

May 13, 2018
Easter 7, Year B
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Christ Church, Exeter

Is That Your Prayer?

Our movement through the Easter season continues. On this Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost, I would like for us to consider the prayers we pray. All kinds of prayers. Small and large, important and not, hail Mary's, and 'my life depends on it' prayers. First and last. Prayers of regret, thanksgiving, awe, joy and wonder and prayers of longing and loss. The setting for today's focus is the gospel reading comes from a portion of the extended prayer Jesus himself prayed the last time he gathered with his disciples and friends.

Prayer was the actually the cue for my small part in the Pine Street Players at Christ Church's latest production: the 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee playing at the Exeter Town Hall. PSP, as we call it, is one of the ways we reach out and minister to the young people of our parish and beyond. Through music, dance, and drama the young people who come find community, learn the value of shared work, and discover and sharpen their God-given gifts. They find their voice and it's thrilling to experience.

My walk-on role is as Jesus Christ. As you can expect, I'm playing a middle-age, better-fed version of our Savior. Jesus enters the scene in Act II when, in the midst of the featured Spelling Bee competition, he receives a prayer request from a very self-confident and precocious Marcy, played in today's show by our own Elsa Bishop. Marcy is not quite satisfied with the word she's been given. She speaks six foreign languages after all, plays concert piano and has already skipped two grades. She was underwhelmed and unimpressed with the simple word given: camouflage. Can YOU spell camouflage? C-A-M-O-U-F-L-A-G-E. She asks Jesus for help in finding a harder word to spell.

I can't say that this staged back-and-forth conversation has the theological depth as Jesus' Biblical encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, yet there is enough going on worth a mention.

At first, Jesus presses Marcy: "that's your prayer?" Of all the things to pray for, you want a more challenging word in a Spelling Bee? Then the audience begins to see the cracks in Marcy's stone-cold confidence. The girl who seems like she's "all business" carries with her a host of self-doubts and worries. We learn that she rarely sleeps more than three hours a night and is not allowed to cry. In the face of tremendous expectation and mounting pressure to succeed, what she really wants to know is whether Jesus would be disappointed if she doesn't win.

As I watched this group of talented young people rehearse week after week leading up to the show – juggling school, homework and other commitments – I could not help but think about and remember how hard the Middle and High School years can be. Growing bodies, changing voices, shifting friendships, lofty dreams, and the fullness that family life means today. The play speaks to the struggle that many of us can relate to regardless of how old or young we are: how to live in a world that often values winning and success over all else? – where expectations can be exceedingly high and push up against Kingdom of God priorities. There is a line in one of the play's songs that I wish, playing the role of Jesus, I could have crashed the stage to challenge, it goes: "God's hates losers because losers don't know how to win." I'm forever fond of the commentator Robert

Capon's handy list of those who command most of his attention: the last, the least, the lost, and the little. Capon reminds a success-minded culture and excellence striving people that the work of the Messiah will be accomplished not by winning but by losing. (p. 180 Kingdom, Grace, Judgement).

As I exit stage right, as Jesus I tell Marcy she'll be just fine whatever happens: win or lose. A timely message of comfort to an anxious generation – young and old.

Prayer as petition. We are all familiar with these requests. God, Jesus, Holy Spirit – pick your go-to member of the Holy Trinity – can I have a moment? A little help down here. I'm in trouble. I'm afraid. I'm lost. I'm sad. I'm sinking. So, if's it not a too much to ask: a good test result, a successful interview for a job I really need and want, healthy check-up, a stress-free family Thanksgiving Dinner, a long overdue reconciliation with a friend.

It's OK, right? To ask away. Jesus said after all: 7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives.

Yet, should we even bother the Almighty with our small request: doesn't it seem... well, small? With wars raging, people dying, and refugees fleeing we approach a very busy God with: a prayer that my cat will come back home tonight.

This is where we can use some guidance and perspective. We don't have time to cite all of the time Jesus prayed, but we can hear again what he chose to mention when he gathered with his circle during his last hours.

In that upper room, with the air heavy and the anxiety rising, Jesus connected with what those around him most cared about at that moment. They were growing afraid that all the things he had said about his dying would in fact come true. They wondered about how they would go on without the one who led them there.

In that moment, Jesus prayed for them. He prayed to his Father: (John 17:6-19) v. 6 "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word." In the face of their very real fear, Jesus supported and encouraged them.

Being faithful is about praying for one another. For Patti and Bruce who celebrate the birth of a grandchild... for Jim who cares for his dear wife. Each prayer offered is a blessing – for it adds and never takes away.

Jesus knew, he had to know, that some of those who followed him would share his same fate of a brutal death. So, he prayed:

John 17: 11 Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. 12While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. 13But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

Watch over us Lord and keep us safe – we pray.

In this in between liturgical time, when we are between the absence of the physical Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit next Sunday at Pentecost, we can listen more closely to our own prayers and the prayers of God's people.

Prayers of thanksgiving on this day for the mothers in our lives: our birth mothers, adopted, proxy and borrowed. As God gives life through love, we can offer a prayer for the woman past and present who formed us into who we are today.

Prayers for peace in war-raged countries. For healing of broken relationships. For second chances, long shots and lost causes.

Prayers for harder words in spelling bees, and perhaps, for an easier path living through the next few weeks. All prayers are welcomed and received. None are dismissed or insignificant.