

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service

Session 21 – The Eucharistic Action, Step I: Taking

This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.

Follow the action. In our exploration of the Holy Communion half of the Eucharist which we celebrate each week, we have noted several things. First, this half of the service is more about symbols than words. The bread and wine are the center of this symbolism, but as we shall see they symbolize us as well as Christ. Second, this half of the service is about action: something happens. Third, this action is one of transformation. We further noted that while we use a number of Eucharistic prayers, all of them have a common pattern, what is known as the “fourfold action” of the Eucharist. In all the prayers, the Elements of bread and wine move through four steps: 1) Take (take to the Altar); 2) Bless (give thanks and invoke the power of the Holy Spirit); 3) Break (symbolic of sacrifice and the Crucifixion); and 4) Share (distribution of Communion and dismissal to service in the world). As the Elements of bread and wine move through these steps, so do we as worshipers. This morning we explore the first of these steps, “Taking.” We will explore the other three in successive weeks.

Preparation of the Table. This first, Taking, step is often referred to as the Offertory, but actually in the Eucharistic prayers the offertory action occurs later on. So it is better called the Preparation of the Table. Bread and wine are brought from the congregation to the Altar, together with alms (church word for money). The priest, aided by eucharistic ministers, arranges these gifts on the Altar. It used to be customary at this point for the congregation to sing what was called “the Doxology,” a verse from a 1674 hymn written by an English bishop, Thomas Ken. Doxology means words of praise, and singing this verse developed when Morning Prayer was the principal service on Sundays and bringing the money offering to the Altar was the symbolic offering in that service. While the Doxology was beloved by many, its use at the Preparation of the Table distorts the pattern of the service because in the Eucharist the doxological moment occurs at the very end of the Eucharistic prayer.

Symbolism of the bread and wine in the Taking step. In this first step of the Eucharistic action, the bread and wine represent *us*, “our selves, our souls and bodies,” as the Rite I prayer has it. We place our selves as a gift to God upon his Altar. As an optional prayer over the bread and wine puts it: “through your [God’s] goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made / wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands.” We bring to the Table what we have made with what God has given us. And God receives it, as symbolic of our thanksgiving.