

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

August 15, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 5:1-7
 Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18

Hebrews 11:29-12:2
 Luke 12:49-56

Prayer of consecration

I am just back from a week on the coast of Maine, and my eyes and ears are still full of the sights and sounds of the seashore. I spent hours one day with my husband, clambering over rocks, bending down to study the details of barnacle and lichen, the colors of granite and basalt, and then standing up to feel the wind on my face and to watch a cormorant skim over the water. Always there was the sound of the sea, and for a long time I watched as the waves poured themselves out on the rocks, and the rocks gave themselves to the waves, and everything was moving and tumbling and alive.

Standing by the sea, I felt what we all feel when we find ourselves on the edge of mystery: I wanted to praise. I wanted to give thanks. To be precise, I wanted to plant my two feet on that ancient rock, raise my hands, and say, "The Lord be with you. Lift up your hearts."

This morning our sermon series brings us to the Great Thanksgiving, the prayer of consecration that begins the second part of the service. In the Great Thanksgiving we move from the liturgy of the word to the liturgy of the table, from the pulpit and lectern to the altar, from a focus on God coming to us in words to a focus on God coming to us in action. It is the place in the service where -- if I might play for a moment with the metaphor -- we all stand beside the sea, look out to the infinite expanse of God, and open ourselves to the waves of God's blessing.

"Lift up your hearts," says the celebrant in a dialogue between priest and congregation that echoes an ancient Jewish blessing, and with these words we launch into the recital of God's mighty acts of salvation. More than one would-be priest has sought ordination because of feeling called to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, to be the person who stands at the altar and blesses the bread and the wine. It is a great privilege to serve as the celebrant, and I find it one of the most meaningful things that I do, and will ever do. Yet it is worth asking: Who really carries out the Eucharist? Is it the priest? That was certainly the piety of the late Middle Ages before the Reformation, when the service was conducted in a language that most people did not understand, when many of the prayers were inaudible, and

the congregation essentially sat back and watched what the priest was doing, as if the priest were the primary actor and everyone else only a passive spectator.

Our contemporary service of Holy Communion restores the understanding of the early church that the whole gathered community actively shares in carrying out the sacrament. As commentator Marion Hatchett observes, everyone stands up in this part of the service as a way to “[foster] and [signify] the participation of the congregation in the action.”¹ We stand to give thanks; we stand because we have been raised in baptism; we stand because all of us are part of the action. And when the celebrant says, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” the celebrant is not just saying, “Let’s do it! Let’s go for it!” -- the celebrant is also asking for “permission to offer thanks in the name of those present.”² The response, “It is right to give God thanks and praise,” is an expression of consent. To put it another way -- when I, Rob, Hilary, Susan, or any other priest is at the altar, preparing to celebrate the sacrament, in a sense we wait for you to empower us, to bless us blessing you. When you proclaim, “It is right to give God thanks and praise,” you say to the celebrant: we entrust you to give thanks to God in our name. Yes, we stand with you and pray with you, and together we will open ourselves to the mystery of a God who created the world in love, who came among us, enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, to enter our sufferings and joys and every part of human life, and who comes to us now in the elements of bread and wine.

All of us take part in the action of the Eucharist, for all of us are standing at the shore of the sea with the wind of God on our cheeks, and God’s bedrock beneath our feet. However familiar this moment may feel, however many times we may have stood in the very same spot and added our voices to the very same prayers, there is always an edge of exhilaration, a sense of anticipation and expectation, for every Eucharist is different. Every Eucharist has something new to reveal. God’s love is as vast as the sea, as full of majesty and surprise, and in the prayer of consecration, we stand before God, uttering words that reach back through the centuries and yet have power to quicken our hearts and to startle us awake. Of course, we don’t always *feel* this vastness, but like the ocean, it is always there.

In the early church, every worshiper offered prayers of thanksgiving in the posture that today is generally reserved for the celebrant alone: standing with arms outstretched, a posture in which one’s feet are grounded in the love of God, the chest and lungs are open to inspire -- to breathe in -- the Holy Spirit, and both hands are lifted up to receive the gifts that only God can give. If, during the prayer of

¹ Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1980, p. 361.

² *Ibid.*

consecration, you find yourself nodding off into a state of dreamy inattention, I invite you to be bold and to lift up your hands, to let your body remind you that God is right here, and that *you* are sharing in this great transaction between heaven and earth. It is you for whom Christ came into the world, you for whom he died, you whom he now would fill with his presence and his Spirit. We come to the table so that everything in us and around us can be lifted up and blessed, so that everything in us and around us can be caught up in the redeeming love of God -- not only the bread and the wine, but also we ourselves, and the whole Creation, every leaf of it, and every speck of sand. Sometimes our bodies can take in that knowledge long before our minds are able to, so if it helps you to experience the sacrament more fully, then I encourage you to give it a try -- to lift up not only your hearts, but your hands, as well.

In this context I can't resist telling you a story that moved me deeply when I heard it. The story concerns Teilhard de Chardin, the 20th century theologian and Jesuit priest who was also trained as a paleontologist and geologist. What I heard is that one day, while he was exploring a cave, he became so vividly aware of the presence of God, so deeply thankful for the divine mystery, that he wanted -- right then and there -- to celebrate the Eucharist. But he had no bread and no wine. What could he do? He reached down and lifted up a rock -- *that* is what he could lift up, and bless, and offer back to God, and in that moment he felt as if he were lifting up and blessing the whole creation.

And that is what happens in every Eucharist.

The first Eucharistic prayers were extemporaneous, ad lib creations that emerged spontaneously from within each gathering of the faithful. Over time, the church worked out a variety of fixed forms for the prayer. Our prayer book offers eight different Eucharistic prayers, each with its own wording and emphasis; some of them keep an open space so that celebrants can praise God in their own words.

All our Eucharistic prayers invite the active participation of the congregation, and all of them emphasize our unity in Christ. You will notice, for instance, that during the prayer of consecration we keep on the altar only one plate for bread and only one chalice for wine. The additional bread that needs to be blessed is placed to one side; the additional wine that needs to be blessed is kept in a flagon. The focus during the Eucharistic prayer is on the one Host (the single, large wafer that the celebrant lifts up), and on the one chalice of wine. The visual and theological point is that we are all one in Christ, that we share the one bread and the one cup. Only at the end of prayer does the deacon turn around and fetch the other chalices and containers that are needed to distribute the bread and the wine.

Similarly, although each of us comes to the service with all sorts of individual needs and concerns, in the prayer of consecration we are gathered up as one body into the story of salvation that we share. Together we turn to the Holy One who

loved us into being; together we remember our shared history as a people created, redeemed, and sustained by God; together we discover again that we are more than a haphazard collection of small, ego-driven identities. We are a community that knows that God has come among us, and we are caught up in a holy mystery much greater than ourselves.

Every Eucharistic prayer ends with the same word, a single word that is printed in small capital letters, unlike any other word of the prayer book. It is a word to savor and proclaim. Not long ago one of the children of the parish stopped me after the service to ask about that word. What, he asked, is the meaning of the word ‘Amen’?

“It is a way of saying ‘Yes,’” I told him. “Amen means, ‘I really mean it.’”

When the boy kept staring at me, looking bemused, I added, “Amen is like giving a high five. It means ‘Yes, I completely agree. Yes, I declare that this is true.’”

So when we come to the end of the great prayer, when we reach the place where the celebrant lifts up the bread and the wine, and expresses in the fullest possible terms our praise of the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, I invite you to sing out your Amen. What is called the Great Amen or the People’s Amen goes back at least to the second century, and even late in the Middle Ages, when the celebrant said most of the Eucharistic prayer in silence, the priest always raised his voice at the end so that the people would know when to respond Amen.³

‘Amen,’ we say. ‘Yes, I really mean it.’ We are standing at the shore of the sea, looking out toward the expanse and depths of God, lifting up the stones, and seaweed, and water, and every aspect of our lives, and discovering to our amazement that we are immersed in God, and filled with God, and that through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ, nothing and no one can separate us from God’s love.

³ Ibid., p. 373.