

## Easter VII Year B 2018

I still remember my bedtime prayers that I said every night as a child. I would begin with the Lord's Prayer, the King James Version, of course, you know the English that Jesus spoke... I'd start with the Lord's Prayer and then I would ask God to bless Mama, and Bobo, Bobo is what I called my Dad... and then I would ask God to bless my brothers, Taylor and Bob... and then my grandparents, and my best friend Dyke Helms... but most of my prayers had to do with what bothered me... I can remember asking God to rescue me from the things I feared.... or praying for the things I wanted.... In the seventh grade I prayed that the girl in my class that I liked would like me back. I prayed that I would make the basketball team. When my Dad got cancer I prayed that he would be healed. I pray often for my children; that they would be happy and productive and safe... Some of those things panned out... some didn't. I've heard some say that God always answers prayers, but sometimes the answer is no... That has never sounded right to me. I hope God isn't like that: That it is God's occupation to give or withhold favor based on the relative earnestness of our asking... or based on the status of our faith... or based on what kind of mood God is in.... or worse, that our petitions somehow don't square with God's particular plan for us.... But mostly, we've been taught by the church and our culture that prayer is about

asking for a special dispensation from God, that God might intercede on our behalf. I am loathe to admit that my prayers have most always been about me; privatized, as it were; my bedtime prayers have become stale over the years; and serve mostly to help me go to sleep at night.

So let me remind us, you and me, that whatever we think of prayer, whether it works or not... Is it real or fantasy...? Does God listen to our prayers, really? Whatever we think of prayer, we are nonetheless exhorted by scripture to pray without ceasing... and, prayer is, after all, the regular practice of the church.... Are we just going through the motions, or is there something more profound about our praying?

Y'all have heard me say before, and I don't know if I made it up or stole it from somewhere... that prayer is the art of paying attention; the art of paying attention. That seems to me, still, an apt description of prayer.... But that definition begs the question: paying attention to what? We are reading still from John's Gospel here on the seventh Sunday of Easter. We will continue in John for the next two Sundays and then we will return to Mark. In our reading for today we are listening in on Jesus' prayer for his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion and death. This prayer doesn't occur in any of the three other Gospels... and if you

buy in to Luther's premise that praying shapes believing, then we get an insight into Jesus' theology of his mission and ministry, his inner thoughts, his predisposition... or, at least, the understanding of the mind of Jesus held by this community that produced this gospel. This gospel as you know, was the most controversial of the four gospels. It almost didn't make it into the canon of scripture in the early church. The principal reason was that it was considered docetic by the church fathers, that is, this gospel privileges Jesus' divinity much more than his humanity... you'll recall that the early church councils sought to strike a balance between Jesus' being human and divine.... Fully human and fully divine... that's the orthodox formula; but throughout the church's history we have opted mostly for the divine side of things. We have consigned Jesus to Mt. Olympus, wholly apart from us, a supernatural being with magic powers; and we discount his humanity, his struggles, his doubts, his being subject to change... but what the early church fathers almost didn't see... and what the modern church has chosen to ignore, is that this gospel sees no qualitative difference in Jesus and the ones who follow Jesus. If Jesus is the divine in human form; then those of us who follow are also divine in human form. For John the Incarnation has as much to do with us, as it does with Jesus of Nazareth. We too, though human, are Divine in that we have the innate capacity to Love. To be human is to be made in

the image of God. That would render Augustine's and Calvin's theology of the fall absurd. That would render the theology of our humanity being in need of rescue from sin contrary to the teachings of Jesus, at least according to the fourth Gospel. This theology is unique to John; a unique perspective; one worth thinking about... This gospel has high expectations of the human community....So let's look at Jesus' prayer, and maybe we'll learn something of our own praying, and perhaps a new theological perspective.

The prayer is really a literary device for John to articulate again his community's theology; In short, that the people of God receive the truth as gift, and then it is their vocation to share that truth with the world. Jesus is the incarnation, the embodiment of truth; and therefore we as followers of the way are embodiments of the truth as well... Love is truth, plain and simple. Love is the nexus between the human and the divine. Jesus is in short handing off his legacy to the ones who follow him; they are sent as he is sent, as John puts it. So we are to pray as Jesus prayed. This prayer is one of passionate advocacy. Advocacy for the ones Jesus' loves... for their happiness, their well-being, and that they take courage; and that they are protected... and what that means, I think, is that prayer is the means by which we become open, mindful to the possibilities of love... In other words, prayer is not so much the means of asking God to intercede

in the nature of things... prayer is a posture of being mindful as to what Love requires of us, and what Love is up to... and Love does change things, but Love changes things on Love's own terms. Love changes the one who loves, and love changes the one to whom love is given. In Love there is self-knowledge... in Love there is empathy... in Love there is perspective. Prayer predisposes us to Love... and it takes practice.

I don't have to tell you that Life unfolds in a beautiful and terrible randomness. We pray so that Love may be present in life's unfolding. Despite my prayers my father died, at age fifty three... but Love was present. Love was present then in my asking for his healing; and though he has been dead for thirty four years, Love is still present. Prayer grounds us in Love in the midst of what is, and what is to be. In articulating what we want, and being aware of our gratitude for what is, perhaps we get a more profound glimpse of the creative possibilities for the way ahead. And perhaps a more profound glimpse of the meaning of now. And perhaps such sacrifice, and prayer is sacrifice... perhaps such sacrifice is what opens us up to the creative possibilities of Love.

The Holy Spirit in this gospel is called the Advocate. I think that is what prayer is all about; it is the artful practice of mindful advocacy. Because Love

always considers first the other. It is a way to remind ourselves that we are first and foremost for the world's well-being. This prayer for the disciples identifies Jesus as one who, even at the hour of his death, as one who lives first for the other... And so must we... Our very lives are enlightened prayers for our world... "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says. The way and the truth and the life is that we are advocates for the well-being and dignity of the ones besieged by shame and indifference, the evil one, as John puts it.... And our prayers are public. They are not private chats with God. They are Love spoken as advocacy, Love brought to light in the public sphere. Our prayers don't demand answers, and yet they quite possibly may be answers in and of themselves. Because Love changes things. Love will not let life grow tired and languish broken in the status quo. Jesus tells God in his prayer for his friends that they are sent as he is sent. That would be an apt prayer for every day, brothers and sisters. Pray that you will be sent as Love into the world, so that others may know the hope of a better day; that they may see that Love is real and alive, and that it is for all to share; that the abundance of God is not a dream or a fantasy, but a real possibility for here and now.... Because in Love, all things are possible. Pray that this is so.

So when you pray... first...be honest... and keep open and engaged to life's marvelous unfolding; and be courageous in your praying.... Be mindful of your

sacred place, and the Love you bear in the midst of life's infinite possibilities; and know that God's will is already being done, because Love will have its way.... So dear friends of God, pray without ceasing, pay attention to your world and your high vocation in it... and remember in your prayerful words and deeds...

Remember who sent you... remember who you are... and remember to whom you belong.