

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Fall Back to Strength

For those of you who were not here last week, or didn't read my sermon on our parish web page, I spoke about the state of our parish and reflected on some of the results of our recent survey. I noted that we have lost some of our steam of late, and spoke about some of the new possibilities that have arisen because of the ministry of our Family Ministry Coordinator. This week I want to address first the question of our Sunday morning schedule, and second the finding of our survey of a strong hunger for Spiritual Growth.

On Easter Sunday in 2005 we officially launched our new service, the Family Eucharist at 9:15 on Sunday mornings. It was specifically targeted at attracting families with school-aged children. It was not intended to be what many churches call a "Contemporary Service". It was intended to be an Episcopal service that was as easily accessible as possible for anyone from a different Christian tradition or with no church background at all. The music and style of worship was intended to be both traditional and less formal, with an emphasis on what I call 'old time religion' hymns. As we were developing the service, there were many helpful suggestions from many people. To most of these suggestions I said politely and without irony, "This service is not for you," meaning that it was for those who were not yet a part of Christ Church. The two services that existed when I arrived in 2000 remained unaltered, except for starting time. The new service was for seekers, visitors, newcomers. By not making the style of the new service radically different from the existing ones, I was trying to avoid the kind of culture shock that can happen when a parish goes in a whole new direction with a new service. Often the new style

attracts people who are different in temperament, background, and even worldview than the existing congregation. I didn't want to set us up for conflict in the future.

As I noted last week, the switch to three services on Sunday from two was a somewhat radical move at the time. We were in no way bursting at the seams, but we were trying to create space for growth. We spread our resources thin hoping that growth would provide more people to lighten the load. When there were questions or concerns mentioned about the stress this new schedule put on the parish, I pushed us all to keep up the difficult pace. When people asked to go back to two services at least during the summer, I said, "No, this is the new normal. We need to get used to it." When people said that the community of our parish was fractured because we were split between the two later services, I said, "That's right. That is part of the reality of being a three service parish." I pushed, and pushed, and pushed because we were in the midst of a very difficult transition in our size and structure, a transition that most parishes try and fail to make several times before they are successful, if they ever are successful.

Five years later, the reality of our parish is quite different. We can no longer see ourselves as a growing parish, quite the opposite. If our attendance numbers didn't really warrant three services then, they do so even less now. As we went into the survey this spring, I saw two possible ways forward. First, we would take an honest look at the 9:15 Family Eucharist and realize that it had not achieved its goal of attracting families. It would require a complete overhaul, something completely different. Or the second choice was simply going back to two services. After studying the results of our survey, and discussing them with the vestry and wardens, I see that there are two problems with the idea of remaking our 9:15 service: 1) We have even fewer people and less energy now than we did when we launched it, and 2) We now have a group of people with a vested interest in how the service is currently. It would be

doubly difficult for them to change. So after much prayer and discussion, I have decided that in September we are going to stay with two services. They will be at 8:00 and 10:30, with a full hour of Christian education in between from 9:15 to 10:15.

Now, what will the style of those services be? The 8:00 service I have no intention of changing. It will remain Rite I with no music. That is our smallest service in terms of attendance, but I would argue the one that is most unique and serves a very particular congregation. What about the 10:30 service? That is a tough one. If we went with one or the other styles of either 9:15 or 11:00, we would create winners and losers. I don't want to do that. We could alternate between the two styles week by week based on some pattern, but I suspect that would be somewhat jarring and unsatisfying for most. We could try to blend the two styles together and create a hybrid. The risk there is that by trying to please everyone, we please no one.

I don't really have the answer to the question about style for the new late service. Here's what I intend to do. I will work with our music professionals, a very talented group: Hannah Massey, Kristine Massey-Clifford, and Lydia Pozzato. Together with them, and input from the two choirs, our Worship Commission, and I hope from all of you, we will try to create something new, something that honors the elements of music and style that we have, but also is open to creative change. I wish I could tell you what that service will be like, but I honestly don't have a clear vision for it yet. I do know, however, that we can't just keep doing the same thing and expect different results. I anticipate a period of experimentation, looking for constant feedback from you, trying new things musically and liturgically, and always with an eye toward what will be attractive to potential new members.

I expect there will be those who tell me that they are happy with the way things are. In fact the survey did not show great dissatisfaction with the music. The truth is, I am happy with the way things are. But I am afraid that change is definitely called for, for all the reasons noted above. I don't see the change back to two services as a failure, but rather as a reasonable adaptation to the changing conditions we are facing. I think of it as a kind of strategic retreat, a falling back to a position of strength. I expect a renewed sense of community as we are reunited with other members from whom we have been isolated because of the switch to three services. We will have more people in each service, giving us a stronger feel –a more robust spirit of worship. The day may well come when we have the need to go back to three services because of having so many people. I pray that day comes, but for now we will be a two service parish once again. The new times, again 8:00 and 10:30, which were the two most popular times in our survey, will go into effect in September. The full hour for Christian education in between those services will hopefully help us with another issue raised in the survey, the desire for more Spiritual Growth.

Now I don't know exactly what people meant when they overwhelmingly checked "Spiritual Growth" as something they want/need. But to me it means something pretty specific. To me spiritual growth means that we grow in our commitment to Christ, to love, follow, and serve him, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This growth, to me, naturally sends us out into the world to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, and to serve the needs of the world in his name.

How does one grow spiritually? I believe that the only way to grow spiritually is to commit oneself to a spiritual discipline. It is no coincidence that the words discipline and disciple have the same root. Your personal spiritual discipline may look different from mine, but I think there are five crucial elements to be included: 1) Worship and prayer, both public and

private; 2) Learning, especially the regular study of Holy Scripture, as well as other spiritually edifying material; 3) Active engagement in Christian stewardship, including working toward a personal tithe; 4) A commitment to Christian community, meaning a willingness to be held spiritually accountable; and 5) Living out your special calling of ministry, using the gifts God has given you to glorify God and to serve God's people.

That's my take on spiritual growth. I intend to take you all at your word, and will focus on these areas in sermons, and in adult education –on Sunday as well as in Confirmation/Inquirers Class, and other seasonal or occasional programs. I appreciate this opportunity to refocus as a parish, to refocus our communal worship into two Sunday services instead of three, and to refocus ourselves on developing our own faith and commitment to Christ. I expect that God will bless us in this effort.

We certainly have many challenges facing us as a parish, and even as a denomination. Now, as always, but especially now, what is required is our renewed commitment to our own spiritual growth and to the overall mission of Christ's Church. Join me in working and praying for the spread of the Good News of God in Christ.

Amen.