

For the people of St. Philip's
6 Easter, Year B
John 15:9-17
Maria Hoecker, preacher

Happy Rogation Sunday!!!! ?????? Did you know today is Rogation Sunday? This is the short season in our church calendar when we make the connection between prayer and the growing season of spring. At harvest we give thanks for ripened crops and at Rogationtide we pray for the success of what is being planted.

While Rogationtide is now an optional observance in the Anglican Church calendar, historically the faithful observed the Rogation days by fasting three days in preparation to celebrate the Ascension. Farmers often had their crops blessed by a priest at this time of Rogationtide, which has always occurred during planting season in the Northern Hemisphere. We celebrate the Ascension this coming Thursday, 40 days after Easter. Paul describes Christ as in heaven, the earliest Christian reference to Jesus in heaven. It is in the Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11, where Jesus is taken up bodily into heaven forty days after his resurrection, as witnessed by his apostles, with a prophecy to return.

It is from the word root of the word "Rogation" that leads us toward the idea that prayer is for the asking. The Latin word 'rogare' means 'to ask' and Rogation Sunday is called that because in the gospel traditionally set for this day we hear the verse: 'If you ask anything of the father in my name, he will give it to you.' (Jn 16:23). It's from John 16: v 23, the prosperity Gospel reading. Historically it's a good verse to read when you want your plantings to grow and be fruitful.

Since time began, the thing on everyone's mind at this time of the year has been the successful growth of seeds sown, at least it used to be. Now days we take for granted our food supply. We get most of our food from wide store aisles, not thin crop rows. We forget that harvests aren't a daily occurrence that can be exercised at our convenience with a wire shopping cart. We forget that sowing, harvesting, and preservation is a risky business, with no guarantee of success.

With Rogation Sunday's traditional Gospel reading, it was natural to make the connection between praying for the successful planting of crops and Jesus' invitation 'to ask anything in my name'. It's easy to imagine centuries full of superstitious hard-working farmers saying a prayer and then hoping for a fruitful harvest. To everything~ turn turn turn~ there is a season, and so it goes. In the autumn, the growing season would turn to harvest and prayers for thanksgiving would be offered in celebration....if the bad weather or insects didn't come and wipe it all out. The circle of prayers has turned with the seasons of life on this earth since time began.

Jesus deeply knew the language and experience of those who tended the pastures and the vineyards. But, prayer is not offered as an alternative to hard work. Jesus never said that prayer replaces hard work. There's an episode of The Simpsons tv show where some shoes are thrown through the plate glass window in Ned Flanders' house. Ned is sort of a wide-eyed Christian character on The Simpson's cartoon show. The Simpson family is always making fun of Ned. Nothing fazes Ned. He's what you might call a happy clappy guy. Ned is not fazed by the broken window or shattered glass all over the floor but simply turns to his boys and says 'anyone been praying for shoes?'

The cartoon is exaggerated, of course, but there is an edge to the satire that resonates with me.

There's a popular idea out there surrounding prayer, but I see it as a temptation. Its proof text lies with the prosperity Gospel reading. It's the idea that if you pray hard enough, if you pray well and often, you will somehow get on the right side of God...a personal ascension of sorts. This belief infers that God may not know that there is a particular need, so if you name it loudly enough with just the right piety and good words, you will be rewarded with whatever it is that you desire. Of course this must be true, because sometimes prayers are answered. Surely there's a reason for that. If you pray hard enough, your prayer will be rewarded right? It seems to say it right there in John. If your prayer isn't rewarded, well then, you must not have been praying hard enough or with enough fervor, right?

Right? No. no. NO. Actually, the book of Job disputes that very idea. Job's friends offer up that rationale and Job pretty much slams them down. Prayer is vital to our existence, but it is not about reminding God to be open to our will. God knows we have strong wills. The purpose of prayer is to open our wills to God. Our prayers open us up to truth, love, and transformation, all of which comes in abundance with the turn of the seasons.

Prayer, if it is genuine and sincere, IS an articulation of desire. True prayer is a heartfelt plea for what we most earnestly desire – what any of us understand to be our own will. Prayer is not our task to align God's will with our will but it is our task to align our will with God's love. Prayer opens our hearts and our minds to the love of God.

The practice of prayer is difficult and confusing, at least it is for me, and I pray daily. There are many days when the only prayer that I can attempt is silent prayer because often my own words seem so arrogant and thin to me. My own feelings of humiliation, humbleness, anger, bewilderment, fatigue, doubt, and distraction invade my prayers on a regular basis. It helps me to realize that prayer to God is not like a conversation between two people. Rather it is a triangular awareness: prayer is between us and God - yes, but there is a third part of the triangle, and that is our own reality of the fragility of life on this earth.

We express both our desires and our pain in our prayers. In many cases when we pray it might seem that we get no response. We are so uncomfortable with silence in this culture, we've come to expect immediate results in most of what we do these days. God knows our fast-paced life as it slowly unfolds. If our own prayers do not name our reality then we should question the honesty and depth of our prayers. It's ok to rant about the shattered glass on the floor and the fact that you weren't asking for shoes.

When people pray from the depths of their true heart, with or without words, they begin to realize that life is not about acquisition. Prayer is not about inflicting our own unexamined desires on the world or on other people. For any person who prays, life becomes an opportunity to learn how to desire what God is giving. We learn how to abide in love, as God loves us. Prayer becomes a daily walk, stepping through what Parker Palmer calls the "tragic gap." -a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might be. Prayer helps us to bridge the tragic gap of life lived on this side of heaven.

Praying heals the one who prays. For all of us, a healing transformation is needed because each of us is caught up in this hurting world. Prayer opens us up to naming the reality of what is, just as our prayers open us up to accept what is to come.

This is a strong message I'm delivering today. Walking the way with Jesus Christ doesn't mean that we are freed from pain. If we are hurting, God has not abandoned us. Through Jesus Christ, God abides with us as we abide with God. When we abide with God we do not withdraw from this broken world. Our openness to God in prayer is intertwined with

our openness to fully live into the joys and pains of the world. You can't pull it all apart.

Fervent prayers won't always shield us from harm. That's superstition, not prayer. There are simply times in every person's life when it's "our turn." It's our turn to face loss, it's our turn to reap an abundant harvest, it's our turn to experience tragedy, it's our turn to be the favored one, it's our turn to be scared, it's our turn to experience profound joy, it's our turn to mourn. It's simply just our turn.

With or without words, our prayers flow out of us as God's love flows in. Our human experience is of this world, but God's loving grace, through the Holy Spirit, brings the promise of continual renewal. New life comes to us in abundance through Jesus Christ. To everything, turn turn turn, there is a season~ from that ageless song we can rise up from our prayers and proclaim, Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!