

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, August 11, 2024
10am

Text: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

Theme: Worship with Rejoicing: Prayers of the People

[prayer]

What can be said about prayer? So much, and so very little. Prayer is a deeply personal experience. What I experience in prayer may not be what you experience. We bow our heads, we close our eyes, and we try to communicate with something larger than ourselves. What that feels like is always unique.

But prayer is also a corporate discipline. Faith is not simply an individual pursuit; it is also the pursuit of the whole body of Christ. Jesus said, "I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them" (Matthew 18:19-20 CEB). We access a supernatural power when we join our hearts together in prayer.

As such, prayer is an important part of our corporate worship. We open worship in prayer. We close it in prayer. We pray before I preach. We dedicate our offering with prayer. We sing a prayer over the communion table. And we engage in a ritual we call the Prayers of the People.

Richard Foster, a Quaker theologian and expert on spiritual formation, wrote one of the best books to date on prayer. It is titled *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, and it explores twenty-one different types of Christian prayer. (You can find this book in our church library.) Foster describes prayer as consisting of three movements: moving inward to personal transformation, moving upward to intimacy with God, and moving outward to minister to others. And one of the outward movements of prayer – intercessory prayer – is what we do together during the Prayers of the People.

Intercession, from the verb “intercede,” which means “to intervene on behalf of another” – is the spiritual discipline of praying for others. If you have ever prayed, “Please God, help so-and-so with such-and-such,” then you are doing the work of intercession.

Intercession is one of the priestly functions of the Church. It is also the responsibility of every baptized Christian. In baptism we are initiated into Christ’s royal priesthood, and in the baptismal covenant we promise to “Pray for [each other], that [we] may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.”¹ We have inherited this priestly function from Jesus, who is our High Priest in heaven and who speaks to God on our behalf (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; John 17). The Holy Spirit does the same; according to Paul “the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes [for us] with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26 NRSVUE).

My experience is that a lot of Christians do not think they are good “prayers.” We think the mark of a good prayer is its eloquence. We are afraid of saying something stupid, or stumbling over our words, or not having enough words. My first summer in seminary I served a country church in western North Carolina. Every church I have served has done intercessory prayer differently and in this particular church sharing joys and concerns during worship was really important to them. They had a whiteboard in the worship hall and as the microphone was passed around the pastor would write the prayer requests on the whiteboard. And then the pastor would pray over the requests, extemporaneously (without preparation).

I was so nervous the first time I was asked to lead that portion of the service! I was accustomed to more formal Prayers of the People with structured, written prayers. I was afraid of offending the congregation by not honoring their prayer requests with a “good enough” prayer. My supervising pastor was kind but firm: “The only way you learn to lead in prayer is by doing it.”

He was right. The first few prayers were pretty wooden with lots of “ums.” But gradually I stopped feeling self-conscious. And as I relaxed, I was able to feel my way to the needs and emotions behind the prayer requests and translate them into words. I grew more comfortable with silence as I listened for the Holy Spirit.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>

That congregation had lots of grace for their nervous student pastor. They were able to hear past my stumbling words to the compassionate heart that longed to lift them up to God.

Which is why I love this image of the Spirit groaning on our behalf. This is an image of the Spirit of God praying for us. And there are no words involved! Instead, there is God's presence, so close to us, so in tune with our spirits, that no words are necessary. Words are not the essence of prayer. Instead, it is the posture of our spirits that matters most. And the posture that matters in intercessory prayer is a posture of compassion and accompaniment – of being *with*, bearing *with*, suffering *with*, empathizing *with* the needs of others.

King David, the traditional author of the Psalms (a book of prayers), was an eloquent speaker. When Saul and Jonathan died, David prepared an eloquent elegy for them both. He did the same for the military commander Abner. When David's infant son with Bathsheba died, he spoke somberly about death and mortality. But when his son Absalom was executed on the field of battle, the only words David could find were *beni'Avshalom* – "my son, Absalom." David's lament was the anguished, gut-wrenching howl of a father mourning his child. There is no more poignant portrayal of human grief in Scripture.

There is a lot of backstory to our Scripture lesson today. If you want all the details, you can read 2 Samuel 13-18. The lectionary left us last week with Nathan's dire prophecy after David's affair with Bathsheba – "The sword will never leave your own house" (2 Sam 12:10 CEB) – and this week it jumps to this scene of David's son and heir, Absalom, strung up in an oak as David's soldiers spear him to death. In the intervening verses, we witness to a violent family drama as David reaps the consequences of his sin. David's firstborn son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister, Tamar, who is Absalom's sister. So, Absalom avenges Tamar by murdering Amnon. He then flees the palace. David eventually forgives Absalom, but he refuses to let Absalom back into his home. So, Absalom plots to overthrow his father. He raises an army and attempts to kill David, forcing him to flee Jerusalem. Eventually Absalom and David's armies meet on the field of battle.

By law Absalom was an insurrectionist and a traitor. As king, David was compelled to punish him for these crimes. But as a father, he wanted nothing more than to reconcile with his son. Joab, the commander of David's army, knew that David's

paternal affection would prevent him from dealing justly with Absalom, and Absalom would just continue to destabilize the kingdom. So, despite David's command to "Protect my boy Absalom" (v. 5), Joab ordered his soldiers to kill him, and they threw his body into a shallow unmarked grave in the forest.

David was not only grieving the death of his son. He was also grieving the death of a future where their relationship was whole, and his family was restored. I expect David also grieved for the choices he made that led to this tragic outcome. Absalom showed the same kind of grasping, arrogant power that David demonstrated in his treatment of Bathsheba and Uriah. David sowed, watered, and grew the seeds of violence in his son. His sin transferred to his children. And in the end, both father and son paid a horrific price.

But even if we knew nothing of the complex history that lay between David and Absalom, we can still viscerally grasp the pain of David's loss. Whatever the circumstances or strains on a relationship, no parent wants to experience the loss of a child. Some of you know this kind of loss. You grieve a child or grandchild's death. Others of you are estranged from your child. You lament the choices they have made; you lament the choices that you have made.

None of us is entirely free from regret. We know what it is like to grieve for a future that will not come to pass. We are both victims and perpetrators of sin. We inherit the harmful patterns and behavior of generations before us and, unless we are mindful enough about those patterns to disrupt them, we risk perpetuating the cycle of violence into the next generation.

The Prayers of the People invite us to be mindful of the complex and unknown suffering of our neighbors – the person sitting next to us in church, the family living down the street, and communities of strangers halfway around the world. We acknowledge and lift to God war between nations, conflicts within families, and battles being waged in individual hearts. We acknowledge and lift to God the enormous challenges we face. And we acknowledge and lift to God our equally enormous need for a Savior – Someone who can show us a better way to live.

American preacher and theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote that when David wished he had died instead of Absalom, "he meant it, of course. If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid

the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that. As later history was to prove, it takes a God."²

Intercessory prayer does not require us to have the answers to the world's problems. It doesn't even require us to have the right words. It only requires us to have compassion. As I wrestle with the complex suffering in our world, I often think of the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

We have the power to offer one another grace through prayer – grace that comforts and strengthens and heals. We turn our faces toward God on behalf of people we do not know. We ask God to intervene in situations we barely understand. And as we do this, we offer ourselves to our neighbors as a sign of God's presence and love. Richard Foster writes, "If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer: Intercession is a way of loving others."³

So, when I say, "Let us pray," what exactly am I asking us to do?

² Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 6.

³ <https://x.com/FosterEveryday/status/1036333265022607362>

I am asking us to groan as the Spirit groans.

Amen.