

Dear friends in Christ



July 24, 2022, 7 Pentecost, Proper 12

“When you pray, say...”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15, [16-19];
Luke 11:1-13

Friday night bright lights. The football team, their coaches and handlers trotted out onto the field of the stadium to the uproarious cheers of the hometown crowd. There they all paused on the fifty-yard line, assembled in a clump, with bowed heads as their coach led them in prayer.

Anne Lamott, hearing of this pious spectacle was horrified. She, a believer, considers such sanctimonious demonstrations of religiosity nothing short of blasphemy. They diminish and demean the faith when it is so trivialized. Not what Jesus had in mind.

She objects -- when we consider the real problems of the world – the hellish difficulties women now face concerning their health care – the incineration of our natural world under the embers of global warming – the intolerable pain of places like Uvalde, Highland Park, the list goes on beyond remembering – when we read daily of the horrors in Ukraine, starvation and disease in Third World countries – when one takes all this into her soul, what the hell is a football game that God should be concerned?! That God, that we, believers and non-believers should be concerned? Such pious blather borders on blasphemy.

Here's Anne's rant:

"It offends me to see sanctimonious public prayer in any circumstance – but a coach holding his players hostage while an audience watches his piety makes my skin crawl."¹

And on such self-serving expressions of righteousness, remember Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the Publican. "I thank God I am not like..."

I remember long ago; our congregation was involved in a church volleyball league. Before the opening game of the season, one of the pastors proceeded to lead us all in prayer. He muttered something to the effect of..."Lord, we know it's only a little piece of metal at stake...Not much of any consequence..."

Now, all the while, in my mind, I'm subverting the pious thoughts of this sanctimonious prayer... "Yeah, pastor -- just a little piece, just a scrap of metal this league trophy...Right! We're going to go out there and KILL FOR IT. Egos, elbows...they'll be out in full force in service of coming out "King of the Hill for this little, bitty inconsequential scrap." And that's pretty much how it went that evening. Not quite Marquis of Queensbury sportsmanship on display.

As Jesus was concluding his prayers, he was approached by one of his disciples. "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them. "When you pray, say: Abba, Father – Daddy, really – (and here we recite this familiar prayer in the words and thought forms of the spirituality of New Zealand Anglicans, as heavily influenced by Māori and Polynesian culture):

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

¹ Anne Lamott, "I Don't Want to See a Football Coach Praying on the Field," *New York Times* Opinion, Monday, July 11, 2022.

May the hallowing of your name echo through the universe; the way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world; your heavenly will be done by all created beings; and your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread that we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and forever. Amen.

This essential prayer of the Christian faith is widely prayed throughout the world by almost all faithful followers of Jesus. And also, by many outside the faith. I associate it with the summons to attention by one of my first teachers:

“FOCUS, JOHN. FOCUS.”

This prayer directs us to what we need to sustain life, and invites us into the process – to what opens a window to eternity.

We need to acknowledge that life is not just about us. There’s an overarching summons beyond our limited cares and petty grievances. We need forgiveness because of the hurt we cause, and likewise we need to let go of the hurt others cause. We need daily sustenance. We need relationship with one another and the verities that make for a life worth living.

Without this life orientation, our existence is the slow circling of a Final Drain. Jesus is telling us in these brief few words – FOCUS ON WHAT MAKES IT ALL WORTHWHILE. What brings joy, what brings life abundant.

Don’t squander the splendor of it all in trivia. We only go around once.
FOCUS, John!

Martin Buber, grasping at the idea of the unknowable divine, settled on an expression of that reality in relationship. In his work, *I and Thou*, he fleshes out

how it is that we are drawn into relationship wherein we are valued, and value others.

When Moses asks for the Holy Name at Mt. Sinai, all that is revealed is: “I am who I am.” Or “I am becoming who I am becoming.”

We are, further, told that this reality is bound up with neighbor. “You shall love the Lord Your God with all your soul, and all your heart, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Neighbor and the Great Mystery – that’s about as close as any of us will get.

It is this simple prayer Jesus taught his followers that centers mind and heart on what is necessary for this love ethic – the final requirement of Torah.

Love of God, love of neighbor – one and the same. Do this and you are very near to the Reign of the Divine.

It was for this reason that I was so overjoyed when our son Christopher shared his new vocational direction. Being a PhD student at Yale, I always thought he’d end up a professor at some prestigious college. But lately he began drifting from that direction towards thinking he might want to teach high school or maybe community college. But then he surprised me with a revised vocational goal: He wanted to teach in a prison.

“Dad, these people really need the education, not some pampered, elite, rich kids.” I thought, maybe all that he got from home, from church has put down some very deep roots. Well, glory be!

Not far from what matters!

I told him that I had a friend who actually teaches college-level classes in prisons. Chris Hedges, a Presbyterian pastor and a Pulitzer-Prize-winning war correspondent for the New York Times, has seen some of the worst of the worst prisons in many far-off, war-torn lands. He’s taught classes for a number of years in a New Jersey prison.

“Would you like to me to call him? He certainly has some incredible experiences to share.” Our Chris said that would be great. I was surprised I still had Hedges on speed dial. He said he would love to talk with our son. Maybe our son should first read Chris’s recently published book, *Our Class*, a

work about his classes behind bars which doesn't sugar-coat prison life in the slightest.²

As these classes are college level, these students are bright and capable of difficult material. To enable them to draw from their life experiences, Hedges has introduced a number of playwrights that open up prison life, notably August Wilson. His play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, set in 1911 in a boarding house, refers to a song by W.C. Handy about "Joe Turner's Blues."³

Like prayer – the real thing – deep listening – Wilson's plays draw these men into their interior lives. Into what most matters. Into "finding their song."

"What is this song?" Hedges asks. "Like a prayer. Like memory," another answers.

"It connects you to where you came from. It connects you with your ancestors. It connects you with your own history; your own story. It validates and lifts up your suffering, your dignity, your humanity, your resistance. It tells you that you will not be defeated by the troubles of this world. It affirms you and your people."

Until we find our song, we are but dried bones. We only stand when we find our song, when we're fully resurrected as free men and women, when we are able to shout out our song, when we can say who we are and where we came from.⁴

This brief prayer of the Jesus movement, if allowed to marinate over a lifetime, connects us with our song – the pain, the tragedy, the delight and the blessing.

"Our song is so difficult because of the pain," one said. "Because it's about loss, about suffering and death, about families ripped apart, about people not being treated as if they were real human beings, because that's the story then, and it's still the story."⁵

Taken to heart, Jesus' prayer becomes deep listening, not a laundry list like a superficial prayer on the fifty-yard line or at the volleyball net.

Deep listening -- inspired by a hug, an unexpected kindness, the tranquility of a forest grove or the splendor of a starry night above in the desert sky.

² Chris Hedges, *Our Class: Trauma and Transformation in an American Prison* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

³ Ibid, 78-79.

⁴ Ibid, paraphrasing Wilson's character Loomis, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

⁵ Ibid, 79.

To see both God and neighbor as an unfolding Thou, to be cherished, to be wrapped in care, to be honored. That is prayer. That is your song -- your connection to the deepest Thou. It is the unfolding of heart and mind and strength. Without it, we're just discarded bones.

"God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God in them," is how John's community understood the connection.⁶

Lord, teach us to pray. Simply...simply say:

"With the bread that we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

FOCUS, John. FOCUS. Beyond and within all outward appearance is splendor, beyond and within daily routine, we each find our own song unto eternity. Yes, "Give us this day..." Amen

⁶ | John 4:16b.