

The Shape of Our Liturgy

A meaningful liturgy should roll like poetry while melting our hard parts a little bit. (Jodi-Renee Adams)

Our liturgy is about God – we are hungry for God, desperate to live in God’s story. What we do here is first about God. Not first about our whims or inclinations or social loyalties but about God’s action, love, kindness and authority over us and our world.

Our liturgy is our work, a communal act – this act is itself the fulfillment of God’s intention to build a new community. This is obedience. Worship distanced from the community of God has a degree of distance from the story of God.

Our liturgy reminds us that faith is not something merely heard and acknowledged, but something believed, something encountered, something felt, something practiced. God is with us, but God is also above us, beyond us. Worship that encounters the true God will always carry mystery. We don’t have to understand everything we participate in – and over time, our participation in God’s story will transform us and heal us. The following sketches the various movements of our liturgy and why we participate in them. You may also peek at our paper Liturgy: the Drama and Work of Worship or download a sample of one of our weekly liturgy guides.

CALL TO WORSHIP

With a greeting, a welcome, or a communal affirmation, we hear God’s call to gather, and we affirm that we are God’s people – and that God is center.

PRAYER

Prayer is conversation, and conversing with God is central to the life of following Jesus. St. Benedict called prayer “the work of God,” reflecting the reality that God is the one first at work in prayer – we are merely joining the conversation, responding to God’s invitation to engage in God-work. Prayer is often portrayed in Scripture as a communal act. The Psalms were the prayer book of the early church where, together, they would sing and speak their hopes and their repentance and their passions ... to God. We pray together in many ways at All Souls. We pray the Lord’s Prayer, the way Jesus taught us to pray. We pray liturgies (some are taken directly from the Psalms and some are crafted within our community, prayerful responses to one of the Scripture readings). Along with thousands of other churches, we pray the Sunday collects from the lectionary. In the prayers of the people, we pray ordered prayers for our city’s neighborhoods and others we want to never to forget – and we pray open, spontaneous prayers that we carry as burdens. We believe God is present and God is listening. So, we pray.

READING THE GOSPEL AND OTHER SCRIPTURES

All Souls practices the regular reading of the gospel, the story of Jesus. We read this story because it is our story. We need to be reminded that we are not asking God to enter our story, but rather he is asking us to enter his. The Lectionary is a very old way the church has sought to regularly retell the Jesus narrative. Following a three-year cycle, we hear the high points of Jesus' ministry on earth. As we hear these words, we are instructed by his ways and changed by his teaching. We also hear the Old Testament Scriptures, recounting for us God's movement in history. We will often also hear an Epistle reading, the letters God wrote to the first churches.

MUSIC & ARTS

Music is common in most every tradition of public worship. Music speaks the language of our soul. The Hebrew culture in which Jesus lived was a culture of poets and musicians. Perhaps the best known book of the Bible, Psalms, provides a collection of prayer books that God's people have used over the centuries to worship our God. The prayers were often spoken, but the prayers were also sung. The music at All Souls attempts to provide our heart a voice. Through music, we sing of God's character, we sing of our need, we repent, we ask God to move on our behalf and we simply celebrate that God is ... and that we are his people. Music – as all art forms do – reflects the reality that we are artists, formed in the image of a creative God who loves diversity and beauty. Embracing this truth, our musical expressions are eclectic and diverse, ranging from 16th century hymns to original scores, from old gospel to acoustic and rock. We also incorporate other art forms (imagery, ambiance and original works, to name a few) as expressions of God's creative work and our creative response. In it all, however, we hope to see God, not merely the art and the music.

PREACHING & TEACHING

The Scripture is God's gift to guide us into encountering the Living Christ. It offers us instruction and mercy. It provides us with wisdom and correction. However, the Bible is not a textbook or manual. It is a place where the God-breathed words are breathed afresh into our soul (I Timothy 3:16). At All Souls, we place a high priority on sitting under the teaching of God. We wrestle with what God says. We seek to understand the implications of what God says. We wonder if we are correctly hearing what God says. Yet, in all this, we are acting in faith ... that God has said. God has spoken. Our Sunday teaching hopes to faithfully engage and journey into the things God has spoken. We desire to let Scripture speak for itself, attempting to minimize (albeit imperfectly) the ways we impose our presuppositions or worldview or politics or felt-needs onto God. We desire to let him speak. And we pray we will have the courage to obey.

CONFESSION & SILENCE

Confession provides us the opportunity to lay down our resistance and our idols and come clean. Confession is also a time to declare (confess) what we believe and what story we will live. It is a time of response to the Scripture and to God's presence in our worship. It is a time to say yes to God.

Silence offers a way of being still before God. It is a wait of stopping our labor, if even for a moment, and (again) simply saying yes to God.

PASSING JESUS' PEACE

Some of Jesus' more frequent words were: "Peace be with you." (Luke 10:5; Luke 24:36; John 20:19-21) Jesus calmed storms, spoke faith to doubters, offered hope to the oppressed, promised forgiveness to sinners and calmed the hearts of the fearful. In all this, Jesus was giving peace. However, life in our world is often anti-peace, and to such a troubled world, Jesus continues to offer – through his words and his presence and then the words and presence of those who follow him – peace. So, when we gather on Sundays, we recognize that Jesus is among us, offering peace to each of us through each of us, our voice and our touch the peace-giving voice and touch of Jesus.

As a Jesus-community, we provide space for this Jesus-act of peace passing each Sunday. We turn to one another, to one we might know well or to one we may be meeting for the first time. We give a handshake or a hug and we say something like, Peace to you or Peace of Jesus to you. This is more than a greeting, more than a "say 'hi' to your neighbor" time. This is space where we recognize we are a community, a people God is forming and a people who are able to participate in the life and peace Jesus always desires to give.

Participating in this act may be uncomfortable at first. It can feel strange. Since we live in a culture of anti-peace, this is no surprise. The tension is increased because our society places a premium on maintaining personal space — and passing the peace is an intimate, spiritual, communal act. Jesus calls us to be part of the community he is forming, the Church. This means opening ourselves up to giving and receiving from one another. This means being the peace-giving voice of Jesus to one who might be lonely...or fearful...or sinful – and, thankfully, it means receiving this same peace-giving voice of Jesus in return, recognizing we are all ones who are lonely... or fearful... or sinful. That's the essence of Jesus-peace, anyway — a gift from a good and generous God.

If you are unsure of what you make of Jesus and are uneasy with this act, do not feel pressure to say anything. Simply receive the words offered to you. Merely receive them as a gift. This is how Jesus offers his peace, free with no strings attached.

EUCCHARIST

For much of the history of the church, the gathering around the Lord's Table (also known as Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper) was a central moment in our public acts of worship. This practice reflects the picture in Acts of the early church where gathering around the Lord's Table as a community was held equally as important as acts of teaching Scripture, participating in prayer and sharing life with one another. Paul also seems to reflect the reality that "breaking of bread" was integral to the life of the earliest Christian communities (Acts 20:7-12; I Corinthians 11:18-20, 33), and he evokes imagery suggesting that sharing a meal at the Table of God was core to the identity of God's people (I Corinthians 10:17).

Jesus' Table is the centerpiece of our worship. The symbolism enacted and the story retold compels us to want to meet one another – and God – at his feast each week. Communion is both a symbol and a story. It is both something pictured and something experienced. Communion allows us to remember – and enter into – the reality of Jesus Christ, the one who died and rose again and now is among us offering grace. Our Creator has made us tactile creatures. Our mind needs to be stretched and our wills need to be challenged. However, we also need to experience spiritual reality. We need to experience God. Coming to the Lord's Table, receiving bread which Christ told us is his body and dipping it into wine which Christ told us is his

blood, is a way we experience God, a way we taste grace. We share a common cup where all who participate dip the bread into a cup along with others who are participating with them. This recounts the way Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples, and this imagery honors the truth that we are not isolated souls participating in some individualized rite, rather we are part of a community, a people God has connected by his cross and resurrection. We are a family, and we are sharing in a feast.

Communion is a time to reflect, remember and repent. But it is not always solemn. Communion is a time to rejoice, to receive grace, to be forgiven. The picture God has given us is his table. The setting is a feast. There is dancing. There is laughter. There is friendship. There is hope. There is God.

GIVING

Generosity has always been something the gospel calls us to (I Timothy 6:18). We are called to give our life, our passions, our hearts, and yes, our crisp green bills. Part of the early church's weekly communal experience was the act of each one giving as they were able to support the mission God had called them to (I Corinthians 16:1-4). Giving is no more a duty than participating in music as worship or communion as worship or prayer as worship. It is also no less important. The wisdom writers of Scripture – as well as our own experience – indicate that we use our financial resources for those things we value and believe in. Giving is a way of speaking against and greed of our culture; and in its place signaling that we deeply value God and the community he has placed us in.

If you are a guest of All Souls, please receive all that happens as a gift. However, if All Souls is your community, then we ask you to consider how the call of God and the call to worship would influence your use of your financial resources to share in the work God has called us to.

CREEDS & AFFIRMATIONS

Each Sunday, we will affirm together (pray together – these Creeds are actually prayers) one of the Church's creeds (some expression of the ancient narrative first formed in the 2nd or 3rd century recounting the core Christian story). We will also regularly affirm our Rule of Life (the story we believe God has called our community to live into). These words remind us of our communal identity in the gospel.

BLESSING

As we conclude our worship, we are sent out with a blessing. We believe that in our worship, God acts. God heals. God transforms. God blesses us and sends us into the world, following Jesus in the power of the Spirit to live as God's shalom (peace, well-being) for God's world.

