

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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### Worship: Vitamin “W”

Last week I invited everyone to join in a new focus on spiritual growth in our parish. I see this quest for spiritual growth as an opportunity for us all to grow as individuals and as a congregation. The impetus for this focus comes from our recent parish survey in which ‘spiritual growth’ was by far the top thing identified as a want/need. Also near the top of the list were ‘prayer’, ‘Bible study’, and ‘learning Episcopal Church traditions’. Near the end of my sermon last Sunday I identified five things that I believe are essentials for anyone’s spiritual growth. They are: 1) Worship and prayer, both public and private; 2) Learning, especially the regular study of Holy Scriptures, 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.

These five things are not really distinct or separate. They are rather parts of a whole, all interrelated and interdependent. Surely there are other ways to break down a system of spiritual discipline; there have been many throughout Christian history. This is just my humble attempt to give some form and content to the expressed desire for spiritual growth.

Starting today with worship and prayer, I intend to take these five aspects of a spiritual life and preach on them over five Sundays. My intention is not to say all there is to be said on each subject, but simply to make a case for some attention to each aspect of our spiritual lives as individuals and members of a congregation. I hope that by being clear about how I see the

subject of spiritual growth, we will have some common understandings, some common vocabulary, to discuss how Christ Church can nurture you on your path of following Christ. I hope that this provides us a starting point for a discussion that goes on indefinitely.

So why is worship and prayer important? And why should we be concerned about doing both publicly as well as privately? Well, I may be *preaching to the choir*, so to speak, as you are all present at a worship service on Sunday morning, but allow me to make a case.

Worship, above everything else, is what defines us as Christians. Worship is absolutely central to our identity. We are a worshipping community; we worship God. That is who we are because that is what we do. Everything else the Church does, missionary work, social outreach, fellowship, even education, could be done by some other organization or institution. The worship of God is what makes us unique.

We understand who we are in relation to God through our worship. The first of the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me,” tells us the proper relation between us and God. God expects worship from us. More than that, God draws worship from us by God’s very being. God’s creation around us inspires wonder and awe. God’s involvement in our lives inspires thankfulness and humility. And God’s decisive act of love through his Son Jesus gives us the particular story that shapes our worship. This particularity –the incarnation of God in Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection– is reenacted in our worship. It is through that reenactment that we become the People of God, the Body of Christ. As we receive the Body of Christ in Holy Communion, we are incorporated into the Body, the Church, and Christ’s Body is incorporated into us giving us spiritual nourishment. Therefore, worship not only defines our relationship with God. It defines our relationship with one another as well.

We are the People of God, members of Christ’s Body. As members of one body, we cannot say to one another, “I have no need of you.” If the Body is diminished by one member, we are all diminished. As members of one Body, we are members of one another. As St. Paul points out we each play different roles within the Body based on the gifts God gives us and activates with the Holy Spirit, but none of us is more important than the other. The body needs all of its members to be whole.

Participating in regular public worship is the cornerstone of any spiritual life. It reminds us who we are, and whose we are. It reminds us that it isn’t always about us. And it recharges our spiritual batteries to go back out into the world to be Christ’s representatives. Bishop Ihloff, when he was here in February, spoke of the Church as a “filling station”. I love that metaphor. Just as our car needs to stop in a gas station every once in a while to get “filled up”, or else it runs the risk of running dry and rolling to a quiet stop along the highway, so we need to come back periodically to be filled with God’s grace through the proclamation of the Gospel, and the spiritual food and drink of the blessed sacrament, or else we run the risk of running dry, of losing our way, of getting our priorities out of whack, of crashing and burning, in a spiritual sense.

Now many will say, “Yeah, but I can feel just as close to God when I’m on the golf course or out fishing.” The best response to that I have ever heard is, “Sure, but when has a fish ever told you that your sins are forgiven?” I’m not saying that God isn’t present in other places, in the beauty of nature, or wherever you find a sense of God’s presence. Rather am saying that there is something special about gathering as God’s people to worship. The discipline of our liturgy leads us to do the spiritual work we may not have chosen to do, such as reflecting on our sins and humbly asking for God’s forgiveness. Not to mention, thinking of trying to forgive others as we have been forgiven. Likewise the seasons and holidays of the Church year, take us

on an annual journey through the life and ministry of Jesus. From Advent’s hopeful expectation to Holy Week’s gut-wrenching contemplation of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane or hanging on the cross we are challenged to reflect on many different aspects of Our Lord’s life. Each different focus gives us reason to work on a different aspect of our spiritual life. Just as the lectionary, the three year cycle of readings we follow, forces us to hear and deal with a broad spectrum of the Bible.

Lest we believe that all the reasons for coming to church are for us personally --for *me* to get *my* spiritual batteries charged, for *me* to do *my* own spiritual work-- we must remember that our presence here is for each other too. Each of you is important as a child of God, as a member of Christ’s body, as a member of this parish. Our fellowship is lessened when you are not here. Your presence, your gifts and talents, they are needed here. You are needed here. You never know what kind of a blessing you will bring into someone else’s life just by showing up.

And when we are dismissed from our corporate worship with the words, “Go in peace to love and serve the lord,” and we go our separate ways, we cannot think that we are finished with worship and prayer for the week until we return to church on Sunday. Prayer needs to be an integral part of our lives. St. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. Easier said than done, but we can try to develop our own personal discipline for prayer.

We teach our children to pray before meals and at bedtime. Those are both excellent times to pray. I am a fan of the Celtic Christian traditions. They had prayers for everything you do throughout the day, from lighting a fire, to sweeping the floor. What would your day be like if everything you did was accompanied by prayer? For most of us it is easiest to take certain times for prayer and worship in our day. Whether that special time is for you early in the morning, over your lunch hour, or at night before bed, I think it is helpful to establish a routine.

Of course pick a time that works with your lifestyle and regular routine. Once you have chosen when, stick to it. Make it a habit. Work at it.

When you pray, it may be helpful to use a particular form of prayer. There is nothing wrong with memorized prayers or written prayers. Take time to pray for yourself, and for the needs of others by name and as specifically as you can. If you are not into the more formal rituals, just open your heart and pray. You don't even need to use words. Just turn your attention to God and open yourself up. Another aspect of prayer that sometimes people forget about is just to listen. Listen, expecting God to have a special word for you, an answer to a question, or possibly a challenge to you to do something.

There are resources available to help you with your personal prayer life. I have put together a sheet with a list of things in the Book of Common Prayer that may be helpful to as you develop your prayer discipline. It is available in the back of the church. So far I have just been talking about praying alone. It is always good to pray with others too, with family at meal times, or with your spouse, or maybe you have a friend you can pray with.

A final word on worship and prayer. When God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, he set up a rhythm for our lives, and commanded us to follow it. Christians may have shifted the Sabbath day from the seventh to the first day of the week when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, but we are still expected to follow that rhythm. We Americans know that for every work week we deserve a weekend, but the concept of the Sabbath has slipped out of our culture. It is up to us to keep the Sabbath holy. After six days, we really need to take the time to stop the busyness of our lives and spend some time worshiping God. It is crucial to our well being. And it is what we were created to do.