

Jesus' Welcome Centers Our Ministry

Richard Fabian

Americans are 60% churchgoers today, just as in colonial times and in every century since. But our times are different. Today everything stands in question. In San Francisco and the western half of Washington State, 90% of residents tell census takers they have no religious identity whatever. Moreover, today America offers many faith options: Buddhism, New Age Spirituality, Islam, and countless fundamentalist cults. Our own mainline church services increasingly resemble fourth-century churches, filling up with people with no known faith commitment. That describes not only our visitors, but longtime church members as well.

The people who *never* come to church are *not* our only evangelical target now. As a parish pastor, I have learned that even people who do enter our churches can have crazy ideas about what Christianity stands for. We take nothing for granted; we must choose what we show people on Sundays, from the minute they enter the building. Church growth folks tell us most strangers make up their minds about a church within *three minutes* after entering it. And yet many of the helpful hints that church growth folks give us—like offering good music, clean bathrooms, and directional signs—would work as well for a restaurant or an office building. We must also show newcomers what we are distinctly up to. Of course we want to show them the gospel—but concretely what does that mean?

For one thing, if we would offer the gospel to generations of Americans alienated from the church, we must tackle alienation within our own religious life. The great nineteenth-century sociologist Max Weber defined alienation as mistakenly treating things we made up ourselves as though these were external realities—for example, inventing a human dietary law and then attributing that law to God. The renaissance Reformers called this superstition, which means believing things that have no spiritual truth. Weber found alienated religion thriving everywhere; and the Reformers would have agreed with him. That's why Martin Luther said *Ecclesia semper reformanda*: the church will always require reforming, to serve Christ's gospel.

Over the past century, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics and other mainline churches have shared a eucharistic renewal based on critical research into scripture and Christian history. Even some of the assumptions

we started out with, we now criticize in turn, as we review our experience and priorities. Today I want to set one priority above all other for celebrating the Christian gospel together to show it to everyone who comes in our church doors: Jesus' hospitality. In some ages that priority has been shadowed or eclipsed by others, but because it stands firmly rooted in scripture, it will reform the way we worship together every week, the way we use our church buildings, and the way we will build new ones.

Christians have taught for centuries that our sacraments are signs. Different churches have counted different numbers of sacraments; but all agree that the Eucharist is preeminently Jesus' own sign. So his church must hold his sign up clearly. I want to talk today about ways we can make Jesus' own sign so clear that even unchurched people can get it right off: that way it's a sign of the *gospel*, the *good news about Jesus* as well.

Luke's and John's gospels say Jesus did both signs and wonders, though in Hebrew scripture those differ. Doing wonders can prove any prophet's spiritual power, and change the course of battles. But a sign shows people what God is already doing, maybe always doing, while people somehow dangerously fail to see, even when their own experience of God should make it plain. Therefore the prophet tries some dramatic gesture to show them even plainer, hoping to overcome their tragic blindness. Jeremiah calls city leaders out to the Jerusalem garbage dump and breaks a pot and says, here's what God will do to our nation if you don't wise up. Jeremiah doesn't pretend he's breaking up the nation; he's using a pot for a sign, a sign of what *God* is up to for real (Jer 19). Jeremiah's sign failed in his time, because his leaders went on blindly as before, and his nation was destroyed. Yet Jeremiah's sign still speaks to every Bible reader, telling them what God is always up to. Who knows what they learn to see today, or how they live in response?

In Jesus' time everyone yammered about God's kingdom coming: when, how, where, with what result. But Jesus' parables have a unique theme: God is here working with you right now. It's too late to prepare for God's coming, to manage, to control God's work; instead, your response right now makes all the difference. And so to help people see what they were failing to see, Jesus made a sign out of Isaiah's prophecy about a banquet where the Israelites and their pagan enemies, the clean and the unclean, would dine together one day (Isa 25). Jesus summoned all the wrong people to his table, dining with them publicly.

Scholars tell us this sign was so offensive, both religiously and politically, it led straight to Jesus' death. So you might expect the church would repeat his sign just the way he did, because showing Jesus life and

death to the world is our chief job. But Jesus' own worst enemies read his sign more clearly than his church has often done since. Luke's gospel (15:2) preserves an insult directed at Jesus, and thus our surest evidence about him. At my own Episcopal Church of St. Gregory Nyssen, San Francisco, we spelled out that insult in decorous gilt Greek letters on our altar table: "This guy (*houtos*) welcomes sinners and dines with them."

For centuries Christians have argued about the second verb there—about what we are eating when we keep Jesus' memory this way. But the first verb comes first for good reason, because it carries Jesus' own real meaning: This guy *welcomes*. Today church growth writers talk a lot about making our buildings welcoming, our services welcoming, our music welcoming, our ministers and church members welcoming. Of course, we work hard to do that at St. Gregory's, just as you do in your parish. But the real purpose for our hospitality is not to grow a bigger church. Our real purpose is to show Jesus to the world.

So we do welcome everyone without exception to Jesus' table at St. Gregory Nyssen Church. Our Episcopal cathedral and a growing number of California parishes do the same, with our bishop's blessing. Open communion has become a hot topic among Episcopalians, and you and I don't have time to rehearse the arguments here today. Yet how ironic it is that Jews have moved on from stressing the purity of their fellow diners, to stress the ritual purity of the foods they eat—and most Jews now welcome everyone to share their kosher meals, as Jesus once did—while Christian churches have assumed the posture of Jesus' *critics*, scrapping over who is pure enough to eat and drink with us!

We know that our hospitality's *chief* impact is not on our visitors. Visitors do come back, and even join up; but many are traveling, and some are hunting for a different kind of music, or social style, or ethnic or age group, or any number of things they may *still* be out there hunting for. The chief impact of our hospitality is on our own congregation's life. In my student days I traveled through Europe staying at monasteries as a guest because monasteries interested me (and they were cheap!), and as a guest I discovered what I'll call Fabian's Law of Hospitality. Contrary to what you sometimes hear—"Those folks are really warmly knit together, but unfriendly to outsiders"—in fact, groups treat outsiders pretty much the way they treat insiders, because most groups treat all boundaries the same. You can tell right away from the welcome you get just how much the group's members accept each other and know they can rely on each other—how much welcome *they* experience there. A welcoming church is

a loving church, and an unwelcoming church loves nobody, and every visitor feels it. Our liturgical welcome is a sign anyone can read.

Welcome to Worship

At breakout time this Wednesday afternoon, I'll show a videotape of St. Gregory's regular Sunday worship. A prize-winning documentary filmmaker in our congregation made it, and you'll find it more intriguing than any description I could give. So for now, let me discuss ways you'll see us hold up Jesus' sign of hospitality there. These are concrete steps any parish church can take—maybe yours already has. And if you have discoveries to share, please send them to me at our website: rfabian@saintgregorys.org. We want them! (And our website is full of stuff you can download.)

1. During St. Gregory's services we **put newcomers first**, all the time. That's a sign for all to read, just the same way church growth writers advise: Put signs up everywhere pointing to the bathrooms and other facilities, because newcomers will know right away that you want them to be at ease, whether they need the bathroom now or not. So during our services we address every announcement, every instruction, every action for newcomers to follow, and we know our old timers will feel again the welcome they already find here. Of course, welcome is different from compulsion; and people must know they are welcome to take part as they choose—and if they don't take part, *they* are still welcome. That takes practice, and planning, and reminders when we stumble by making in-jokes, or apologies to people who've heard this before, or anything else that suggests newcomers are different from old timers. By Fabian's Law, they are really the same.

2. We **greet people repeatedly**. Since most people who join a church say they decided to do so within three minutes of entering it, the first moments of a service set the context for everything afterward. Outside on the steps, our greeter welcomes everyone arriving, new or old, and hands them a music book. Inside the sanctuary, more greeters guide them to a welcoming table for nametags and whatever else they will need. Then at the appointed hour, our choir begin a choral prelude while the clergy emerge from their vestry and move among the crowd, touching each with a quiet word of welcome. This is no hand-shake—we deliberately extend the *left* hand, conveying affection without formality, because affection is the context our old timers share. More than that, St Augustine wrote that worship begins in awe and ends in affection; so we move affection right up front.

3. We **move music up front**, too—good music, of higher quality than most churches give newcomers to sing, because good church music is more powerful. And nearly every part of the service we can sing, we will sing. That means confronting modern Americans' alienation from music-making. Many have been told they can't or shouldn't sing, and have got used to listening while professionals make the music; in some churches even congregational hymns are actually sung by the choir alone. To meet this difficulty, some worship planners dumb down church music to a level where visitors already believe they are competent to take part: this strategy has supported numerical growth in many famous congregations. But our strategy instead leads newcomers to sing more and better music than they assume they can. After a welcome from the presider, our Music Director begins at once introducing today's music so all can join in. It isn't necessary to rehearse the music thoroughly, only to create the illusion of familiarity, so people will understand they're welcome to sing along.

Of course, an experience like that takes intentional planning. We choose hymns and chants that are easy to pick up, by ear or with simple musical notation, and our own composers write more every year. We begin singing each hymn in unison, moving to harmony on the second verse. And for our entry procession, with the whole crowd moving, we use call-and-response, or repeated refrains answering a solo cantor: these join rich variation in scripture text with ready congregational participation. They also cut down on paper! We give people only the paper they'll need to sing; otherwise we keep their heads out of books and into the liturgical action, newcomer and old timer alike. (Later on, when our congregation are busy eating and drinking at the altar, the choir will sing more complex music on their own.) You may know, likewise, that at the end of our services we dance carols, or circle dances: those we will introduce on the spot, by teaching first an easy repeating step with rhythm instruments, and once the step is moving steadily, we start singing along.

4. Throughout the liturgy we **announce everything** we're about to do, so people hear that you don't have to know anything to take part here. Each announcement we script carefully, giving information in exactly the order a newcomer can follow in thought and action. And we announce only what we'll do right now, so they have no need to remember things. Every week we watch newcomers for signs of confusion, and after church we revise the script to guide them better. For example, we invite everyone present to share the bread and wine which are Christ's body and blood, and to respond with their own gifts for the world's needy and the church's work. This announcement has taken many revisions! We must make clear the

eucharistic bread and wine are Christ's body and blood, so that no newcomer will be surprised when these are offered; and sure enough, every Sunday a few visitors do decline communion and receive a blessing instead. We must also make clear that everything we give, we give in response to all God gives us—including the very Eucharist itself—and people are welcome to share Jesus' table whether they have brought donations or not. That is why we take up our collection *after* communion, and gather other charitable gifts to set on the altar table alongside the bread and wine. And we dance in circles around all these gifts together.

5. **Deacons are welcomers** first of all. They marshal everyone, so everyone can carry out their part in our common worship. So naturally, most announcing is our deacons' work. We train them to aim every remark, every gesture at newcomers, fixing their mental attention on one or two visitors if necessary. When deacons select readers and assist them by pointing the text, or guide children bearing the gifts of bread and wine to the table, they convey the context of hospitality, modeling welcome for our church members to help out newcomers in turn. Hospitality is a natural human behavior, after all; our adversary here is alienated worship. Alienated worship shows up when people don't help guests out or fix things that go wrong, the way they would at home—the way any host or hostess would do. When church members don't host newcomers, that's because they don't feel at home here themselves. It's Fabian's Law again: groups treat outsiders and insiders basically the same.

6. **We *show* the world is welcome.** The sign of hospitality that Jesus chose, came first from Isaiah's prophecy about Jews and heathen dining together. Throughout our building, St. Gregory's liturgical art and vestments honor God's conversation with the whole world, visibly evoking this original sense. When you come to a breakout session to watch our videotape, you will see on the walls above our altar eighty life-size icons of saints dancing in heaven, while we dance below: our congregation chose these saints from every era, nation, race—and even religion—to represent all humanity rejoicing together, with Jesus leading as Lord of the Dance. On Good Friday we wear vestments drawn exclusively from religions outside Christianity, in order to symbolize the universal significance of Christ's death and resurrection.

Of course, inclusive and expansive language are important for Christian mission today, but these have no clear standard yet. So we combine several approaches at every service. On principle, we work on building up feminine imagery in our readings, prayers and songs, *without* suppressing masculine

language. It's a slower reform method than some, but makes clear everyone belongs.

After readings and meditative silences and a sermon, we invite anyone to stand and share their own experiences that these have brought to mind. We do *not* invite opinions or arguments, but only shared life experience: something people with widely differing opinions can receive openly and respond to in turn. (Sometimes the presider must intervene to keep this sharing on track!) St. Gregory's members comprise a wide spread of political opinion, and both left- and right-wingers sing in our choir, volunteer in our food pantry, teach in our classes, and party together. Their combined participation shows it's safe for everyone here, whether people choose to speak up or not. Showing people they are welcome is our prophetic work. The church need only make clear the sign Jesus once chose. How people respond is up to them and to God.

7. **Coffee hour happens around the altar.** Congregations typically gather in another space after the Eucharist, for less formal hospitality. But the difference between these gatherings is one of the chief obstacles to welcoming newcomers to your church, many of whom will leave after the service and not even attend coffee. Instead, we make coffee hour an extension of the Eucharist, much the way early Christians kept their Eucharist within a meal. We bring coffee urns out from the kitchen and set them right on the altar table, with food tables carried out nearby. Deacons invite everyone to share the food and sign our guestbook; and even those few visitors who have held back from communion or from dancing, now join in. Some visitors have told us this coffee hour is the most remarkable part of our liturgy—and it truly is part of our liturgy. Holding coffee hour this way also reclaims the church building from alienation, an issue I will talk about shortly. But first, another linkage we make clear in this same altar space: linking Eucharist and service.

Welcome to Service

At St. Gregory's our largest liturgy falls not on Sundays, but on Fridays at midday. This is also our longest liturgy, running from noon to four p.m.! Our food pantry volunteers set three tons of groceries on movable tables ringing the altar. Then they gather round the altar table to celebrate a very simple Eucharist. After communion they lay even more groceries out on the altar table itself. And for four hours, volunteers distribute groceries from all these tables, to anyone who comes in the door. Some three hundred families come every week to be fed. They come

without screening or qualification, to circle the altar, taking what they decide they need. Every week some clients join our parish volunteers distributing the food for awhile. A few have begun coming on Sundays to worship, and joined the church, and now volunteer in other programs. And every Sunday we raise money for buying all these groceries from the San Francisco Food Bank. A cash gift of \$10 will feed a family for a week, because the Food Bank gathers surplus food from local merchants and markets; we are just paying their operating costs. So lots of our Sunday congregation chip money in during the collection, and each Friday new volunteers show up to help distribute food.

Any parish can do this service, with little financial investment and great effect—not only on the hard-pressed families who take groceries home, but also on the whole congregation’s vision and life. The woman who founded our food pantry—a lifelong atheist, now baptized and a churchwarden—is launching another in a neighborhood nearby and hopes to start a food pantry in every San Francisco parish. She’s achieved something we always wanted: a service program that serves our own church members as much as it serves the world.

When St. Gregory’s Church first opened in 1978, Episcopal churches had a fashion for contracting with outsiders to run service programs in parish space. Alcoholics Anonymous, day care centers, tutoring centers, soup kitchens, after-school gym and art and music programs, overnight homeless shelters. All were wonderful, valuable services—and nearly all were managed by professionals from outside the congregation. Americans have a penchant for professionals, who know what they’re doing and will probably do it right most of the time. Many of these services *require* professional experience to be done well.

Unfortunately, boundary conflicts often de-stabilized these church contracts, and every year I heard of another one ending explosively in some parish. Outsiders’ professional programs can present another alienation problem for churches: for all their success in serving clients, professional programs can reinforce churchgoers’ belief that they themselves are not competent to help. This competence gap—even if it is only a perceived competence gap—subtly alienates those churchgoers from their own parish service programs; and the few volunteers qualified to serve can find themselves caught in the middle.

For example, San Francisco unluckily leads the country in homelessness, partly because our weather is clement year round. As Episcopal parishes began opening their sanctuaries to overnight guests, complex problems soon called for administrators from outside the parish to

run each program. But within two years a large central homeless shelter replaced our many parish versions, and now the Episcopal Diocese of California operates the biggest shelter in the city, in its own dedicated buildings. Nearly all our parish churches send money there, and none provides that service at home any longer. And the diocese is doing that job better than any of us could, by meeting the need with resources no parish could supply.

Our founding plan for St. Gregory's Church required that we focus on our members' *own* service work. You could say our strategic target is not needy clients, but our own volunteers. We support their community service both outside and inside St. Gregory's. It is remarkable how far a church can reach this way. Nearly every Sunday we collect donations for some program a parishioner volunteers at, so we send 10% of our budget outside annually: to Cambodia for medical relief, to the nearby middle school for library books and uniforms, to Global Aids Interfaith Alliance, to a Roman Catholic feeding program down the street, to the city's Night Ministry, and of course, to our weekly Friday Food Pantry.

For a congregation of young people paying high rents, St. Gregory's members have proven remarkably generous. When a charity applies to us for a grant—even an official Episcopal diocesan charity—we tell them: “It works best when our members are already taking part in a program. Come and tell them how they themselves can help, and if they join you, they'll raise money for sure.” Some other San Francisco churches have a higher service profile and make a broader impact on our city life. But we find that developing our churchgoers' own service opportunities has energized other aspects of parish life, too, not least by raising new leaders in new places. And joining their gifts of money and food and clothing for the needy right on the altar table after communion, together with the bread and wine that are Christ's body and blood, makes clear that all Christian service is our response to God's gracious gifts to us.

Welcome and the Sanctuary

Christopher Alexander's influential book, *A Pattern Language for Architecture*, argues that the natural church pattern sets worshippers in the nave viewing a distant, unreachably sacred area where they may not set foot: Alexander finds this forbidden holy of holies a core feature of temples throughout the world. Nineteenth-century liturgical reformers saw medieval cathedrals in just that way, and built new sanctuaries to match. Therefore modern church architects seem to take that pattern for granted, whatever

visual lightness or warmth or contemporary “feel” they may add in. But scholarship shows that Alexander’s pattern does not actually represent our tradition after all.

During the fourth century, when Christians first went public in the Roman Empire and began building on a grand scale, many flocked to Jerusalem, hunting up ancient sites and buildings, and returned to shape their home churches after the Jerusalem temple that scripture describes, and Jesus himself might have known. (The temple itself had been torn down centuries before.) But the Cappadocian theological party objected, with arguments worth hearing today. They were leaders in fighting against Arianism, and they opposed this movement just as staunchly. Why would anyone go to Jerusalem, asked Gregory Nyssen, now that Christ is risen and is everywhere?¹ During periodic famines, Gregory’s brother Basil railed against furnishing churches expensively while poor families starved in the streets outside the sanctuary. Basil’s most famous sermon, on the parable of the rich farmer who tore down his barns to build new ones, caused an outpouring of public generosity, and stands today as a model of early Christian rhetoric.²

Today few church donors can revel in lavish display, and every judicatory hunts for ways to build houses of worship cheaper and serve the poor more efficiently. So our modern economy may have helped the Cappadocians carry their ethical point home. But their theological principle is more urgent than ever. Even if Alexander’s architectural pattern may fit some other religions, it probably never fit ours. Recent historians have changed our understanding of how classical church buildings worked. Early sanctuaries gathered worshippers near a lectern or an altar table, while chancels marked off only the space clergy needed for moving about. (The medieval Russian development of an iconostas wall still preserved that immediate feel, and today visitors to older Russian cathedrals are struck by how close the gathering remains.)

Even those vast western European cathedrals never functioned as modern architects imagine. Except for grand royal occasions, the real worship space was small and gathered people close in what we call “choir” seating. The long cathedral nave filled up, not with Christopher Alexander’s vision of layfolk praying toward an inaccessible high altar, but

¹Gregory of Nyssa, “On Pilgrimage,” in vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 382–383.

²Basil the Great, “I Will Pull Down My Barns,” in vol. 3 of *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, trans. and ed. M. F. Toal (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1959), 325–332.

instead with crowds of haggling shoppers, soldiers, beggars, and even livestock. Our modern altar communion rails were invented at the Reformation, and not to keep laypeople outside the holy of holies—something no Protestant would have stood for! Civil statutes expressly ordered these rails to prevent the many dogs, who still ran free about the nave, from pissing on the Reformers' fancy brocade altar vestments, which were newly enlarged to make the altar table look like a banquet for all!

However, nineteenth-century reformers inherited empty medieval buildings and without sound historical information, their romantic imaginations invented Christopher Alexander's remote and inaccessible holy space. So they built or rebuilt churches that way for the first time in history. American cities are full of these. But today we can see that their model contradicts both Jesus' message, and Christian tradition, too. Early prayers and sermons locate holiness first of all in us worshipers, and only by extension in the buildings we use for prayer. And though the Reformers quarreled over individual worshippers' holiness, not one Reformer proposed a Christian sanctuary should restrict access to those spiritually superior.

Modern sanctuaries built on that alienated liturgical pattern preach a double untruth. To unchurched newcomers, they proclaim the very opposite of Christ's gospel, saying: you are not competent or worthy or authorized to share God's presence and minister to others here. As if the church could manage God's presence in some way! That is the deepest reason why St. Gregory's Church purposely pulls everyone into our processions, gathers everyone around our altar table, invites everyone to sing a drone along with presider during the consecration prayer, and teaches everyone to sing and dance.

And we've built a new sanctuary that supports active, popular participation at every liturgical moment. We rejected the one-room theatrical plan many modern church builders use: that plan treats the worshippers as an audience, who watch while professionals do the worship action for them. Even theater-in-the-round plans still work that way; and today's megachurch services modeled after television studio audiences do the same.

Instead, we copied a floor plan from early Syrian synagogues and churches, with *two* rooms, and a dramatic procession between them. Each room has its own appropriate acoustics, supporting what the congregation do there. One room with choir seating gathers everyone around a lectern and a preacher. Later, we all process together into the other room, with an altar table at the center of a wide open floor. Here people stand all around

for the Great Thanksgiving and communion, and dance in circles about the table. On the walls overhead, those eighty life-size icons of saints dance in heaven, while we dance below, and Jesus the Lord of the Dance leads us all. This altar room also serves as our parish dining hall and for distributing groceries from our food pantry. At all our events, the altar is the room newcomers enter first, to see first the altar table welcoming them; and then beyond, our baptismal font of natural rock in bright, outdoor daylight. At one glance they catch the message of Jesus' chosen sign: first they are welcome to his table and then welcome to take up his ministry through baptism like his baptism.

The year we built it, our sanctuary received the America Institute of Architects award for the best religious architecture in the United States. I invite you to see this wonderful building videotaped in action, at one of our two breakout sessions. It is truly a church where Jesus' hospitality centers all our ministries.

Welcoming Christ the King

Finally—finally in every sense!—let me touch on eschatology in the Eucharist. Parish musicians and all who write prayers or choose hymns for our church people to sing, please take note! Thanks to our modern liturgical renewal, every churchgoer now hears weekly that the Eucharist is a foretaste of God's just and peaceable kingdom of love, to be fulfilled at the end of the world. Our modern lectionaries emphasize justice themes during an extended Advent season, which now begins in late October; and throughout the year, petitions for peace and justice, and revised eucharistic prayers giving people's responses like "Christ will come again" have supplanted the medieval preoccupation with wiping out worshippers' individual sins. On the one hand, this wholesome attention to social responsibility suits our times urgently. On the other hand, this futuristic mythical imagery shows that liturgists have fallen far out of step with New Testament scholarship today.

A century ago, it seemed obvious that Jesus preached God's kingdom and the world's end were drawing near, and his disciples should pray the end would come soon. But the world's end did not come. That failure long haunted Christian thinkers; as Hans Küng warned after the Second Vatican Council, a theologian must contend with the fact that Jesus was wrong about the *Parousia*. But the last fifty years have seen a critical reversal, and most gospel scholars now reckon that Jesus never talked about the future at all. Talk about the world's end comes from other voices

interpolated into the text. By contrast, as I mentioned half an hour ago (before putting some of you to sleep!) Jesus preached a radically different message: God is already here working with you right now; it is too late to prepare for or manage God's presence; you must respond at once, and your response now makes all the difference.

Our renewed liturgies were shaped during Küng's era, and lag behind biblical scholars here: they overlook Jesus' distinctive message, and still picture the kingdom as a future event, something Christians can only hope for. We must find ways to bring Jesus' more radical message into our weekly worship. And Jesus' message can only strengthen our commitment to justice and peace *now* in our own actions and lives. Luckily, both the New Testament and liturgical tradition offer resources for this task. John's gospel emphasizes the believer's action *now*, and supplies rich imagery for prayers and hymns faithful to Jesus' teaching. If you visit our St. Gregory's website, you will find we have written several such prayers.

Moreover, our liturgy already features an action well suited to express Jesus' message in an ancient ceremonial tradition. Recall how we bring bread and wine to the altar, exchange the peace, and lift up our hearts. Typically, hymns and prayers chosen here fill up with sacrificial images referring to Christ's offering on the cross, or our offering of thanksgiving gifts: those images anticipate the Great Thanksgiving Prayer of consecration that follows soon after. Instead, however, early Christian symbolism expressed Christ's arrival in this very eucharistic gathering, bringing salvation to everyone present, and forgiveness and peace and grace for holy living. He comes like a king with power to establish justice and with gifts to share freely. So we put aside commonplace affairs and petty strife, and raise our hearts and minds heavenward to receive him.

Our familiar liturgical preface, "Lift up your hearts!" carried this meaning in ancient times. And the earliest accompanying hymn we know of, sung as deacons brought bread and wine to the altar, was Psalm 24 "Lift up your heads, O ye gates ... and the King of Glory shall come in." Eastern Christians added similar songs: we all know the latest of these as the beloved hymn "Let all mortal flesh keep silence..." If you have visited Greek or Russian churches, you will recall the dramatic procession they make here, with all the clergy following along like the king's attendants, and members of the congregation bowing to the floor in adoration: they call this the Great Entrance. Such ceremony might surprise your American Lutheran parishioners! But in fact western hymnody is rich with suitable parallels: "Hail to the Lord's anointed," for just one example. Our hymnbooks publish these hymns for Advent use, but many will serve this

liturgical action year round. Several years' experience at St. Gregory's shows these hymns evoke powerfully God's kingdom here and now, just as Jesus preached; and they move our congregation to respond immediately with peacemaking and thanksgiving, as Jesus urged his disciples to do.

I dare to think that Martin Luther would be pleased with our way of putting God's word into action here. Luther's opponents pressed him constantly to debate about sacrifice, and justification, and the metaphysics of eucharistic presence. Yet at one point he wrote, perhaps in frustration, "What we believe is no different from what the Greeks and Russians believe!"³ And Luther's own hymns are full of conviction that God is acting in our lives right now, which is what matters most. In any event, nothing would have pleased Luther more than to see us show Jesus in the liturgy today the best way we know how.

³Editor's Note: A search of *Luther's Works* on CD-ROM produced no match for this quotation. While it is certainly possible Luther made such a statement, one should be cautious about accepting the veracity of unattributed quotations. See, for example, Timothy Wengert's introduction in "The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths" on p. 92 of this volume, and Fred Gaiser, "What Luther *Didn't* Say about Vocation," *Word & World* 25/4 (Fall 2005): 359–361.