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## **The Power of Worship and Study Together**

**By the Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.**

Immanuel has been blessed to receive several recent requests from parishioners and from nearby neighbors of the parish to offer worship and study opportunities for residents of senior living facilities. Immanuel is already so fortunate to have our dynamic and engaging program for seniors in the parish, but these requests were specifically for an Episcopal Eucharist in two retirement communities, along with a Bible study in a third one. We have been able to respond to these requests because of the blessing of having multiple clergy.

I have been deeply moved on almost every occasion where we have been able to provide these services. In one setting, even though there are no prayer books, most of the residents know the liturgy by heart and join in the responses enthusiastically. In another setting we recently had 25 in attendance, including a retired priest and a retired bishop. In several cases people have had tears in their eyes as they tried to express what it means to them to pray the words of the familiar Episcopal liturgy together, often their service from childhood. In the Bible study we have people at vastly different

levels of biblical exposure and knowledge, but they have shared deeply of their Christian faith and how it applies to their current situation.

I'm sure you know the old saying—"You don't know what you've got until it is gone." These services have been such a humbling reminder of that truth. I see the power in sharing our faith, lifting up our needs in prayer, and receiving Holy Communion together.

The popular author and theologian Annie Dillard in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (pp. 40-41) has a knack for naming what we take for granted when it comes to our worship. She asks:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."

Ms. Dillard is obviously using hyperbole here, a bit of shock to get our attention just as Jesus often did in His teaching. She is naming the incredible blessing we all sometimes can take for granted:

- We are able to gather in freedom with other believers to worship the God of the universe, to remember what is most important in life, to grow together, and to pray in the words of our ancient liturgy that still has a way of being new. Then, together, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ.
- We go back out into the world to try, once again, to live more in line with what we believe – to love God and our neighbor, to be deeply and truly thankful for our plenteous blessings, to grow in the faith, and to witness in word and deed to what we believe.
- Our faith even tells us that we worship together with those who have passed on to the other side of the veil in a rich banquet of praise.

I often remember a scene from the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder as I go by a cemetery. A key scene in that play takes place in a cemetery, where the residents can converse with one another and observe the living as they pass by, often oblivious to the majesty of their lives.

Emily, the central character, offers a haunting monologue, from her grave:

“Let's really look at one another!...It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed... Wait! One more look. Good-bye, Good-bye world. Good-bye, Grover's Corners....Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking....and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths....and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it – every, every minute?”

I don't think any one of us, unfortunately, can always remain in a heightened state of appreciating life and everything with which we have been blessed. Yet, I do believe our faith helps us with awareness and appreciation better than just about anything else in life, especially as we worship *together*. I believe some of these folks I have met recently in retirement communities know the power of practicing the faith together on a deep, visceral level. Let's all remember and remind one another of this blessing and this power of worshipping and studying together that we can experience and share!

Thanks be to God for the blessings of coming together for worship and study.