

Prayers of the People

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 August 11th, 2024

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In this series we have been trying to look at the different parts of worship. Why we gather? Who is it for? And ultimately, what is it supposed to do?

In our particular service, we spend a great deal of time on prayer. Linda puts careful and considerate effort into compiling a list from people who call her, email, or drop notes in the offering basket. She follows up on developments, changes, blessings of people healing or ways we can share with others in their grief. We mention our leaders, our world, our denomination, and after each we say together—"Lord, hear our prayers."

When guest preaching early on, I would always shy away from the "pastoral prayer", being as you, know, I wasn't considering myself a "pastor." Then a mentor pointed out an alternate use of the word- "pastoral". The Old English meaning was more "pastoral", of the countryside, the pasture, the people. Thinking of it as the "people's prayer" sat better with me.

The prayers of the people.

In particular, the prayers of the people invite us to respond to the complicated and often unknown challenges facing our neighbors in the pews, down the street, and around the world. Few simple solutions exist to the complex problems that plague our lives, whether we're talking about war among nations, conflicts within families, or battles being waged in individual hearts. Whether our neighborhoods are hungry for food, a living wage, or unconditional love, we must grapple with the problems. And yet, no matter the enormity of the challenges we face, grace abounds again and again. The prayers of the people remind us that when we don't know what to do or we are afraid to acknowledge the suffering around us, we begin with prayer; and not just individual prayer—corporate prayer. We don't have to know the details of

our neighbors' struggles to gather together and offer one another grace through prayer.

These prayers help us understand to what Paul is describing in today's passage. First and foremost, he starts by asking us to claim ourselves as a people.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Vv. 31-32)

We start with identity. Who we are and how we live. Implied throughout the letter and particularly in these verses is Paul's understanding of baptism. In baptism we're given new life. We're "reborn" through Christ. The "putting away" in verse 25 refers to the practice of the Early Church of taking off one's old clothing and putting on a new white baptismal robe as part of the ceremony. Baptism meant "putting on Christ" (letting Christ shape how you live). Verse 30, which speaks of being "marked with a seal", is another baptismal reference. It reminds us to Whom we belong.

Baptism is about transformation; the new identity we receive in baptism leads to a changed life. Those baptized in Jesus Christ live differently. Duke Seminary Dean Samuel Wells writes: "Christians aren't just called to make a difference. They're called to be **made different** by Jesus Christ."

Paul offers some guidelines of what living this "different way" looks like: (slightly paraphrased.)

Don't lie. Be honest and speak truthfully.

Don't let anger destroy your relationships; don't hang on to your grudges.

Don't take what's not yours.

Work so that you have something to share with others.

Don't use "trash talk" or words that hurt, put down or make fun of others. Speak in ways that affirm, build up and encourage those around you.

Nourish and tend to your spiritual life.

Don't indulge in bitterness, wrangling, gossip, slander or malice.

Be kind. Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Paul works his way down the list, wrapping it up with "**Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us....**" That's the key verse. We're God's people and we're to be who we are. Paul's equation is simple to say. "We love because God loves us. We forgive because we're forgiven. We're kind to one another because of God's kindness to us. God came among us as a servant; that's the role we take in the world". Simple to say, yes...

The Christian lifestyle isn't a matter of adhering to some rigid set of rules. It's a relationship with God that flows outward in love and grace to others. It's a grateful response to what God did and continues to do for us in Jesus Christ. It's not a question of merit (theirs or ours). It's grace. This text doesn't say: Do this and become a child of God. It says: You are a child of God, show it. Be who you are. Be Whose you are. Look and act like the One who loves you. Paul isn't just talking about our lives as individual followers of Jesus. He's also talking about our life in community. It embraces both our personal and public lives. He warns against those things which destroy or break down our community life.

Pastor John E. Sumwalt writes about one of his "favorite forgiveness stories", clipped from Dear Abby column in his local newspaper years ago. It was based on a question Abby raised about "whether a baby shower should be given for an unwed mother-to-be."

A woman from Rochester wrote in to say that the question "revived a long-forgotten memory:"

"In 1962, I was seventeen and had just graduated from high school... In those days, most unwed mothers were sent away to have their babies, and then give them up for adoption so that no one in the family would be embarrassed. I chose to stay home and keep my baby.

"I'm sure my parents were embarrassed and disappointed in me. The baby's father and I were immature, and a silly quarrel had caused our breakup. I was so depressed that I considered suicide on a daily basis.

"In my seventh month of pregnancy, thirty women from my office gave me a baby shower! I can't begin to tell you how much it meant to me to have those wonderful women shower me with their good wishes and much needed gifts. They literally saved my life and my baby's life.

"The shower turned my life around. After that, I was able to hold my head up. When my son was a year old, his father and I got together and were married."

Sometimes it takes a village to provide the forgiveness needed to save a life.

Prayers of the people.

"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit". We might put it this way: "Don't do things that hurt God." When we cause others to suffer, we wound God. Senseless shootings, adults and children dying in extreme poverty, neglect of those in need, groups targeted, ridiculed and degraded because they're "different", slurs painted on places of worship, human trafficking, persons persecuted for their faith; the exploitation of creation; these are ways humanity "grieves the Holy Spirit".

It's so very simple to say. It's so very difficult to do: that carefully curated practice of being able to look at others and see

God in them. To know God loves and cherishes them as God loves and cherishes us. It calls for intentionality. It calls for discipline. It's the choice **to live differently and to make a difference by how we live**. Can we practice that kind of kindness and respect in our words, and actions? Can we remember it as we struggle and disagree over issues and solutions? In all the clamor and chaos around us, can we remember we're called to have the eyes, mind and heart of Jesus?

"*Walk in love*" writes Paul. We try. It's hard. God gives us the grace that's necessary to do it. God loves us. We're God's beloved children. That's a wondrous gift. It's also **a great responsibility**. The God who chooses to love us; honors us with the task of sharing that love with others.

A teacher had each of his students bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to class. For every person these students refused to forgive in the course of their daily lives, they were told to choose a potato, write on it the name and date, and put it in a plastic bag. Some of their bags, as you can imagine, were quite heavy.

They were then told to carry this bag with them everywhere for one week, putting it beside their beds at night, on the car seat when driving, next to their desk at school. The hassle of lugging this around with them made it clear what a weight they were carrying emotionally and spiritually by not being willing to forgive. Naturally, the condition of the potatoes deteriorated to a nasty slime. It was a metaphor for the price they paid for holding onto their anger.

Because so far, I have found that the only way to extend the grace we offer through prayer in worship into the other six days of the week, is those prayers of the people. At the risk of a terrible pun, I want to pray with my friends. I want to "pray well with others." I ask this in the name of the One who taught us to pray...