

July 28, 2024  
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Christ Church Exeter

### **A Recipe for Healthy Christian Life**

Once in a blue moon, as the expression goes, one of the 'light bulb going off in your head' moments' – and an idea comes along that turns out to far better than you could have imagined.

I had one of those moments fifteen years ago when I was writing a grant application to fund my first real sabbatical leave from full-time ministry since I was ordained. The opportunity to step away from parish life for three uninterrupted months was the goal. The challenge was to make my application stand out from the many others submitted.

Back in 2007, I had been watching like so many others scenes of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast and the city of New Orleans. A few short years after the historic natural disaster, I attended a conference in that city. I don't know how many of you have been to New Orleans, but it is a unique place in our country that takes its food very seriously. We had the opportunity to learn about the importance that food and culture were playing in the rebuilding of the city.

We heard about the local *The Times-Picayune* newspaper running a series of recipe exchange articles. You might wonder: that does not seem like a big deal. But remember this is New Orleans. What the paper was doing was inviting their readers to send in their once tightly held and secret family recipes to share with the wider public– we're talking gumbo, jambalaya, red beans and rice, crawfish etouffee, po-boys and muffalattas and more. Why? Because so many residents had lost those treasured recipes in the flood waters. What the newspaper did was a tremendous public service: they showed how food and cooking and sharing meals brings communities together and helps them heal and grow.

And there was the idea to hopefully move my application to the top of the pile. "The Urgency of Hospitality" it was called: "a collection to build community recipe by recipe." The ending of the story is a good one: I received a very generous grant that made it possible to step away for a bit to travel and write. My family ate very well as we collected recipes and stories from Chicago to California to Montana to back home.

In our gospel this morning from John, we can see the urgency of hospitality on full display. Jesus knew that people needed to be fed. He said, after being confronted a major crowd control challenge: "Make the people sit down. Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted." Everyone on that day ate their fill and there were leftovers for good measure. Jesus never failed to see the urgency of the moment.

Imagine replicating that scene today in our world -- where so many have more than enough and too many have next to nothing. How might life be different?

Food and cooking and hospitality can shape who we are.

Ever since the experience of working on that sabbatical project, I often thought of recipes as a metaphor for the way the faith gets lived out and sustained. What goes into a healthy Christian life?

If we take a closer look at the today's reading from Ephesians, one can make a good case that the apostle Paul lays out a pretty good recipe for what goes into good prayer – this ongoing mystical spoken and unspoken conversation between the heart of the believer and a God who has been revealed in Scripture and made known through Jesus Christ.

Let's deconstruct this particular prayer.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father.” The prayer begins with a posture. Bowing in Paul's time and in ours is a sign of a respect and honor. They form the body language of worship. Some of us do it to this day. #6 on the late great comic Robin Williams's Top Ten Reasons for being an Episcopalian, he listed 'pew aerobics': which I take to mean all the standing, sitting, kneeling, and bowing we do.

Though Robin Williams did not say it, remember that what we value most in our church is the freedom and choice to do what brings us closer to God. We do not mandate a particular way to read Scripture. We don't require kneeling, or bowing, or genuflecting (bending the knee). All these physical actions -- like a handshake, a smile, a kiss or a hug – can be ways to commune with God without words.

Bowing for believers like Paul was a way to enter into the conversation called prayer from a place of awe and reverence – key components of understanding where we stand and where God stands.

And the God to whom Paul was praying was far greater than the local gods and shrines of the ancient world – God's scope and breath and reach was universal and unifying: v. 15 “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.”

We are in a moment in our society where the word 'unity' gets used and tossed around a lot. In times of crisis, leaders of all stripes are keen to claim the phrase in speeches and rallies: “we need to be united.”

Remember that a large part of Paul's key message to the communities he founded and visited was that, in his words, 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28 He was shaping a new commonwealth of peoples into what we would call the Body of Christ. The divisions of tribe and clan and status and ethnic origin has no place or currency to God.

This is why the movement of the so-called Christian Nationalism is so deeply offensive to so many. Movements and currents that divide, I believe, run counter to the unifying dream of God.

Our prayer mix continues that God may grant that, “according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.”

When I think about the prayer I ask most often for myself, and others is strength. Even before I ask for wisdom, understanding, patience and healing, I find that I ask for strength. How about you?

“The Miracle Club” is a wonderful film that came out last year that takes place in 1967 Ireland that tells the story of a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France. An all-star cast, including Dame Maggie Smith, take you on a journey filled with laughs and tears. The various characters were all looking and hoping for some kind of miracle by bathing in the waters of the famous shrine. I don’t want to give away the ending of movie, but the line that has stayed with me came from the Roman Catholic priest who led the trip. When a woman faces disappointment that the healing she had hope and prayed for did not instantly materialize after bathing in the cold waters, Father Dermot said that “the real purpose of the pilgrimage was to sustain one’s faith even in the absence of miracles.”

Grace can come in the form of strength to continue on living and working and breathing even when the miracles hoped for don’t come in the ways expected.

Paul prays that 17 “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

These are the words and images we lift up: dwell, being rooted and grounded.

What do they invite you to imagine?

Consider the story Jesus told about a foolish man who build his house on the sand. 27 “And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” But those who hear and act upon his words, are like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.” Matthew 7:24-27

The God of our tradition does not just pass through our lives and checks in from time to time to see how we are doing. And neither should we. Our hope is that God will camp out and live and take root and dig deep so that we can have the power to push up against the winds and tides and forces that want to knock us down and deplete our spirit.

Here is a final ingredient that we could add to this prayer recipe.

20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

We have not even begun to imagine what can be done through us to make our world a more Christ like world.

What are the urgent signs around you that need attention?

What parts of your life need to be fed?

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Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

John 6:1-21 Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.