George Washington—a faithful Episcopalian—received communion only once or twice in his lifetime! Like many through the early years of the Church in America, he might well have gathered for Morning Prayer, which was Cranmer's inclusion of a monastic service in his prayer book. In doing so, Cranmer gave both Anglicans and the newly-created American Episcopalians a format for prayer and worship when a priest was not available, as would have been common in the new nation, with its vast expanses of wilderness.

The “new” prayer book—the most recent revision, as we old folks sometimes call it—had a profound effect on our worship at St. John’s. It gave us two versions of Morning Prayer, in traditional and contemporary language. It also gave us Compline, Noonday Worship, and Evening Prayer, And in our “*Book of Occasional Services*” we can find house blessings, “A Service for All Hallows Eve,” “Distribution of Home Communion,” and the list goes on, All of these non-Eucharistic services can be led by both lay and ordained persons.

This is a far cry from communion services in the Church of Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries. If a member of a congregation wished to receive communion, he/she would have to meet with the minister, who would decide whether the petitioner was “worthy.” The minister would then present a communion token to each person he believed could come to the altar. I have a communion token that Henry bought for me at antique shop on the High Street in Edinburgh, It is from Callander (a parish near Stirling), minted in 1779, and it looks a bit like a beat-up nickel. The other day we took out all the tokens in our possession, checking for names of parishes and dates of minting. Among them was a token from Monymusk, a parish near Aberdeen, a region of rigid Presbyterianism.

Toward the end of her life, when I took my “very Catholic” mother to church, she would point out to me the note included in the bulletin: “only Catholics in good standing can receive communion in this church. “I didn’t believe that then, and I don’t believe it now. I believe instead that the grace of God draws us to the altar, that God knows our hearts, that God forgives us when we don’t quite make the mark.

Today we have the gift of Morning Prayer, that ancient monastic service now reproduced in the Prayer Book, so that we can worship privately or in a group, with or without the presence of clergy. And so we break free from old cautions as we sing to the Lord, alone or in the assembly of the upright. . . or the “not-so-upright:

*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
for the Lord is gracious and full of compassion.*

Halleluja!