

Yr. C, Easter 7
June 2, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1224 Words

Lessons: Acts 16:16-34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
John 17:20-26

Prayer can be such a funny thing—light as a downy feather carried on the wind or thick as mud, words trapped in a bog, seeming to go nowhere.

I watched a movie the other day in which a young man was asked to give the blessing at a picnic. A loud, oblivious latecomer arrived mid-sentence and overwhelmed the moment. It was as if the attempted prayer evaporated without a trace.

Yet, other times in the din of excruciating noises—code blue in a hospital room, gunshots on a city street, or artillery fire in a war zone—the silent, unspoken prayers for mercy are the most real of all.

If you are like me you tend to think of prayer as something you do...or don't do. Maybe we are prioritizing words over silence, even though St. Paul commends a Holy Spirit-led silence that is too deep for words. Jesus, himself, pleads for us to exercise brevity and discreteness. Jesus makes fun of people who show off with sanctimonious words and ideas.

I think many people—faithful people—feel like it is hard to pray. It is very tempting to judge our own prayers as inadequate. Let me be provocative for a moment and ask this question: “Who do you think *you are* to judge the adequacy of a prayer, even your own?”

Did it contain the truth? You see, it doesn't matter if it was joyful or angry, helpless or sad, or even a bumbling mess of confusion. All of those expressions meet the biblical standard for prayer as long as they are honest to God.

I want to take a moment and repeat my teaching about the prayers of the people in the Holy Eucharist. Marie and I try to make it simple for you to pray. You don't need fancy words or phrases. Rather, we just hold up a common container of sorts—right now our ‘container’ is Form III on page 387. The script makes it easy for you to follow along, and then simply pour in the names of people, places, and things that are honestly on your heart.

Now, I always jump in first with the microphone just to name your fellow parishioners who are preparing for, or enduring, or recovering from surgery and other demanding therapies—and I also name those who are homebound. The reason I speak these names out loud is so that you can express *your prayers* for the ones you may know during the week to come. You might choose to pray with a card in the mail or a call on the phone that says, “I heard your name in Church. I'm praying for you, too.” Or you might ask, “How are you doing? I want you to know that I care about you.”

Right now, that spoken prayer list feels long to me. It may feel that way to you as well. I want it to be short enough for us all to listen well and possibly remember a name or two of someone to whom you could reach out—in word or deed.

Now, after I speak those names aloud, you can always count on some silence. This is *your* turn. Offer all the names you want (or need) to offer. Feel free to say them out loud. This is the Prayers of the *People*, after all; not the prayers of the priest.

It may sound like a cacophony to us, but it is music to God's ears—it is the honest, heartfelt music of our love. To us, it seems unintelligible; to God it's the sound of the beating heart of love in this community at this time. Nothing could be more true or beautiful than that.

Except this!

We need to realize that we didn't start our prayer for God's benefit. Rather, God began the prayer for *our benefit*. You see, prayer is—above all—a response by us, a responding to the love God has planted in our hearts, the love that God has animated through our relationships, and the love that God has surrounded us with on every side.

The Source of Light and Life has *started it all*, and simply invited us to join the unselfish conversation of Love in word and deed. As usual, Jesus is our leading example.

Now, according to St. John (who was there), at the Last Supper, after Jesus had spoken *to* his disciples, he began to pray *for* his disciples. *There it is*—leadership by example!

Thanks to John, we learn that Jesus not only prayed for the eleven disciples who were still in the room; Jesus *also prayed* on behalf of those who *will believe* because of those eleven disciples. Dear people, this includes the *entire Christian community* of the last two thousand years. This includes you and me.

Jesus prayed for us at the Last Supper, even as he prayed for his eleven disciples. In the final prayer that Jesus prayed before his arrest, he prayed that we may all be one. As much as he and our Father in heaven are one, Jesus prayed that we may also be one with God...and with one another.

Now we all know that we have not lived up to Jesus' aspiration for us. Over two millennia the Church has failed miserably to live up to Jesus' prayer, his hope, and his dream for us. The Church has split and divided in innumerable ways that break God's heart.

And there is nothing we can do about that. We cannot fix or change other people or other churches or other congregations. All we can do—individually and corporately in this community of faith—is attempt to respond *as ourselves* to Jesus' prayer.

It is *hard* to respond to this prayer, but it is *not complicated*. You see, Jesus spelled out for us in *his prayer* that the *only way* we will experience oneness—is if we value and share the love of God above everything else. Jesus did not pray for us to have doctrinal unity...or political unity...or organizational unity. He prayed that we would have an even more valuable kind of unity that grows out of the love of God.

I mean—listen to what he prayed for us! “Father, may the world know that you have loved *them* as much as you have loved me.”

How *can* we know this? How can we know this love? We know it by the example of Jesus. We know it by experiencing and then repeating Jesus' example—in thought, word, and deed.

My hope is that if nothing else comes from this sermon, you will at least stop judging the adequacy of your own prayers. They don't belong to you! They are not *yours* to judge! Your prayers belong to God.

This prayer you join in praying—silently or aloud, with words or deeds—*that prayer* began with, and is sustained by, none other than Jesus Christ. You and I have simply been invited to respond to this unselfish conversation of love. It is an invitation that is open to everyone—always and everywhere. It is an invitation to oneness—with God and with one another. It is the invitation to love one another as Christ has loved us...and loves us still. Thanks be to God for the gift of prayer.

Amen.