

Allowing Ourselves to Be Loved
Sunday, July 24, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

In the words of Rev. Bill Rankin, former Associate Rector of ASC, I offer this sermon “In the name of God; divine mother, divine father, divine lover, divine friend.” Amen

Who taught you to pray? For me, it was my mother who began with a prayer she had learned from her mother. Each night, she would sit beside me, put her arm around me or hold my hand and say a short prayer with me.

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
When in the morning light I wake,
Help me the path of love to take,
And walk that path for Jesus’ sake
Amen.

It was a loving prayer. Praying with her arm around me was an act of love passed down through our relationship with each other and with God. I felt it, and it helped me know God was with me, even in the separation of the night. Her prayer was a slightly altered version of the original, present in the New England Primer in 1781. The original version was also a prayer of protection, “if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take”. It was also a petition for protection... from hell, or eternal separation from God, in the event of death before dawn. Hardly reassuring! Almost 200 years later, my grandmother and mother gave me a prayer that moved from the protection from hell to the protection of secure love. It helped me go to sleep feeling less afraid.

As I grew up, my influences became more complex. I took in our cultural values of independence, self-sufficiency, and perfection. I began to question a patriarchal norm that confused strength with lack of vulnerability. I felt skeptical that trusting God and the power of prayer was naive, wish-fulfilling thinking. Unconsciously, I shrugged off the simplicity of that childhood prayer, and grew distant from its intimacy. It wasn’t until my own daughter was little, that I found myself repeating those words, altered slightly again, and prayed them with her each night. That prayer was truly an act of love passed down—and an example of how prayers can evolve.

The gospel reading today tells us about an intimate moment with Jesus’ followers. They have seen Jesus pray in silence many times and have observed the profound connection Jesus felt with God in prayer. They felt God’s love and compassion in Jesus’ presence with them. The apostles had witnessed his healing and prophetic power. Perhaps in their understanding, God was transcendent only beyond all things, but not in all things, not close at hand. They wanted to feel the closeness to God that Jesus did, but they didn’t really know how to do it. So they asked

Jesus, who gave them what we call the Lord's prayer. We pray it every Sunday as we gather around the table.

It is simple, with only three parts:

- a prayer that God's kingdom of compassion and justice will infuse all of earth;
- secondly, prayer for our daily needs—our real concrete needs
- and lastly, prayers to forgive as we are forgiven.

Most importantly, Jesus gave them a prayer of trust and intimacy. Jesus began the prayer with a term of familiarity, "abba" which is like saying daddy or mommy or Maddy, a parent who is 'fierce on our behalf' and loves us tenderly beyond all measure. When we pray, we pray to the One to whom we belong, who is at the core of our being; to someone who is with us, not against us! Jesus recognized that prayer is being loved at a deep, sweet level.

We must note that Jesus' words for God are recorded only in male terms-father or daddy—even though in union with God, he referred to himself like a hen gathering chicks underwing. He used female metaphors and examples of the work women did in those days in his parables, like kneading bread. He included women as disciples, notably Mary Magdalene—who was apart from the male gaze was, (thank you Christine Yi Suh who preached last week) the apostle of the apostles. Feminist and womanist theologians note that the Lord's prayer itself, has four different versions in each of the four gospels, and they celebrate the multiplicity of voice that didn't get squelched.

Our language about God forms our thoughts and we must continue to see where patriarchy and white supremacy have corrupted our images and our story about God, and even tainted our prayers. That is why our liturgy uses inclusive language and why after careful discernment we added Creator-Creator as an alternative way to address God in the Lord's prayer. The language we use to pray to God matters. In fact I chose an alternative, just for today, as we pray the Lord's prayer later in this service.

Episcopalians are a people of prayer. Our entire liturgy is prayer. Our Book of Common Prayer is a collection prayers mostly based on or drawn from scripture. These prayers can frame every day of our lives and connect us in corporate prayer to others across the Anglican communion and across the past and present. They are like a tether to what's deepest and real as we navigate our lives; to discern between the vital and the trivial. Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget.

Like our Jewish and Islamic siblings, there are prayers —beautiful words and times to pray, throughout the day and evening. For the purpose of focus, we alter our physical posture by bowing or kneeling. Those postures can feel and can be taught as subjugation. Yet God is not coercive. In prayer, we're not being manipulated, we're not being used, we're not being judged, we're not being evaluated. It's the place of ultimate freedom. Who wouldn't want to go there? Under the cover of prayer we find the freedom to become who we most truly are. When we kneel and bow, we honor God's Holy Presence in all that exists, within us and all around us. At

the grocery store, in the pews, and the face of a person without a home. Honoring each, we long to create freedom for every person to be fully alive, which is the glory of God.

Prayer is also beyond words and postures. It may be just dwelling in silence to listen, wait and be present. To practice meditation as an act of religious faith is to open ourselves to the endlessly reassuring realization that our very being and the very being of everyone around us is thanks to the generosity of God.

We wait in love.

We return to love.

We trust that love is the deepest stream of reality.

Still, it is hard for us to set our phones on silent. We have so many demands and distractions. It can also be hard if your own childhood did not include a tender or loving parent. Maybe your story was about a punitive God, instead of one who is fiercely for you. Sitting in silence can bring those things up. But Jesus tells us that when we go into the Presence, as Jesus did, we find God is never an abusive father or a tyrannical mother; God is always a lover greater than we dared hope for. God cares about each of us intimately with infinite care. God is the lover we have longed for who longs for us, and who receives and forgives everything.

I know there is not a person here who has not experienced praying with all their heart for ease from suffering or the healing of a loved one, and those holy desires have not been met, or not yet. I know others who have experienced miraculous healing and provision and wonders...The prayers of all are authentic and holy. It is beyond us to understand the vast complexity of God's healing presence in all things.

But here are the things I believe. God hears every single prayer. All of them. From everyone. I believe God loves us all and hates our alienation and anguish even more than we do. I know that in answer to every prayer, God sends God's Spirit, without measure. She is your friend, not a stranger and She will never leave you. You will know Her intimately as the one who loves you enough to suffer with you. She dwells in you and your soul is her home. God is with us, moving all of creation towards healing and restoration.

Sometimes the work of God is slow and we never know whether it will be a big effort or the flap of a butterfly's wings that will create enormous change for good. Our's is a non-linear universe. But don't give up. God is not a sleepy neighbor resistant to get out of bed to help us. The journey to know our belovedness is life long. The word for persistence used in the gospel, can also be translated as shamelessness. Be shameless in your prayers! You never need to feel ashamed in front of God for being incomplete and dependent. There is no shame in asking God to help you like a child needing comfort and reassurance in the night. Be shameless in standing with the poor, the displaced, the LGBTQ community! God who is far beyond the best lover or parent we can imagine or mirror, will meet us with Her presence. Be persistent. Never give up.

Prayer, my beloved All Saints, is also action. You know this. It is deep in the soul of this place. You've shown up again and again praying with your feet, as Rabbi Joshua Heschel described it

when he marched with Rev. Martin Luther King across the bridge to Selma. You show up with your hands that feed and music that soars. All Saints, we need to dwell in the love of God that dismantles all that stands against love within us, and pray it out in our lives in action in the world around us. We are grateful for and pray for the leadership of associate rector Mark Chase and our rector Mike Kinman, and lay leaders who focus our prayer in action from the streets of Pasadena to the steps of City Hall. We will persist until every child of God is safe to walk our streets without fear of gun violence, all women have access to health care, and everyone, not only white people of wealth, has a home in our city. We will work with the great leaders in the community around us. We will not give up.

I heard those words, never give up at a vigil for one of Pasadena's great leaders, Councilman John Kennedy. Councilman Kennedy was a former student of our own mighty prayer warrior, Alma Stokes. Persistent, principled, and compassionate, he demonstrated caring and innovative leadership across this city and the world. Councilman Kennedy always cared deeply about the overwhelming need for affordable housing in our community, and he was a passionate and tireless advocate for it. Last Monday, he voted in support of a zoning proposal to allow churches to build affordable housing on church property. That proposal passed just two days before he died. Councilman John Kennedy was a man of prayer. He did not give up and neither will we.

Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then, although God is always delighted when we call. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. To pray is to take notice of the wonder; to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings; to be radically amazed by the inconceivable surprise of living. It is what we offer in return for the mystery by which we live, move and have our being.

We need to pray because we need to connect with God; we need to be in God's presence. We need to allow ourselves to be loved. Like a tree torn from the soil, our souls wither when detached from what is greater than itself. When we listen to the earth, to what's deepest in our hearts, to what is expressed in the languages and ways of people not like us, heaven rejoices with the Spirit of God doing her work in the world.

God, Ground of our Being

Do not forsake us in our time of conflict and loss
but lead us into new beginnings.

For the light of life, the vitality of life,
and the glory of life are yours now and forever.

Amen