

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - C - Proper 20 (2025)

Amos 8:4-7 Psalm 113
1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13

“First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone....This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior...” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I suspect we've all spent more time than usual on our proverbial prayer rugs these past weeks. It's shocking to the system to recount the atrocities that have taken place in our country, starting with the horrific shooting at Annunciation School and Church, where a deranged person fired indiscriminately into a church at children during Mass, killing two. This was followed by the murder of the young Ukrainian woman, Iryna Zarutska, minding her own business on a Minneapolis bus after completing her work shift, stabbed to death, a scene on video that makes the soul shake in utter disbelief and anger. A week ago, the assassination of Charlie Kirk in broad daylight in front of thousands at a Utah university rocked the nation to its core and set off a firestorm of comments like that I have never heard before. And several days ago, three Pennsylvania police officers were killed while responding to a call regarding domestic violence of some sort, officers doing what they took an oath to do, to protect and serve their community. Communities and the nation have been asked to pray, to remember those who lost their lives, and for the families, friends, and authorities charged with investigating these horrific tragedies. We have been asked to pray, recognizing that these four incidents are just four of numerous other incidents of death and loss that go unnoticed in the larger sense, but are still worthy of remembrance and prayers. Prayer seems so insufficient at times like these, and some have openly questioned the benefit and value of offering prayers. Yet we must pray because our holy writings demand it, and our proper relationship with God and each other requires it.

Our desire to pray, especially from a Christian perspective, is part of our soul's DNA. We were made to worship our Creator, the God of the universe. We are often called the 'people of the Book,' the Bible. And as Anglicans/Episcopalians, this goes double, as the Book of Common Prayer is a critical piece of connective tissue that holds together our common worship and life with each other and God. The BCP is filled with prayers for various occasions and 'all sorts and conditions of humankind.' We begin our weekly service with the Collect for Purity, where we acknowledge that God already knows what is in our hearts and that we cannot hide anything or thought from him. We pray for the forgiveness of our sins. We pray for the concerns we have and offer thanksgiving for the graces we have received. We pray for our leaders, for the sick, and for the dead. We offer our prayers of praise and thanksgiving during the Eucharist and pray to be sent out to do the work God has given us to do. We pray a lot, and Paul exhorts us to a level of prayer that is part of an ongoing lifestyle, not narrowly, but expansively.

In today's letter to Timothy, Paul urges prayers of all kinds to be offered for 'everyone,' underscoring God's universality and inclusiveness of Christian prayer. While Paul explicitly mentions "kings and all who are in high positions," 'everyone' means 'everyone.'

And herein we often find the rub, don't we? We're called to pray for the souls of those I mentioned earlier and their friends and families, but 'everyone' includes those accused of perpetrating the killing. 'Everyone' means those we don't like and those with whom we disagree. 'Everyone' means all those who hold responsibilities for authority for the common good, whether we agree with them or not. We pray for their ability and willingness to govern to help create an environment where we may live peaceful and quiet lives filled with godliness and dignity. We pray 'rightfully' because this pleases God. It renews our souls, reduces stress, and reveals God's light and love to those we interact with. As John Chrysostom, an ancient Father of the early Church, said so eloquently, "No one can feel hatred toward those whom he prays." Let that sink in.

I have no doubt everyone here knows what prayer is. Simply put, it's communicating with God. It is a path by which we grow our relationship with God, just as we do through worship, fellowship, and service to others. It is an opportunity available to us anytime, and Paul says we are to exercise this gift ceaselessly, to incorporate our prayers into our daily lives. We believe that we communicate with a God who is not 'far off,' but as close as our breath. As believers, we have been given a divine right to approach God because we understand ourselves and identify as children of God. When we pray, we enter into the presence of God with awe and reverence, yet in confidence and boldness. I wish I could remember the author, but the phrase, 'prayer is easier than waiting online for a human to answer the phone at the Social Security office' makes me chuckle when I find myself trying to impress God with the quality and sincerity of my prayer.

The first question my spiritual director and bishop ask me when we meet is, "How's your prayer life?" Sometimes my response is positive, other times confusing. Sometimes I find myself lamenting the evil in the world, other times being grateful for all the goodness that surrounds me. My responses have rarely been the same because my relationship with God is continually a work in process.

Despite what I said about prayer being always available and easier than connecting with someone at Social Security, it is a spiritual practice that needs constant attention. If you and I are to reach the level of St. Chrysostom's maxim of praying regarding one's enemies, we have to practice praying for our enemies. We need to practice and listen for the voice of God that reminds us that our enemies are also children of his. As we develop our talking and listening skills, we allow ourselves to pray as Jesus prayed, not that our will be done, but that God's will be done. As our prayer life matures, the compassion we express in prayer should know no bounds, lighten our load, and reflect the reality of godly righteousness in our lives.

So all this begs the question: How's *your* prayer life going? Do you find it a chore, an item to complete on a checklist? Is it 'hit and miss?' Do you find yourself talking/telling God more than listening? How is prayer integrated into your life? How do you feel after you've prayed? Is there thanksgiving along with petition and lament? Does prayer increase your sense of hope? Are you afraid to tell God exactly how you feel and what you think? Do your prayers bring hope and expectation? Are you willing to hear what God has to say and what it may require of you? All these are legitimate questions and ones that God wants to explore with you.

This congregation, along with your brothers and sisters who make up La Iglesia de la Resurreccion, is entering a new phase of life together: the calling of a new rector. As part of this process, you've developed a prayer for discernment, a prayer that combines the Holy Spirit's leading with your own agency. You're working with a clean slate, and I assure you that you will be surprised during this journey. I encourage you to embrace the flexibility of listening for what the Spirit is saying and where she is leading. Enjoy the ride.

These are exciting times because you can respond enthusiastically and confidently as you pay attention to what the Spirit is doing. This is what your prayers will do: they build confidence and trust, relieve the stress of the task, and create new opportunities heretofore either shrouded in uncertainty or clarified by the light of possibilities grounded in hope and expectation. We all know that God has already been at work to prepare you and the person best suited for this new calling. How great it is that you're not on the hook to 'do it all,' but you're working with the Spirit to bring to fruition the work of prayer and discernment demanded of you. Pray well, my friends, pray well. May God be glorified and this new community of faith be a source of hope, joy, and well-being for 'everyone.' Amen

