

Sunday, May 16, 2021
Trinity Lutheran Church – Herkimer, NY
John 17:6-19
Rev. Edwina Landry

Praying With Our Feet

Today, as we celebrate the last Sunday in Easter, the gospel writer John brings us to a flashback of the night before Jesus was arrested. This text invites us to listen to a private and deeply personal conversation between Jesus and his Father. Jesus was about to experience the most pain any human would ever endure – betrayal and denial by his closest friends, intense suffering, torture, and death by crucifixion. It's the longest prayer Jesus prayed, and continues as Jesus says, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one...." and later, "as we are one." As Jesus was about to suffer, he was not just thinking about himself, but he prayed for his disciples – and not only for the early disciples who were with him at that time, but for all of us today. Over two thousand years ago *we too* were not only on Jesus' mind, but in his heart, as he was on the way to the cross. Jesus was interceding with God on our behalf.

How do you respond when people pray for you? When you know that despite all they may be going through they take the time to pour out their hearts to God on your behalf? I was speaking with a colleague this week about this very topic. We wondered if as pastors, our congregation members – and even those congregations whom we supply with regularly like yours - had any idea of how much we pray for them. Do you know how much you are on our minds? I want you to know that you are – each and every one of you. When you are going through difficult times, my heart aches for you, and

I pray to God on your behalf. When you experience great joy, I too rejoice. There is not a day that I do not lift each and every one of you up in prayer.

Prayer connects people. It connects them to each other, and it connects them to God. Prayer is not a checklist of wishes to be granted, but an entering into the presence of God. When we pray we are communicating and connecting with the Divine. In prayer, we pour out our hearts to God, and the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to hear God's response, and feel God's presence. We must be aware to see and hear that response in whatever shape or form it may take. Sometimes, the answers don't come in the time we'd like or in the way we'd like, but prayer keeps us connected to God. Through prayer we know that we are not alone.

Today we hear Jesus pouring out *His* heart and soul to God for us so that we may be made whole. That's the reason Jesus came into this world. God saw that we were lost in sin. The cries of God's children did not fall on deaf ears. Jesus came down to earth to suffer and die and rise again so that we would be one with God. And today we hear him praying to His Father, his Creator, "that all may be one as we are one." The unity that Jesus prayed for is a unity as close as Jesus is to his Father – a relationship so close that they are One.

We believe in a Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier - yet One God. Jesus prayed that we – though many, and different, and distinct with our various ideas and practices – may be one Christian church, one body of Christ, called, gathered, and sent out into the world to spread the Good News that Christ died for us and is risen and will come again. We are called to be the living hands and feet and voice of Christ here on earth. We have been blessed to spread the kingdom of God here on earth, yet how easy it is to forget that.

How easy it is to forget that we are one body of Christ because we want to have things our way instead of God's way. We pray "thy kingdom come" but often what we really mean is "my kingdom." We want God to work things out the way *we* think things should work out. We can forget that it's not just about us. Our lives as Christians are about following Jesus who has revealed God to us. We are called to celebrate in each other's joys, to embrace one another in our sorrows and to ease each other's pain. We do this by always acting and responding to one another with kindness and love. We do this acknowledging our own hurts and disappointments, sharing our burdens, and caring for one another so that we as a church can be one. We are called to walk with one another through life, and death, and to love one another as deeply as God loves us.

Bringing our prayers to God is not just an act of faith, it is an act of love. When we take the time to be aware of and receptive to the concerns of others, and bring those concerns to God it shows our love for them. And when we ask God to change us, so that we can be of service to others, that too, is an act of love. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who was active in the civil rights movement and marched with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama, famously said, "In Selma, Alabama, I learned to pray with my feet." This is quite a transformative perspective that prayer is not just something we say with words, prayer involves our whole being. Sometimes, when faced with a deep trauma or crisis, we are at a loss for words. St. Paul assures us in his letter to the Romans that "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

At times, it seems like our prayers go unanswered. It's not only hard, but painful when that happens. I think of St. Monica, who was said prayed for over 17 years that her son, Augustine would come to know Christ. Yet, after all those years, he eventually did, and St. Augustine became one of

the great early theologians of the church. How many other mothers, and fathers, family members and friends have prayed for years for those they love without an immediate answer. Waiting is not easy.

And I wonder what it must feel like to Jesus that *his* prayer has still not been answered. He's prayed for unity, yet we Christians fight among ourselves over things that *we* think are important, but are they important to God? Instead of seeking to understand one another we often fight to be right rather than kind. Instead of working for unity through all we say and do, we tear each other apart through hurtful words. We focus on our own desires, rather than on following God's mission of love as modeled through Jesus. When we take our focus this Divine mission of love, then it all falls apart. But when we keep our lives focused on what Jesus taught us, we have hope, and peace, and true joy no matter what circumstances we may find ourselves in. Jesus never promised that following him would be easy. Life is beautiful and joyous, and can also be cruel and unfair. But Jesus promised that he would always be with us. We are not alone.

Prayer is how we stay focused and connected to God. It's not a last resort, but a way of life. Prayer is an act of faith in the One we know will hear and answer. Prayer is an act of love as we intercede on behalf of others. Prayer is an act of courage as we abide in Jesus' love and work for justice and peace for all people. There is so much pain, suffering, and evil in the world, and prayer transforms *us* to be the change we seek.

Let us pray with confidence to God who hears us with all our hearts and souls and our whole being. Let us pray with hope knowing that God acts even when we do not always see the evidence. Let us pray without ceasing so as to draw closer and closer to God. Let us pray with our feet as we witness to the transforming grace and love of God. Amen.