

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Proper 18, Year A, September 10, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Home Altar”

you may recall that last Sunday we talked about being open to encountering God whenever or wherever we may be; and in our adult forum today we talked about The Daily Office and other prayer book resources that we can use to worship at home; so I'd like to expand on both of those and look at an additional, and less formal, way of remembering God's presence in our homes; I want to do this by looking at each of our five senses, at how we experience them in church, and how we might use them to make a home altar or other place of spiritual focus in our homes to be an intentional reminder of our relationship with God

how do we taste in church? the bread and wine of Holy Communion, the food we share in breakfasts, coffee hours, and dinners in the parish hall; at home we can go beyond saying a rote table grace; think about blessing the entire experience of the meal by prayerfully considering everything you eat as you eat it; or saying a grace, additionally, after the meal; just a simple meal eaten with a prayerful and celebratory attitude can remind us of our deep connection to God, to God's bounty that sustains us, and to each other; the kitchen table can become a home altar

what about sight in church? we have the exterior and interior architecture; stained glass windows, crosses; altar, pulpit, and lectern linens; candles, flags and banners; needlepoint kneelers; vestments; in our homes we probably all have some religious or especially meaningful objects or artwork in our homes; we can go beyond seeing these as decorations and treat them as icons—as windows through which one can better see and experience the holy; you can light a candle to remember that Christ said both that “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12) and “you are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14); display actual icons or crosses; put out Bibles, prayer books, spiritual books, or art books where they can be seen and used; photos of loved ones can serve as a reminder to pray for them or to remember special people who have set spiritual examples for us; flowers or plants remind us of God's beautiful creation, as do rocks, shells, acorns, or colorful leaves

how do we touch in church? the bread that is placed in our hands; the cup of wine to our lips; the passing of the Peace; greeting each other before and after church; kneeling, bowing, or standing; making the sign of the cross; walking to the altar; prayer for healing with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil; at home we may want to touch or hold onto an object as a way to keep our prayers focused; being attentive to posture when you pray helps keep the mind and heart focused; you can repeat Christian words or Bible phrases as you exercise; carry objects in your pocket or purse as reminders of your faith; a bowl or fountain of water to touch can be a reminder of your Baptism

what about hearing in church? the spoken, chanted, sung liturgy, music, and instruments; silences; the church's bells ringing; at home we may want to read or pray aloud to give physical voice and power to our words; memorize prayers, Bible verses, and prayer texts to say aloud; sing hymns out loud; set aside times for silence and quiet listening; listen prayerfully to recorded music, or have it in the background as you go about activities; audio books of the Bible and spiritual works; wind chimes as a reminder of the Holy Spirit-like movement of wind; a bubbling water fountain as a reminder of God's creation, of our Baptism, or as soothing natural 'music'

how do we smell in church? Communion wine from the chalice; oil used for baptisms and for healing prayer; flowers or Christmas greenery; candles as they are lit and extinguished; at home we can use flowers, incense, spiced oil, or dried spices to perfume a home altar as a joyful reminder to pray; a vial of spiced oil to sniff or touch on your skin can serve as a reminder of your baptismal anointing; a bowl of spices to sniff or rub between your fingers can be used as 'spiritual smelling salts' if you get drowsy while praying or reading

so, with all of these ideas from the five senses, how might you go about creating your own place of special spiritual focus or home altar?; look around your house and yard and notice the objects and places that already have a spiritual significance for you—that's the best starting point; once you've identified a place, think what you might use for an altar or focal point: a table, a shelf, a window sill, or a niche for placing objects that have religious significance for you; preferably a dedicated space that is not used for anything else; there is no right or wrong way to make a home altar or place of spiritual focus; experiment to find what is meaningful for you and for your family; see if by involving all your five senses you can create a 24/7 reminder of our 24/7 relationship with God