

Custom and Tradition

Sermon by the Rev. Daniel W. Hinkle

Preached at 8:00 a.m. Worship

Advent 2 December 8, 2019

Since St. John the Baptist is featured on two Sundays in Advent, I thought I'd preach a teaching sermon on our Prayer Book liturgy for you 8 O'Clockers this morning. We'll return to John the Baptist next Sunday.

Every church is unique.

I've had the privilege of ministering in more churches than most priests, and each one has had at least one thing that was special about it. St. John's Episcopal Church, Concord is no exception. For instance: I have never ministered in an Episcopal Church where the congregation joins the priest in saying, out loud, the Eucharist Prayer as is your custom at the 8 O'Clock worship service. So, this is new to me.

As some of you know, after experiencing this new thing for a few weeks, I naturally was curious about it and began to ask a few of you about this custom of yours. I thought it might be interesting to share with you what I learned. At first, you weren't sure when you started to join the priest in saying the Eucharistic Prayer. Then you thought it was when Fr. Battin was with you. Then I learned that the custom was probably begun by a woman priest (what was her name?) who was supplying for Fr. Battin for a few weeks. That would be about 30 or 35 years ago, correct? Fr. Battin continued the custom, it caught on, and you've been doing this ever since. The interesting thing is that no reason for why that woman priest had you join the priest in saying the Eucharistic Prayer could be remembered. There was no theological reason, or Biblical, or liturgical reason.

So, I went back to my books and old Prayer Books and did a little bit of research to try to understand what may have been the reason or meaning behind your unique custom. I thought you might be interested in what I found.

1st - To the best of my knowledge, no rubric of any Book of Common Prayer, not in the present American 1979 Book of Common Prayer, or any other American or English or other Prayer Book in the Anglican Communion all the way back to the first Book of Common Prayer published in 1549... no Prayer Book gives permission or directs the people of the congregation to join the priest in saying the Prayer of Consecration.

2nd - It has always been the prerogative of the priest in Anglican and Episcopal Tradition to pray the prayer of Consecration alone to consecrate the bread and the wine of the Holy Eucharist. This is part of our ordination to the

priesthood, and has been true for Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and for Lutheran, Calvinist and other Protestant churches as well.

3rd - No Bishop or priest or anyone else has the authority to change anything in the Book of Common Prayer in any significant way. Only the National Church Convention has that authority. This is part of the discipline we live under as members of the Episcopal Church.

So, there is no theological, Biblical, liturgical, or authoritative reason for why that supply priest introduced this custom to you thirty some years ago, or for its continuation, that I know of.

But,.. having said this,.. it is true that in the English Prayer Books through that of 1662, after the priest says Jesus' words "*this is my body*" and "*this is my blood*" over the bread and the wine and thereby consecrated them,.. the congregation then received the bread and wine of Holy Communion. This was done to encourage people to actually receive communion. Before the Protestant Reformation, in the late Middle Ages, people rarely took communion, something the Reformers were rightly concerned about changing.

After everyone had received communion, the rest of what we consider to be the Prayer of Consecration was said as an alternative Postcommunion Prayer. This is the case for the English Prayer Books, but it is not the case in any of the American Episcopal Prayer Books from 1789 to today. The priest alone says the whole prayer through and then everyone received communion. And, until now the rubrics were not clear as to whether the priest said the Postcommunion Prayers alone or the people joined him in saying the Postcommunion Prayer. We need to remember that up until the most recent Prayer Books, the priest said and did almost everything. So, it might be that what you are doing has something to do with this English alternative Postcommunion Prayer which the people may have joined the priest in saying. But I'm not sure.

So, that is what I've learned from my research on this custom you have of joining the priest in saying the Prayer of Consecration, and as far as I know, it's not part of our Anglican/Episcopal tradition.

In just three Sundays, on the 1st Sunday in the Christmas Season, December 29th, we'll be shifting to Rite I Eucharistic Prayer 2. This 2nd Eucharistic Prayer is less penitential than Prayer 1 and more appropriate for festive occasions such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and other times. You'll not join the priest in saying the prayer as has been your custom. We will return to Prayer 1 for Lent and Holy Week.

Part of my job as your Interim Rector is to re-affirm and re-ground you in our Anglican/Episcopal traditions. This may mean the gradual letting go of a few customs. Let me be clear. I'm not asking you to stop joining me in the Eucharistic Prayer yet. But I am asking that if you do join in saying the prayer this morning,

that you be softer and allow the priest's voice, my voice, to be heard by all. You might also experiment with not joining in to see how that feels. You decide.

The church website upgrade should be finished this week. This teaching sermon will be posted there for you to refer to in the future. If you have any questions about my resources and the Books of Common Prayer of our Anglican/Episcopal tradition, please let me know.