

How might God bless a divided America?

On a recent trip to the US, I went to church—and found myself pondering three liturgical moments.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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It's hard to know how to ask God to bless America right now. On a recent visit to the East Coast, I found friends and peers in a mixture of panic and denial about the coming November election. I did one thing on my visit, however, that gave me three thoughts about how not to feel so paralyzed. I went to church.

It was a conventional Eucharist at an Episcopal church. But three moments struck me in a special way. The first was the prayers of the people. I was conscious that when Donald Trump became president in 2017 there was controversy over the conventional prayer service being held for his tenure on the morning after his inauguration. It wasn't clear if the service was a quasi-constitutional upholding of the presidency or some kind of personal endorsement of the specific office holder.

As I reflected on the prayers of the people, I pondered whether it is too small a thing that such a prayer service be an endorsement of one administration. Surely the Holy Spirit could make it an event where a wondrously kaleidoscopic diversity of Americans each took the microphone to articulate their respective prayers for the ensuing four years. Maybe America could be offered this invitation: "Let your heart expand. Let your mind encompass. Let your soul grow, through meeting, enjoying, and embracing one another. We believe we're going to spend eternity together. So we'd best start today. Because Christianity's about living God's future now."

America, like the church, shouldn't be about where we're all separately coming from. It should be about where we're all together going.

The second moment that struck me was the offertory procession, in which the bread, wine, and money were brought to the altar. As I saw this taking place, my imagination again went to what the liturgy might be saying to this divided country. I thought about Isaiah 2:2: "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it." I imagined every tribe and race and people streaming into this church, proudly bearing the trophies and symbols and glories of their heritage and narrative and dreams. And I pictured each walking up the aisle and placing those icons on the altar—each one saying, *These aren't our identities to be protected—these are our gifts to be shared.*

Gifts are given to be a blessing. And perhaps the nation might behold, on livestream: behold God blessing America, behold that God has blessed America with everything it needs to flourish and to be a blessing to the world. In worship, we both affirm our gifts and let go of them to allow them to be placed on the altar—to become a blessing not just to us but to all God's people. Likewise, in some kind of national pageant the whole nation could offer its gifts to bless each other. Identities could be affirmed and transcended. Possessions could be turned into gifts. Differences could become assets. Diversity could enrich. The life of the nation could become a prayer

that the Holy Spirit would turn the water of its existence into the wine of God's essence and turn life into eternal life. Maybe that's how God could bless America.

My final pondering came during the distribution of communion. I recalled a visit to a convention in the Deep South. Clergy nervously chuckled that the political dividing line between red and blue in their diocese was the altar rail. But it wasn't as simple as that. Several congregations were that somewhat rare thing in an American church: an even split of Democratic and Republican. But rather than a source of discomfort, tension, and denial, I wondered if it were a holy, rich, important opportunity.

So I said, "Your diocese could stop being an embarrassed poor relation in this country and this church. It could be a beacon of hope. Because think about that altar rail. Every Sunday your congregation comes to that altar rail, and what it's saying in doing so is this: we may be divided on culture wars, foreign policy, and migration, but this altar rail reminds us we are one body because we're members of Christ's body. And who we are together is more fundamental than what we think apart. It's too small a thing that you're self-conscious and embarrassed about your political divisions. The Holy Spirit is giving you the power to witness to the whole world about our fundamental identity as Christ's body, an identity that transcends political divisions. You are doing something amazing not just for your denomination but for the whole country—and the whole world."

Embarrassed and evasive congregations could become known throughout the land as beacons of hope for a process by which the most divided people in the nation find they have more in common than what separates them—and come to realize these divisions are luxuries the world can no longer afford.

There is widespread dismay about the direction the United States is going. The most distressing thing about this is the sense of powerlessness among those who long for it to choose a different path. And when those people are Christians, it's even more distressing, because in worship those people have in their daily and weekly practice the gifts God gives to reimagine the world. For Christians, politics doesn't begin or end with our choice on a voting slip but with God's choice to be with us.