

## Matthew's Feeding of the Five Thousand

Failure to commend the faith that is in us

Most common mistake we make in our efforts to be more hospitable: failing to acknowledge the ways we already positioned to welcome people into the Church and into a relationship with the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The question we should be asking ourselves: how can we more effectively use the tools already available to us to practice evangelism and hospitality?

1979 - sea change in the Episcopal Church, when the *Book of Common Prayer* made Eucharist the principal service of the week.

“It is in the celebration of the Eucharist that the Church most clearly acts as the Body of Christ, the people of God... [Every] Lord's Day is the celebration of the resurrection, and it is the Sunday Eucharist which gives its paschal character to Sunday, for it is in the Eucharist that the Church proclaims and lives out the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' dying and rising again.” - Leonel Mitchell

In other words, the Eucharist allows us to fully embody the mystery that exists at the very heart of our faith.

Practically speaking, this meant that Morning Prayer was no longer a weekly occurrence in the Episcopal Church.

Unintended consequences:

“Unfunded mandate” - it doesn't count as church unless you have a priest present to celebrate the Eucharist

The denigration of Morning Prayer - over the last forty years, Morning Prayer has been relegated to the margins of our common life.

To the extent that people thought about it at all, Morning Prayer became either an instrument of individual devotion or an object of wistful nostalgia. In many ways, Morning Prayer became a service for the initiated, one that was only available or interesting to people who were deeply attached to the Episcopal Church.

When I arrived at the Church of the Redeemer in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania four years ago, the church had the following service schedule:

7:45 - Holy Eucharist Rite I

9:00 - Holy Eucharist Rite II (with hymns and choir)

11:15 - Choral Matins (with hymns and small choir)

The first two services were pretty boilerplate: pretty much every Episcopal Church that has more than one service on a Sunday morning offers some configuration of these services. The 7:45

service usually drew between 30 and 50, while the 9:00 service drew anywhere between 175 and 225 (again, fairly straightforward and expected for a parish of this size).

The 11:15 was harder for me to figure out. It had an attendance similar to the 7:45, but was a totally different liturgy. We followed Morning Prayer, Rite I, and adapted some choral preces and responses for the opening sentences and suffrages. The choir sang one full canticle (Jubilate, Te Deum, Benedicite, etc.), and otherwise led the congregation in singing hymns.

Significantly, from the moment I arrived at Redeemer, the 11:15 was described to me as vestigial service, one that didn't really fit into the overall mission of the parish. There were a few reasons for this: 1) It didn't really fit the character of contemporary Episcopal Church 2) it required the investment of substantial human and financial resources (several of the singers who lead worship at 11:15 are paid professionals 3) The service didn't have an obvious market niche: the 7:45 is for older folks and early risers; the 9:00 is well-suited to families with young children; the 11:15 is "the island of misfit toys."

Why did we still have it? Two reasons: 1) A major part of Redeemer's identity in the 70s, 80s, and 90s was shaped by a legendary and tyrannical rector who refused to abide by the "Eucharist every Sunday" rule until just before his departure in the early 90s. Obstinacy about Morning Prayer, in other words, is part of the parish's DNA. 2) It was explained to me that a handful of major pledgers preferred Morning Prayer and were likely to leave the parish if we ever got rid of it. For the staff and many of the lay leaders of Redeemer, our 11:15 service was an albatross: we really wanted to get rid of it, but worried about the political ramifications of the decision. It's worth noting that our thinking about the Choral Matins bought into the prevailing assumptions about Morning Prayer, namely that it is an object of nostalgia and has little relevance for today's church.

Then, something interesting happened. We noticed that, in addition to the "misfit toys" who showed up on a weekly basis, we regularly got a small, but respectable contingent of newcomers at the 11:15 service. Surprisingly, at least initially, a good handful of these newcomers were college students (Bryn Mawr College is about a half mile from Redeemer). Most interestingly, the vast majority of these newcomers had limited experience of church prior to attending the 11:15 service at Redeemer.

Our initial reaction was to panic. These newcomers were coming to the *wrong* service! They weren't getting the full "Redeemer experience"! They weren't even getting Communion! We worried that these new folks would be dissatisfied with their church experience based on their attendance at the 11:15 service.

But fascinatingly, when we talked to these newcomers, they *loved* the 11:15. The more I've thought about it, the less surprising this has seemed. We couldn't see it initially, because of the way we thought about that service as staff and lay leaders: an albatross, something that had to be ended for the good of the community. But if you think about it, Redeemer's Choral Matins service and Morning Prayer in general is the ideal service for someone who is unfamiliar, not

only with the Episcopal Church, but with the Church in general. In the parlance of certain streams of the Christian tradition, it's a seeker service.

Pew Study released in April:

Four in five American adults say they “believe in God.” Of these believers, 70 percent say they believe in the God of the Judeo-Christian Bible, while 30 percent say they believe in another higher or spiritual power. (According to the survey's creators, the survey didn't profile enough members of minority religious groups, such as Muslims or Hindus, to allow a more detailed analysis of their beliefs.)

But, surprisingly, almost half of the Americans who say they don't believe in God also say they do believe in another higher power or spiritual force at work in the universe. Among the religiously unaffiliated — also known as the religious “nones” — nearly three-quarters (72 percent) believe in some form of higher power, and 17 percent believe in God as described in the Bible. And among self-described “atheists,” a full 18 percent believe in some form of spiritual higher power.

Among self-described Christians, the data shows a similarly complicated spread of theological beliefs. For example, among self-described Christians, a full 20 percent believe in a higher power but don't believe in the God described in the Bible. That number goes up to 26 percent for mainline Protestants and 28 percent for Catholics. (The phrase “described in the Bible” was used by Pew without further clarification.)

Recent research by the Barna Group: 67 percent of unchurched people own a Bible.

One of the things that “megachurches” understand: many, if not most of the people who come to church for the first time are not “church shopping.” They might be coming to church for the very first time.

Imagine being new, not to just a church, but to church generally. Everything you know about the church comes from the culture. Some of it is positive, some of it is negative. You know about some of the terms, some of the characters, some of the rituals, but you're not particularly confident about them. But something has compelled you to attend your local Episcopal Church. Maybe you saw Michael Curry preach at the royal wedding. Maybe a favorite aunt was an Episcopalian. Maybe it just happens to be the church closest to your house. Whatever your rationale for showing up, you are intimidated, as human beings are bound to be in unfamiliar situations. Now imagine that you happened upon your standard Rite II Eucharist. People seem to know a lot of responses by heart, and you can't find them anywhere, or you don't care to look. At one point, everybody starts circling around and shaking hands, and you're not sure if you're allowed to leave your seat or not. Toward the end of the service, everybody starts marching up to altar rail, and you wonder, “Is this that Communion thing? Am I allowed to go up? What happens if I do it wrong?” After that experience, how likely are you to return? Maybe you want to find out more, or maybe you don't want to expend all that mental energy. Compare this to the experience of Choral Matins at Redeemer. There aren't a ton of responses for the congregation.

The choir seems to do most of the heavy lifting. The sermon is usually the best of the day, since it's the third time that it's been preached. There aren't too many mystifying rituals that seem destined to confound newcomers. Morning Prayer is what I like to call a low threshold service: it doesn't make people do a lot of extra work to have a worshipful experience; they are less likely to be distracted by their unfamiliarity with the tradition.

When we came to this recognition at Redeemer, it changed our approach to the service of Choral Matins. We made sure we had a newcomer greeter assigned to the service, which we never thought to do before, since this was the service that needed to be ended. Most importantly, we changed our attitude toward this service. Instead of an albatross, we thought of the service as an opportunity, a way to welcome people who might not feel as welcome at one of the other services.

### Obstacles into opportunities

Now, I don't mean to suggest for a minute that we need to go back to making Morning Prayer our principal service of the week in the Episcopal Church. Nor do I mean to imply that all of you should go back to your communities and start Morning Prayer services in the interest of hospitality. Rather, what I'd like you to think about is this: what are the albatrosses in your communities? What are those things that everybody would like to get rid of, but can't for one reason or another? Is there a way of shifting the attitude about those albatrosses?