



Walk in Love

Episcopal Beliefs & Practices

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Introduction

Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 376

Every Sunday in Episcopal churches across the world, people gather for Holy Eucharist. We all pray using *The Book of Common Prayer* so we hear and use many of the same scriptures over and over. One of the verses that we often hear week after week is, “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.”

This verse is used in the offertory sentence, which comes just as the people’s offerings are collected, and is a way of pointing people toward the sacrament of Holy Eucharist that we are about to receive. We are encouraged to make connections between our Sunday prayers and our daily lives. We are encouraged to be generous in our offerings as God has been generous to us.

While there are nine choices for offertory sentences, the most popular choice—by far—is the one in whose honor this book is named. The words come from the fifth chapter of Ephesians, Paul’s lovely letter about how Christ’s sacrificial life and love is meant to shape and form us all.

Why is this offertory sentence the most popular choice?

We can’t say for sure, but maybe it’s the first three words. Walk. In. Love. These words embody action, just as the Christian life is about action and movement. They emphasize love. The phrase paints a clear picture, a vision of how we ought to love and move. But maybe there’s more. The rest of the sentence gets real. To love “as Christ loved us and gave himself for us” is to be all in. This kind of love goes way beyond nice. It is all-consuming. Christ-like love, like Jesus’ very life, is “an offering and sacrifice to God.”

Christ-like love is not about us; it is about God and our neighbors. It is impossibly generous. In fact, this type of love is only possible by God’s grace. We’ll never manage to love this way on our own. And this is where our liturgies come into play. To see bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ is to behold God’s grace, to see radical transformation. Taking part in the sacraments helps us to see God’s grace at work in the world around us. Seeing God’s grace at work trains us to open our hearts and our eyes to God’s action in the sacraments.

For Episcopalians—Anglican Christians—prayer, belief, and life itself are inextricably related. Right belief helps our prayer and our lives. Daily prayer shapes our belief and guides our lives. A sacrificial, loving life feeds our prayer time and transforms our faith from passive to active.

This book is about walking in love. For Christians, this journey begins at the baptismal font, is nourished by the

Suggested Offertory Sentences

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and make good your vows to the Most High. *Psalm 50:14*

Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; bring offerings and come into his courts. *Psalm 96:8*

Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God. *Ephesians 5:2*

I appeal to you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. *Romans 12:1*

If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. *Matthew 5:23, 24*

Through Christ let us continually offer to God the sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his Name. But do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. *Hebrews 13:15, 16*

O Lord our God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power; because you have created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. *Revelation 4:11*

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty. For everything in heaven and on earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom, and you are exalted as head over all. *1 Chronicles 29:11*

Let us with gladness present the offerings and oblations of our life and labor to the Lord.

These can be found in The Book of Common Prayer, page 376.

riches of the church, and is lived out in the world beyond the walls of churches. You can see an artistic hint of this idea on the cover of the book. You see the inside of a church, but instead of a back wall, the church mystically opens up to a lovely path through a forest. Our churches invite us to follow

Jesus into the world. And of course, our faith invites us to bring our world into the church.

We hope you find in this book not only an overview of the beliefs and practices of the Episcopal Church but also a foundation for a life that is guided and nourished by the church and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Christian Faith

Some readers of this book will be new to the Christian faith. Others will be veterans but may wonder about the authors and what they believe. If you want a more comprehensive view of the basics of the Christian faith, we also co-wrote *Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus* (Forward Movement, 2015). But for now, we offer a very basic summary of the faith so that you can see our perspective—or maybe get the lay of the land if you are new to the faith.

Of course, we accept the teaching of the ancient creeds of the church (see Chapter 13). Since we are both priests, we have also gladly promised to teach the doctrine of the church as it is set out in *The Book of Common Prayer*. And we take scripture very seriously, agreeing in our ordination vows that the Bible contains all things necessary to salvation. Perhaps it is helpful for us to share our faith as a story—not our story but the story of scripture.

In the beginning, before there was anything else, there was God's love. God brought forth everything, including this planet where we live, creating light and dark, land and sea, animals and plants, and finally making people. God gave us our freedom—the ability to choose right or wrong and whether to even follow God—and we squandered our gift. We chose to walk away from God, preferring selfishness and fear.

God sent prophets to remind us of God's way. From time to time, we listened to the prophets, and we remembered who we are and how we are meant to live. Each time, we eventually rejected the prophets and their message, always returning to selfishness and fear.

Finally, God's own son was sent into the world. Jesus Christ was born like any other human, tiny and vulnerable, in the middle of nowhere in a backwater region of the Roman Empire. The most important birth in history might seem to some to be insignificant and ordinary. We learn a lot about the God we worship when we see that God chose to enter our world not in power and might, but in vulnerability.

Jesus Christ was Perfect Love enfleshed. Jesus showed us who God is and how we are to love. Jesus' love is expansive: He especially loved the unlovable and people at the margins of society. Jesus' love is honest: He always told the truth. Jesus' love is invitational: He wanted to draw people into his way of life and love.

Then as now, the powers of the world feared and hated Perfect Love. This kind of love is a threat to empires and all powerful people. The love of Christ cares about people, but it cares nothing for power, for might, or for prestige. The authorities in Jesus' day tried to extinguish Perfect Love by killing Jesus. They put him on a cross to die.

Jesus died. But on the third day, as God had promised, Jesus was raised to new life. Jesus wasn't kind-of dead, kind-of raised to a sort-of new life. No, we believe that Jesus was stone-cold dead, and God the Father raised him completely to new life. We celebrate this new life at Easter, but we celebrate more than the power of something that seems impossible. We celebrate that in the raising of Jesus to new life, we see God's love is stronger than death, stronger than fear, and stronger than anything that can happen to us in this earthly life.

Jesus soon returned to dwell with his Father in heaven, but before he left, he promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to abide with the church and lead people into all truth. Fifty days after that first Easter, when the disciples were gathered to celebrate their Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the church in all its diversity, from many nations and peoples. In that act, God showed us all that the church is for everyone of every culture.

The New Testament presents several letters and documents from the time of the early church. In these letters, Saint Paul and others write to fledgling Christian communities that are trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus. This is where we are in the story. Like those early Christians, we are trying to figure out how to follow Jesus in our own imperfect way. Fortunately, we have the Holy Spirit, God's abiding presence, who can lead us into all truth.

Being a Christian is not meant to be easy, and no one who reads the gospels could think otherwise. The way of Jesus can be a source of profoundly deep joy, as we are offered a way to live as God hopes: for love alone. Being a follower of Jesus means that we will "take up our cross" and follow him, that we will choose the difficult path at times, but it is not easy to overcome our intrinsic fears and selfishness. Being a follower of Jesus means we will proclaim Jesus Christ to all people, teaching them about his commandments.

Most of this book is an exploration of what it means to be an Episcopal or Anglican Christian. We believe there is not just one way to be a Christian, but we are head-over-heels in love with the Anglican way of following Jesus. You will read more in the chapters to come, but the shortest version is that Anglican Christianity is a way of following Jesus that is rooted in the Bible and the sacraments of the church, united by shared ways of praying. We will unpack that in the chapters to come.

In This Book

After sharing what we see as the Anglican or Episcopal understanding of prayer (Chapter 1), we move through the sacraments of the church (Chapters 2-8). We spend a bit more time on baptism and eucharist, since they are the primary sacraments. We turn next to how the church keeps time, including daily cycles (Chapter 9) and yearly cycles (Chapter 10). We look very closely at Holy Week, the most important week of the year for a Christian (Chapter 11). And we look at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, funerals, and burial (Chapter 12).

Because our faith is not just about liturgy but also about beliefs, we explore some basic teachings. We discuss the ancient creeds (Chapter 13) and how we read the Bible (Chapter 14). The idea of salvation or redemption only makes sense if we talk about sin and grace, so we do that in Chapter 15. This section wraps up with a chapter on prayer (Chapter 16).

The church itself is an important part of our faith, so we spend time exploring the community of people who follow Jesus. Chapter 17 is an overview of church, while Chapter 18 explores how we Episcopalians organize ourselves. Chapter 19 reminds us that the church is not just the living holy ones but also those who have gone before us, the holy ones who dwell with God as saints. And Chapter 20 considers how we are all called to follow Jesus in particular ways.

The next three chapters look at how we might care for God's creation (Chapter 21), at the implications of God having become human in Jesus Christ (Chapter 22), and at how we nurture the spiritual gifts that God has given us (Chapter 23). Finally, we end with encouragement to continue as followers of Jesus. We share spiritual practices, such as daily prayer or

service of others (Chapter 24). Lastly, we hope you will learn how God's story is your story and how you might share that story with a world in need (Chapters 25 and 26).

How to Use This Book

We encourage you to have a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer* handy as you read *Walk in Love*. You'll want the 1979 version of the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*; you can find a free PDF online or buy a copy at your favorite bookseller. Maybe your priest will loan or give you a copy. There are numerous citations from *The Book of Common Prayer*, including collects (or prayers) that start each chapter. We encourage you to look up the citations in *The Book of Common Prayer* to provide tangible connections between beliefs and practices. Whenever you see a number by itself, framed by parentheses, that is a page number in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

You can certainly read your way through *Walk in Love* on your own. Maybe your curiosity is stoked by something in one of the chapters, and so we have provided some suggestions for additional reading or exploration.

A book group could make productive use of *Walk in Love*, relying on the discussion questions here to get things going. Hopefully your group will have a rich conversation. This book's publisher, Forward Movement, also offers a free downloadable course about Episcopal beliefs and practices, *Practicing Our Faith*. Funded in part by a generous grant by the Constable Fund of the Episcopal Church, the curriculum is available for children, youth, and adults in English and Spanish. This course, *Practicing Our Faith*, is part of a three-year set of courses; the others are *Celebrating the Saints* and *Exploring the Bible*. You can learn about these offerings at www.forwardmovement.org.

About This Book

We developed much of what you read here as we worked together as parish priests in Rhode Island. As you can tell, we spent a lot of time and energy thinking about liturgy, the prayer book, and the Bible. We witnessed the fruits of that work as lives were transformed by Jesus Christ and people were drawn into deeper commitment to following Jesus in their daily lives.

When we tell stories here, we use “I.” Sometimes that “I” is Melody writing, and sometimes it is Scott. Don’t worry too much about that, and just enjoy the stories.

We hope you find this book helpful. More than that, we hope you fall in love with Jesus just a bit more through a deep and abiding life of prayer and enriched beliefs.

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