

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

July 25, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Hosea 1:2-10
 Psalm 85

Colossians 2:6-15
 Luke 11:1-13

Prayers of the people

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” (Luke 11:9)

Today we reach the fourth in our 8-week summer sermon series on the Eucharist, and by sheer good fortune today’s Gospel reading from Luke actually has some bearing on the topic of today’s sermon, the Prayers of the People. “Teach us to pray,” asks one of Jesus’ disciples, after watching Jesus pray “in a certain place” (Luke 11:1). Jesus replies by offering a simple prayer that has been “received by the church as [his] essential teaching on prayer.”¹ What we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer shows up not only here, in Luke’s Gospel, but also in the Gospel of Matthew, and it has become a prayer that unites Christian communities down through the ages and around the world. I won’t speak now about the Lord’s Prayer -- we will have a chance to consider it in a couple of weeks, when we reach the part of the Eucharist where that prayer is placed -- but for now let’s take from today’s Gospel passage Jesus’ encouragement that we join him in prayer, that we turn with him to speak honestly and fervently to the God who loved us into being, and that we be persistent in our prayers, willing to ask, seek, and knock again and again, fearless in trusting a God who yearns to give “good gifts” (Luke 11:13).

What shall we say about the Prayers of the People? Of course, the whole service of Holy Communion is an act of prayer, but the Prayers of the People give us a special opportunity as a gathered community to lay before God -- in silence and aloud -- the very particular longings and thanksgivings that move our hearts. We have listened to the biblical readings; we have absorbed the sermon; we have responded with an affirmation of faith by reciting the creed; and now, during the Prayers of the People, we open up a space in which to express the breadth and depth of Christian concern.

The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* offers six different forms for the Prayers of the People in a Rite II Eucharist, six different models or templates for prayer that can be used as printed, or adapted according to the needs of the community. A

¹ Aaron J. Couch, *Currents in Theology and Mission* (July 29, 2007), cited by *Synthesis*, Proper 12, Year C, July 25, 2010.

deacon or a layperson leads the prayers, and from your own experience you know how interactive the prayers can be. They create a movement back and forth, an interplay of call and response between the person leading the prayers and the rest of the congregation. Sometimes we respond to each petition by speaking a short line of our own, and sometimes we respond with an attentive silence, as we lift up the concern before God. At the end of our intercessions, the celebrant chooses a closing prayer or “collect,” a prayer that collects or gathers up all the prayers that have been expressed, and offers them all to God.

Now I’m going to be very honest here. There are some things about the Prayers of the People that I find very appealing. For one thing, it encourages a big circle of concern. If you turn to page 383 of the Prayer Book, you will see at the top of the page that whichever form of prayer we use, our intercessions embrace many dimensions of our life -- the Universal Church, its members and its mission; the nation and all in authority; the welfare of the world, the concerns of the local community, those who suffer, and those who have died. When I come to church caught up in my own preoccupations, and focused narrowly on my own little band of issues, it is good for me to open my awareness to the larger needs of the world, good for me to place my own concern into the wider basket of our human sorrows and joys. It is good to be reminded to pray for the people and the parts of reality that I might otherwise forget or ignore, and good to pray for the endless needs of the billions of human beings and other creatures with whom I share this planet. Only then can I begin to understand the depth and breadth of God’s infinite compassion, which excludes nothing and no one.

Another aspect of the Prayers of the People that appeals to me is that this part of the service can be creative and engage everyone -- it is intended, after all, to be the prayers “of the people.” If there is a concern that you want to name before God and your brothers and sisters in Christ, now is your chance to name it. If you want to feel the support of other people who share your own fervent longing for justice and peace, for healing, or for the mercy of God, now is your chance to experience that Christian solidarity, to know that you stand with others and that you are not alone. For many of us, certainly for me, one of the first things we do in a time of personal crisis is to phone the church and to ask that our concern be put on the prayer list. There is something immeasurably heartening in knowing that other members of the community are praying with us and for us.

And yet -- and yet. There are times when the Prayers of the People may not “work” so well for us. Sometimes the orderliness of the prayers gets in our way: we are hungry for something messier, more urgent, intimate, and raw, or more spontaneous. Sometimes the prayers seem too predictable: we stand there, reciting mechanical formulas as if reading something from a phonebook, and spacing out. Sometimes we want to linger on a particular petition, because we have a strong

response to it, but we can't pause, because the prayers have moved on. And sometimes we may feel swamped by words. In this parish we take the prayers at a measured pace, and surround them and undergird them with silence, but even so we may sometimes feel that all these words only cut us off from God. We may be hungry for spaciousness and silence, and find that words, even elegant words, constrict our awareness of divine mystery, rather than enlarge it.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Have you ever noticed something like this when you participate in the prayers? If the prayers of the people do bore you sometimes, or give you no felt sense of encounter with the living God, then I encourage you to let your heart speak in the many silences during the prayers. Let your heart cry or sing its lament or song during the silence or beneath the words. Take note of the images, thoughts, or concerns that come to you during the Prayers of the People -- the memories, people, or situations that seem to call for more focused prayer -- the inward callings of the heart that ask you to return to prayer when you go home

For there are many places to pray, and in addition to drawing you to Sunday worship, God may be inviting you to another place for prayer. There are three "places" in which to pray: the room, the house, and the sanctuary. I am citing here an essay by a Presbyterian minister, Charles Olsen, whose insights helped my own understanding of prayer.² He argues that each place has its unique contribution to make to our prayer life, and that each has limitations if it is allowed to stand alone. Like sitting on a three-legged prayer stool, we can only keep our balance if we have three places for prayer.

The first place for prayer is the room. Jesus advises his followers, "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Jesus is speaking here about the value of solitude and silence, about the kind of prayer in which we shut the door to all external distraction and preoccupation, and listen with complete attention to the inner voice of love. Prayer in solitude can take many forms. We may wish, as Ignatius of Loyola suggested, to gaze at length on a Gospel passage and to let its sights, sounds, and smells become vivid in our imagination. We may want to practice *Lectio Divina*, that ancient Benedictine method of reading a biblical passage very slowly until a word or phrase lights up and invites us to linger for a while. We may wish to spend our prayer time giving attention to a word or phrase that expresses our longing for God, maybe by repeating a phrase such as "Bless the Lord, my soul," or "Come, Lord Jesus." What

² Charles M. Olsen, "The Closet, the House, and the Sanctuary: An Exploration of the Locus for Prayer and Worship." Typed, undated manuscript. Author identified as the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Grand Isle, Maine.

other words do we need than that? Or we may wish to dive entirely below words and attend to God in silence. There are many prayer warriors who would tell us that there is nothing more like God than silence. I savor, for instance, the experience of writer Madeleine L'Engle. She loved words, and authored some 60 books, yet she wrote a poem ("Word") that begins like this:

I, who live by words, am wordless when
 I try my words in prayer. All language turns
 To silence. Prayer will take my words and then
 Reveal their emptiness. The stifled voice learns
 To hold its peace, to listen with the heart
 To silence that is joy, is adoration.

The first place of prayer is the room, where in solitude we can go deep, and wait for the living Mystery who comes to us, as it came to Elijah, in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12).

The second place of prayer is the house -- which means a small group. Its warrant comes from Jesus, who promised, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). The early Church met for fellowship in house churches (c.f. Acts 2:42), and for several centuries, house churches were the place in which small groups of Christians gathered to pray, hear Scripture, sing praises, eat meals, celebrate Eucharist. Here at Grace Church there are many ways to pray in a small group -- perhaps by joining a pastorate, the Sunday morning Prayerful Bible Study, or one of our Saturday morning Quiet Days. Or maybe you want to start a prayer group of your own.

The value of praying in a so-called "house" (or small group) is that we have a place to speak our truth face to face, to be more vulnerable with each other, to offer each other accountability for our Christian life, and to pray for each other in a spontaneous and more intimate way. The "house" is a place for disclosure and empathy -- a place, as St. Paul puts it, to "rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

The third "place" of prayer is the sanctuary, where we gather as a large crowd. Jesus met with crowds when he taught the masses and healed the sick, and when he went to the synagogue ("as was his custom," [Luke 4:16]). Gathering to celebrate festivals and to worship in the temple was part of his Jewish religious practice. In the same way, every Sunday we Christians meet in a large assembly to worship the Holy Mystery, and to recite the drama of grace, the story of our salvation.

So if the Prayers of the People give you a powerful and invigorating space in which to name your concerns and to offer them to God, then I thank God for that.

And if the Prayers of the People leave you restless or wanting something more, then I thank God for that, too, for the Holy Spirit may be inviting you to deepen and enlarge your prayer, and to explore other “places” in which to pray. We can’t learn to pray all the time everywhere until we learn to pray some of the time somewhere, and these three places of prayer give us a chance to encounter the God who dwells within us, between us, and among us.

Whether we pray in a room, a house, a sanctuary -- or in the wide-open spaces of the natural world -- the mercy of the Lord is everlasting: Come let us adore.