About the Eucharist
Sermon Series: "Episcopal Worship and More; Why do we do what we do?"
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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This week, we continue our preaching series exploring the Episcopal tradition, and why we do what we do.[1] Today we consider the celebration of the Eucharist.[2] Let's start with the actions of the Eucharistic prayer.

The Great Thanksgiving, or Eucharistic Prayer, begins after the Peace, when the elements of bread and wine are brought to the Table, and we gather around it. The presider holds their arms in what we call the **Orans position**, like this.[3] This position of prayer comes from images painted in the Roman catacombs. By the time of Justin Martyr in the mid second century (150 CE), the Orans position is considered the 'normal' position of prayer. When the presider prays in the Orans position they are raising the prayers of all those gathered.

The words of the Eucharistic Prayer begin with what is called the **Sursum corda,** which is Latin for "Lift up your hearts." Together the presider and community share the responses as we enter into our prayer of thanksgiving. And the entire Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to God.

The prayer that follows our opening responses is called the **Preface**, where we expand our thanks to God. This leads into the **Sanctus**, the hymn of praise which begins with the words, "Holy, holy, holy." It's based on the words of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3, who sing: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory."

This hymn concludes with the **Benedictus qui venit**: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." This text, from Matthew 21:9, echoes the joyful cries of the crowd at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.[4]

Note: Many of us cross ourselves at this point, at the word "blessed." This practice began during the medieval sung mass. At that point it was common practice for the choir to stop singing after the Sanctus, so the people might look up and adore the two elevations of the elements. It became a custom for people to make the sign of the cross when the elements were lifted up. Which means that the sign of the cross was being made just as the choir resumed singing the words of the Benedictus, "Blessed is he..." Which is where that tradition comes from.[5]

Back to the Eucharistic Prayer proper - we move from the Sanctus and Benedictus into what we call **the Institution narrative**. This is where we recall before God the institution of the Lord's Supper. (Remember the entire Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to God.) We recollect the acts of Jesus: who took the bread, blessed, broke, and shared it. And then took the wine, blessed, and shared it. Saying "Do this to remember me." These are called the **'words** of institution,' and the presider must touch the bread and wine during these words.

Liturgical theologians are adamant - we are NOT re-enacting the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Rather, we are participating fully in thanking God for the institution of the Lord's Supper. When the presider lifts the bread and then the wine, we are acknowledging that this bread and this wine are being consecrated.

Interesting side note: It's in the 9th century that unleavened bread is introduced, which appeared in the form of a pure white wafer and replaced the loaf of bread at the Eucharist.[6]

After the words of Institution, we move to **the epiclesis**, or invocation of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit which is the active force in the transformation of the elements of bread and wine **and** the community gathered. The gesture of invocation is essentially a form of laying on of hands upon the gifts and the community. The presider makes the motion over gifts, and we cross ourselves, acknowledging the Spirit's transformation of this entire gathered community.

Our prayer comes to its conclusion when presider lifts the gifts, and the people affirm the Eucharistic Prayer with their "**Amen**." St. Ambrose described this Amen as "sounding like thunder."[7]

After our thunderous affirmation of our Eucharistic Prayer, we pray together the Lord's Prayer. Our current prayer book gives us two options - one traditional, one contemporary. It's a nod to our understanding of authority - that careful balance of scripture, tradition, and reason. The older version of the prayer has long been part of our tradition, but the more contemporary version is a much more accurate translation of what Jesus taught his disciples to pray. (Using this version invokes both scripture and reason.)

So, what's happening when we pray the Eucharistic Prayer? As we've noted earlier in this series, the Elizabethan Settlement attempted to bring peace to the realm, establishing a wide middle way between Catholic and Protestant practices and theology. As you can imagine, the Eucharist was a point of violent contention. Catholics believed that the bread and wine literally change physically into flesh and blood, a process called "transubstantiation." While the varied Reformed Protestant groups tended to see the bread and wine as merely reminders of what Christ did for us many centuries ago.[8] Elizabeth's church takes a 'both/and' approach, understanding the Eucharist to be both a Memorial Meal, and the Real Presence of Christ. Without explaining how that works exactly.

As Anglicanism develops, our theology of the Eucharist becomes more nuanced than simply combining both Catholic and Protestant perspectives, side by side. We've come to believe that the bread and wine, through the prayer of consecration, become outward signs of the inner grace being offered to us by God - the real, **sacramental presence** of Christ's Body and Blood.[9] Which means that for us, the elements are not merely signs - Christ's body and blood become **really present** and are **really given**. So that when we receive them, we are united with Christ and one another. These are Body and Blood of Christ - given to his people and received by faith.

Though belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist still doesn't imply we know **how** Christ is present (that's up to God). Nor does it mean that bread and wine stop being to be bread and wine.[10]

Which brings us to the next question.
When we consider the ritual actions in the Eucharistic Prayer - **when** are the bread and wine consecrated? **When** do they become the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood?

Anglican theologians consistently agree that it's the **entire** Eucharistic Prayer which is consecratory. Consecration happens during the whole of the Great Thanksgiving, rather than a specific moment within it.

Liturgical theologians point out the three-fold Trinitarian confession of faith and thanksgiving: 1) thanksgiving to God the Father; 2) the memorial of God the Son; and 3) the invocation of God the Holy Spirit. And these are embodied by: 1) the Orans position of the presider as we lift our hearts to God; 2) the touching of the elements, as we recall the institution of the Lord's Supper; and 3) the laying of hands upon the gifts, as we invoke the Holy Spirit. All of this culminates in the Great AMEN of the people - the ultimate moment of consecration.

Which means that the Eucharist only 'works' when we're in this together. No priest or bishop can make the Eucharist happen alone - consecration **depends** on the community gathered in worship. It requires all of us to make the bread and wine holy and sacred, the sacramental presence of Christ, given to us by God.

Friends, thank you for being part of this exploration, as we deepen our understanding of this central, sacred act, which we embody together week after week.

Blessed, redeemed, and sustained by the prayers of this community and our shared Eucharistic feast, may we go forth into the world - loving God and our neighbor. Amen.

[1] As mentioned earlier in this preaching series, our worship is a balance of the liturgy of the Word (from our Protestant roots) and the liturgy of the Table (from our Catholic roots). Our worship is heavily influenced by the practices of earliest Christian church. See notes below.
A) The first reasonably detailed account we have of Christian worship comes from Justin Martyr, who recorded the standard practices in these communities. Here's what we know from his outline, written around the year in 150 of the Common Era. On the Lord's Day, Christians gathered "in one place." They heard readings from the apostle or the prophets; a discourse on the readings by the president of the assembly, they stood for common prayers; then shared a sign of peace. After the peace, both bread and wine were presented. Justin Martyr notes that the cup of wine was mixed with water, though he doesn't explicitly share why. With the bread and wine before the community, the president offered prayers and thanksgiving to God, and the people replied Amen. Justin mentions that the prayer of the presider is left to them to compose, "at some length," and, "to the best of their ability." (resource: Jasper and Cuming, Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and reformed, third edition, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN.) Lastly, what he describes as the "eucharistized" elements are distributed to the people gathered and shared with those who are unable to be present. (Resource: Bard Thompson, Liturgies of the Western Church, second edition Fortress Press.)

B) Additional information, from Bard Thompson, Liturgies of the Western Church, second edition Fortress Press. Scholars judge that the prayer commenced with praise and thanksgiving for our creation, preservation, and redemption. And included the recital of Christ's Institution of the Eucharist according to the Gospels: The elements are blessed after the example of the Lord, who took bread, gave thanks, and said, do this for my anamnesis... (a re-calling of Christ's passion) They have been "eucharistized" thanked upon. At the close of the prayer, the congregation added its consent, saying, "AMEN." The thanksgiving, which had been made by the president of the gathering, came from the heart of the whole assembly, and was confirmed by the people's AMEN.
[2] according to the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, 1979
[3] 

[4] Lois Weil, Liturgical Sense; The Logic of Rite, Seabury Books, New York, 2013.
[5] Lois Weil, Liturgical Sense; The Logic of Rite, Seabury Books, New York, 2013.
[6] Bard Thompson, Liturgies of the Western Church, second edition Fortress Press.
[7] Lois Weil, Liturgical Sense; The Logic of Rite, Seabury Books, New York, 2013.
[8] The Memorial Meal is most often associated with Swiss Reformer Zwingli, 1484 - 1531
[9] Lois Weil, Liturgical Sense; The Logic of Rite, Seabury Books, New York, 2013.
[10] www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/real-presence/Material drawn from: Robert Boak Slocum, Don S. Armentrout, "An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church; A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians," Church Publishing Inc, New York, NY, Jan/2000.