

Christian Aspirationalism
Sunday, July 13, 2025, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

*“Grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to **do**, and also may have grace and power faithfully **to accomplish them**. Amen.”*

This prayer that began our worship this morning ... the one we call “The Collect for the Day” because it “collects” the themes of the lessons appointed for the day ... is my favorite prayer in the entire prayer book.

It is one I have turned to again and again
over my now almost 30 years of ordained ministry.
It is one I have in the notes in my iPhone
so it’s at the ready if I’m ever asked on the spur of the moment
to open a meeting or gathering with prayer.
It is the prayer that not only sums up for me
the lessons appointed for today,
but describes for me the work we are called to do
each and every day as we engage in the audacious adventure
of following Jesus –
the one who loved us enough to become one of us
in order to show us how to love one another;
as we strive to make that kingdom Jesus proclaimed
not just a prayer we pray but a reality we live;
as we rise to meet the daily challenge
of making God’s love tangible in this beautiful and broken world.

“Grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them.”

Show us what to do.
Then help us do it.

It’s a variation of the question asked in today’s story in the Gospel according to Luke when the lawyer tries to trap Jesus with a question he already knew the answer to. “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live,” Jesus responds to his recitation of the law to love God and love neighbor.

But then came the follow up question in search of a loophole: “Who is my neighbor?”

And instead of scoring any points in the game of Stump Jesus
(a game which Scripture tells us many others had played and also lost)

the lawyer comes face to face with the truth Jesus wanted him –
and us -- to wrestle with:

Love God. Love your neighbor.
Full stop.
Just do it.

Easy to say. Hard to do. Which is why part two of my favorite prayer is so critical: it's one thing
to know what to do. It's another thing altogether to have the grace and power to accomplish it.

Which reminds me this morning of another favorite of mine – this quote from the Gospel
According to the Indigo Girls:

The hardest to learn is the least complicated.

Maybe it is the stunning simplicity of an idea
that makes it the hardest to learn.

Love God. Love your neighbor.
Full stop.
Just do it.

And truth be told, I'm not sure we've ever really learned it. Ever really gotten it.

A case in point is this observation by CK Chesterton: "Christianity has not been tried and found
wanting, it has been found difficult and never tried."

And then there's this apocryphal quote widely attributed to Mahatma Gandhi:
"I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians.
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Over and over and over again, Jesus told us what to do.
Love your neighbor as yourself ...
Inasmuch as you've done it unto the least of these ...
Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...
The greatest of these is love ...
This is my commandment; that you love one another.
Not "this is my commandment; that you agree with each other."
Not "this is my commandment; that you understand everything."

And certainly not "this is my commandment;
that you write a bunch of creeds and doctrines
that keep anyone who disagrees with you at arm's length."

Simply ... This is my commandment -- that you love one another.

Least complicated. Hardest to learn.

And with every news cycle there is more and more proof
that there's a world in need out there
needing us to learn it –
needing us to figure it out --
needing us to practice what we preach –
calling us to stand on the shoulders of generations of prophets
who have done what prophets have done
for as long as there have been prophets:
comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Prophets like Amos —
who in this morning's lesson said that God told him
that he was giving him a plumb line —
which I'm sure is a great metaphor if you know what a plumb line is.

What I've suggested before from this pulpit —
and repeat again this morning —
is that for me a better 21st century metaphor for what God gave Amos
is not a plumb line
but a satellite signal connecting us
to the God of love and justice and compassion as a spiritual GPS ...
in the words from one of our Eucharistic Prayers
“aligning us with the grain of the universe” that calls us to walk in love.

Walk in love is the “what we're supposed to do” part.

For the “show us how to do it” part, consider these words from Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows which are just as true today – if not more so -- than when she preached them in 2018 in Austin, Texas:

*Practicing the way of love in Jesus
means it becomes difficult to be witness to a sexist joke and let it go,
or to overhear an unchecked comment
that reinforces hateful stereotypes and just let that go.
Or to absorb the racist micro aggression and let it pass because
“they really didn't mean it”
or you're just too tired to have to say something again.
It bears repeating that God's dream for us
isn't politically correct appeasement —
God's dream for humanity is not that small.*

*The erasure of hatred, and white supremacy,
and misogyny, and homophobia,
and xenophobia from human hearts
so that we might turn to love,
is a matter of normalizing love because of,
not in spite of difference —
that is the beginning of God's dream.*

A matter of normalizing love because of, not in spite of, difference can feel like an overwhelming challenge when we wake up every morning assaulted by division and polarization and a worldview dominated by a zero-sum gain mentality demanding heads on a platter and drawing lines in the sand.

Normalizing love because of, not in spite of, difference ... holding tensions in difference not as a default but as a foundational commitment to being beloved community ... is a journey the church has been on since it's very inception.

It is what was going on
when the church was figuring out how to be church
at the 1st century Council of Jerusalem
as Peter and Paul were fighting about
whether to let the Gentiles in or not.

It was what the Church of England was negotiating
in the 16th century with the Elizabethan Settlement —
a non-binary solution to the ongoing battle
over whether it was going to be catholic or protestant.

And it is what is going on at this very moment
as the rising tide of Christian Nationalism
hijacks the Gospel and deploys it as a weapon of mass discrimination
in the service of gangs of masked thugs roaming our streets
and kidnapping the neighbors Jesus told us to love as ourselves.

There's a prayer in our prayer book which speaks of going from "strength to strength in a life of perfect service" ... and we are living in the vortex of exactly the opposite as we have gone from "crisis to crisis in a news cycle of utter chaos."

And that's not by accident, it's by design.
It's not a bug, it's a feature.

Because chaos is the point
Noise is the point

Drowning out hope is the point
Fomenting polarization and division is the point.

Because here's the deal: Americans didn't invent exceptionalism. Or imperialism, nativism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, or any of the other isms that divide us as a human family. The "othering" of human siblings is as old as the prophets and as new as whatever the next social media platform is they're cooking up to replace Twitter.

"Othering" our neighbors is arguably an "original sin" if we understand sin as that which separates us from God and God as the Source of love that calls us to love those neighbors as ourselves.

Calling us to choose love –
Calling us to choose life –
Calling us to choose that other world that is not only possible ...
She is on the way.

How do we choose? One place I want to suggest we start is by claiming the power of John 8:32 – "the truth will set you free" – and telling the truth about the role that toxic religion has played in feeding, fueling, and fomenting the worldview that incubates division, polarization, and violence.

There are complex sets of factors that lead to the rise of the populist, nationalist, sexist, xenophobic, White supremacist, homo/transphobic toxins that have contaminated our body politic, dominated our public discourse and inciting the rise of authoritarianism we are seeing in our nation.

But incubating those factors into this particular set of toxins requires a kind of cultural Petri dish which will simultaneously provide the nutrients necessary to nourish the toxic worldview while protecting it from contaminants like data, facts, diversity, and multi-cultural competency.

The biblical literalism foundational to 21st century American Evangelicalism does precisely that. It feeds, waters and fertilizes exclusively male language for God -- marginalizing women and non-binary people, perpetuating the patriarchy and fanning the fire of unexamined privilege making a Putin-style oligarchy appear preferable to a democracy where brown and black women have voice, transgender teens are protected and liberty and justice really means all.

And it is this fertile environment that becomes a breeding ground for a population pre-programmed to believe fact-based science is an enemy of faith, laying down neuron tracks in the brain set up to reject as "fake news" the fact based reporting of historic levels of corruption and obstruction at the highest levels of our government ... drowning out voices advocating for bridge building rather than bridge burning ... for collaboration rather than competition ... for repair seeking rather than grievance collecting.

It is a hot mess, all right. A hot mess that finds us standing in the need of prayer in general and of today's "help us understand what we're supposed to do and give us grace and power to do it" prayer in particular.

Give us grace and power to stand against Christian Nationalism by embracing Christian Aspirationalism ... help us as we aspire to live our lives in alignment with the hardest to do and least complicated call to love our neighbors. All our neighbors. Full stop.

Bishop Steven Charleston offers this as a place to start:

- *When many voices are shouting to get your attention, listen for the whisper they are seeking to silence.*
- *Today, millions of Americans are whispering. They are whispering their prayers. They are whispering in hope. They are praying for justice. This is the moment when their voices must be heard.*
- *But to do that we need to lower the volume. We do not need leaders playing to the gallery. We need them to be still, listen, and to allow the people to speak their prayers aloud.*

Bishop Charleston knows that when we speak our prayers aloud we speak the truth of our common humanity ... we see in each other the divine spark of love that is part of every single member of our Big Fat Human Family ... and it is that spark of love that hardwires us to be in relationship with God and with each other across whatever differences challenge us. Including the seemingly insurmountable differences that challenge us in our city, our nation and our world today.

That is the work we have been called to do and we are the ones who have been called to do it. In a moment we will turn to this altar and receive once again the holy food and drink of new and unending life and ask God to send us out strengthened for the journey – empowered for the hardest to do and least complicated charge to love our neighbors as God loves us.

But first, one more closing word from Bishop Baskerville-Burrows ... the gift who keeps on giving ... as we endeavor to meet this moment of both challenge and opportunity:

Movements move.

*There are decisions we make moment by moment
to live a particular way and this is our moment.*

This is our time.

*If we were ever called to claim
the counter cultural Christian mantle
that is about turning the world upside down
so that we can normalize love instead of hate — it is now.*

*Right now. You know the way.
You know what to do. You have totally got this.
Now go!
Go. And do likewise.
Amen.*