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Dear Friends,

The past fall we set about to find a good balance between two essential elements of our Sunday experience: **holiness** and **fellowship**. God is characterized by holiness and holiness is, by definition, separated from normal, ordinary, daily life and behavior. Take off your shoes, God says to Moses, for you are standing on holy ground. (Exodus 3:5)

Holiness can be experienced in beautiful and majestic settings. Isaiah's vision in the temple (Isaiah 6) and John's visions of the heavenly city and throne room in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 4 and many other places in that book) are two examples of seeing holiness in the extraordinary. There is certainly a kind of holiness which may also be seen in the ordinary and the humble. As we are still in the Christmas season as this goes out, we remember that God comes to us in a stable, and if we have been paying attention, it may be that we have experienced holiness at home, in a hospital or nursing home, or at work, and, taking a lead from our hymn for All Saints' Day, maybe even "in shops or at tea."

Our custom at church is to set aside spaces (our worship space); objects (such as the linens and vessels at the altar); and even people (clergy) to be especially dedicated to seeking and honoring God and to helping us to remember that we are not God and what we see is not the limit of God's scope. Holiness seems to go with setting things, times, and spaces apart from the ordinary and dedicating them to God. With a puppy, or a young child, it sometimes takes a little time to train them to look at where you are pointing, rather than at your hand. So also with holy things and clergy—their purpose is to direct our attention to God and not to draw it to themselves.

**Transition and Decompression** To facilitate the transition on Sunday mornings from the ordinary life we have at home to coming before the holiness of God in church, this fall we have sought to be more intentional about structuring a gradual transition from the realm of the ordinary to the realm of the holy. Most of us arrive in church on Sunday morning from full and busy lives. This fall, I have invited you to think of the walk down the corridor as a way to leave that busyness outside and gradually walk into a space set aside for holiness.

When scuba divers return to the surface after a significant period in the depths, they have to ascend gradually so that the gases that have built up in their blood may be gradually expelled. Without that

time of decompression, the transition from the deep to the surface can be seriously crippling or even fatal. As our bodies cannot always make transitions instantaneously, neither can our minds or our spirits. We have all made a considerable effort to get to church; we have all come in the hope of nurturing and deepening our relationship with God.

We have come, as we articulate near the opening of Morning Prayer, into “the presence of Almighty God our heavenly Father, to set forth his praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things that are necessary for our life and our salvation (BCP, p. 79).” That introduction to the Confession continues, “And so that we may prepare ourselves in heart and mind to worship him, let us kneel in silence, and with penitent and obedient hearts confess our sins, that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy.” Preparation takes time and intentional effort.

The Communion service begins with a similar assumption as we ask for God’s help in our preparations as we pray, “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name (BCP, p. 323).”

Both of these prayers share the assumption that we come distracted, unfocused, and maybe even unclear about why we are there. Our liturgy is not defined by our expectations or even our desires or conscious needs on any particular occasion. The liturgy exists to offer an encounter with God. There may well be other things that happen as a result of that quest, but to seek the secondary without the primary runs the risk of leaving one feeling dissatisfied or even cheated.

**Architecture and the spiritual journey** The corridor in the Parish House was designed with the intent of supporting, even before you get into the liturgy, the transition from the ordinary to the holy. As you make your way to the narthex ahead of you, take in the gardens through the large clear glass arched windows on your right; see the Chapel and its window showing Jesus surrounded by three generations on your left; note the continuity of the black tile pavement into the narthex, and note how the red carpet takes over as the dominant element once you go through the wide doorway into the narthex and leave the Parish House.

If you remember, look to your left as you walk into the narthex to see the names of those whose ashes are in the Memorial Garden. Look ahead to see the sallies and ropes for the bells and think about the occasions when we ring them all. Our continuing fellowship with those who have entered their larger life with God (symbolized by the bronze plaque with the names) and the transcendent, pervasive beauty and power of God (evoked by the sound of the ringing bells) are both reminders that when we are in church, we are in a place which is different and which represents a reality even more different from that with which we are most familiar. You may leave on your shoes, but remember that you are walking on holy ground.

We ring bells, normally two, ten minutes before the beginning of the liturgy, and we light the candles on the altar at about the same time. These outward practices are further ways by which we seek to mark the transition from ordinary time to the holy. It is to support this necessary and valuable time of transition that we have encouraged the keeping of a respectful and holy silence as one approaches the nave, and especially as one enters into it.

As you walk in, continue on the red carpet down the aisle into the church and take your place in a pew. Even the style of seating here is different from what we normally use. As you may have observed, it is not designed primarily for comfort. Many modern churches in other traditions have adopted theater-style seating. Pews are more communal than individual, they remind us of our past,

and they make it clear that personal comfort is not our first priority. Many people kneel after they have entered and take that time for brief, private prayer, holding up before God a special concern, a hope, a thanksgiving. That prayer on entry is another way to move forward in that transition to the holy. There will probably be music, the prelude, and let it take you further into a different place. Windows line the perimeter of the room, but they look out into past scenes from the life of Jesus, not into daily life outside our building. They are literally windows into a different world.

We step aside from the ordinariness of daily life into holiness so that we might be better equipped to step back into it, with our minds uncluttered, our vision cleared, and our souls uplifted. “The Lord is in his holy temple,” declares one of the Opening Sentences from Morning Prayer, “let all the earth keep silence before him.” (BCP, p. 40; Habakkuk 2:20) When God called Moses aside to the burning bush, it was for the purpose of sending him back right into the middle of complex politics, economics, and ethnic conflict. We leave the ordinary and come into the holy to remind ourselves that God is God of the ordinary, too, regardless of what we may hear, see, or experience outside of church. We come here to get our bearings, to be reminded of the true values and our true purpose and identity. Without holiness, our lives, little by little, are taken over by our environment which then incorporates us into itself. But we were created so that Christ might dwell in us, and we in him (BCP, p. 336). Our union, our communion, our identity is to be taken from God, not from our culture.

A few minutes before the service the choir assembles its procession in front of the parish office, and one of the clergy offers a prayer asking God to guide all those who will help lead the worship that morning as they prepare to undertake the holy work of coming before God. That prayer is an essential preparation, something like a surgeon scrubbing before surgery, and we maintain silence from its conclusion until we begin the opening hymn. As we are making our way into the narthex, I often think of those verses from early in Morning Prayer, “O Lord, open thou our lips, and our mouth shall show forth thy praise.” (BCP p. 42) In the monasteries in the Middle Ages (and more recently), this verse was often used in the morning to break the night-long keeping of silence. The implication was that the first and highest purpose of speech is to praise God, and that as we offer a percentage of the first fruits of the harvest (or of our income, for those of us who are not farmers) to God as a sign of recognizing that everything comes from God, so also our first speech of the day is an offering to God as well. Unless God opens our lips, we remain silent and mute. And so if we have the gift of speech, our first use of it is to honor and thank the donor.

As I have mentioned above, both of the liturgies we use most commonly, Morning Prayer and the Eucharist, have prayers at the beginning to assist in our transition from the ordinary to the holy. It would be asking a lot to expect those prayers to do that work in its entirety. If you think of those prayers as you walk in, when we come to actually hearing them perhaps they might mark a conclusion to our time of preparation, rather than the occasion into which we try to compress all of that complicated work.

Having sought God’s assistance in setting aside distractions, we go about our proper business.

**But also Fellowship** Holiness is not all that happens at St. Elizabeth’s on Sunday mornings; we also come to share in fellowship, those greetings, conversations, and shared tasks and projects which transform an assembly into a community. I suspect fellowship comes more naturally to us than holiness, so perhaps less needs to be said about it.

**Breathe in, breathe out** We conclude most of our liturgies with a formal dismissal: as God draws us into holiness so God also sends us out as agents of peace, loving and serving God in all persons. The journey in and the journey out are like breathing—each is essential for health.

As the prelude assists in the transition to worship at the beginning of the liturgy, the postlude, often more exuberant, is part of what supports us as we “go forth into the world.” The postlude normally follows the closing hymn and dismissal. Those wishing to listen undistracted to the postlude may remain in their place or come forward; those headed to Coffee Hour may make their way out through the narthex to the Parish House. We have moved the clergy greeting station a little further down the corridor and into the Parish House in the hope that conversation there will not distract those who remain in the nave for the postlude. Since I am the principal threat of that distraction, I welcome being reminded to be a little more quiet. When our greetings coincide with the Church School Eucharist in the Chapel, we need to be especially mindful of our surroundings.

**St. Elizabeth’s, Assisi, and Omaha Beach** Though becoming quieter on entering church is not a radical change from the practice of many, raising the profile of holiness and silence at the beginning of the liturgy is a new emphasis for us. My hope is that we will grow into this without a lot of “shushing” before the service begins. My sense is that as we understand and model the silence before the service, its value will become more apparent and it will be more commonly practiced. If someone coming to St. Elizabeth’s for the first time were to be greeted by stern, censorious looks and admonitions to be more quiet, I wonder if they would ever come back. But if they were to walk into a place of peace and tranquility, I suspect they would catch on fairly quickly.

On my last sabbatical, Susan and I visited the lower church of the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi in Italy. As we passed through the space, looking at the frescoes and all of the elements of a powerfully holy space, a security guard over a loud speaker system uttered the word “silencio” about every 30 seconds. I understand the motive, but the method was definitely counterproductive: it did not make the space feel more holy to me.

A few weeks before, we had been at the American Cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach in Normandy, and there everyone, and not just our group, walked about in silence, and, when they spoke, it was briefly and in hushed tones. There were no signs or no announcements: we all knew we were on holy ground and knew what behavior was appropriate. The powerful dignity of the design, the scale of the setting, the care given to maintenance, and, most of all, the occasion it commemorated and the lost lives honored made the Cemetery truly holy ground. And as the solemn setting evoked a response of deep respect from the visitors, so our restraint and quiet conferred on the place an aura of holy distinction.

Later, at dinner in Bayeux, conversation was lively and robust. There was a time and place for holiness and so also for fellowship, and each in some way complemented and enhanced the other.

My sense is that we are well on our way to living into this balance at St. Elizabeth’s. May we continue to grow both in holiness and fellowship through our time together in the parish so that we might grow in our love of God and our love of neighbor, the elements Jesus defined as the heart of the balanced, healthy, and whole human life.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett  
*Rector*