

## Being a Community of Living Prayer

### **Gospel text (from the NRSV):**

#### John 14:1, 10-27

<sup>1</sup>*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.*

<sup>10</sup>*Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

<sup>15</sup>*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

<sup>18</sup>*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup>In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup>On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup>They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. <sup>22</sup>Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup>Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.*

<sup>25</sup>*I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

#### John 15:4-17

<sup>4</sup>*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. <sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

<sup>12</sup>*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

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As many of you know, our church has gone through a visioning process over the past year. One of the initiatives that came out of that process is an emphasis on prayer and I have been asked to lead that initiative. So I'm here this morning to offer a message about prayer and more specifically, what it means to be a community of prayer because I believe that prayer and community go hand in hand. In fact, I believe that prayer is what gives a community life.

Sadly, as I look at the state of the world today and the state of the institutional church, my heart is troubled. Obviously, these are times of great anxiety. Everyday we hear more about economic instability, war, oppression, injustice, civil unrest. On top of this, the phenomenon of globalization has caused the rate of change in our lives to occur at an unprecedented pace that only continues to increase. In fact, studies now show that the average person faces significant changes with such frequency that there is little time to adapt to one change before the next transition comes along. Such an atmosphere creates a prolonged sense of instability and uncertainty to which the natural response is fear and anxiety.

The result is a society whose fundamental posture is one of distrust. Think about it. How much time and energy goes into erecting structures to make sure someone doesn't take advantage of us? We keep one another at arms length and often go out of our way to avoid community. Individual freedoms take precedence over the common good almost without question. There is a tendency toward extremes and so our divisions are pronounced. Our fear makes us vulnerable to manipulation such that our search for security in the midst of the chaos enables us to turn a blind eye to the exploitation of others.

Unfortunately, in many regards, the church is failing to live up to its calling. Indeed, the church in the global West is in decline. I believe this is because in the midst of the world's anxiety and unrest, the institutional church has spent much more time focusing on symptoms rather than causes. I believe the many moral ills of society are merely

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symptoms of this atmosphere of rampant fear and insecurity that will only be healed when people are able to find a sense of security in God's love and constant presence.

But the church has too often turned from being an expression of God's presence and has instead adopted the value system of the surrounding culture. Ask yourself honestly, "What is really different between the value system of the church and the broader society?" The broader society puts a lot of virtue in things like hurry and busyness, self-sufficiency, individualism, consumerism (anyone ever heard the phrase "church shopping?"), competitiveness, and results at whatever the cost. The common denominator is the desire for and the illusion of control (which is a natural reaction to instability). The problem is that there are already numerous institutions that reinforce these values and if the church chooses to operate in that system, it has very little to offer.

Compare this to the value system taught and lived out by Jesus and His followers: Instead of busyness - Living an unhurried rhythm; instead of self-sufficiency - intimacy and interdependency; instead of individualism - an emphasis on community; instead of consumerism - simplicity and contentment; instead of competitiveness - humility; and instead of results only - the belief that *how* something is done is every bit as important as the result. The common thread here is trust in and reliance on God. It is what I would call the contemplative life or a life of lived prayer. It is the type of life I believe the church has been called to.

You see, both systems believe in prayer - just different sorts of prayer. In the first system, prayer usually gets relegated to just another item on the checklist of things to do. It is reduced to a function and simply becomes a means to an end. The typical pattern is to make plans and *then* ask God to bless them rather than actually try to discern where God is leading and follow. Thomas Merton picks up on this when he asks, "What is the use of praying if at the very moment of prayer, we have so little confidence in God that we are too busy planning our own kind of answer to prayer?"<sup>1</sup> In this system, our actions flow out of our neediness to be in control, feel loved, be admired, etc. rather than as an

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts In Solitude*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 27.

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expression of God's presence and work in our lives. So, all that really gets communicated is our own compulsions and ambitions.

In the second system, prayer is not an activity; it is a way of life. Therefore, it is not something you can put on a "to do" list. Prayer has no limits and develops into anything that opens us up to noticing God's presence in our life. In this model, there is still much that gets done but everything that is done has a different character because it flows from a deep sense of security in the midst of the chaos due to the constant awareness of God's love. As a result, ministry becomes more about being a presence rather than results. Therefore, the yoke is easy and the burden is light.

Clearly, the current status quo, that first system, is not God's vision. Today's Gospel readings from John 14 and 15 are part of a broader treatise from John 13-17. Scholars sometimes refer to this section as Jesus' Great Discourse, or the Glory Discourse. While there is some debate as to the historical time and place of this discourse, tradition has long placed this scene in the Upper Room at the Last Supper. Five whole chapters dedicated to Jesus' conversation with his inner circle the night before He is crucified.

It is a passage that has much to say about intimate, living community and speaks to the unsettled time in which we live. Jesus and the disciples were experiencing their own time of upheaval and transition. Just a few days earlier, they had been with Jesus during the Triumphal entry into Jerusalem. They thought Jesus was about to establish his reign and they, who had been with him all this time, would be part of his royal court. But then there were confrontations with the political and religious authorities and plots against Jesus' life. Things were changing fast and the mood was already different. They were confused and about to enter into a time of deep uncertainty. Then Jesus begins to explain that he will be with them only a little while longer. He is about to go where they cannot yet come. Everything they had known for the last few years, all their hopes and expectations of what the many sacrifices they had made to follow Jesus would yield were suddenly disrupted and thrown into disarray. This was not what they had signed up for!

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But Jesus didn't just drop this revelation on them and leave it at that. Neither does he dismiss or pretend away their grief. Rather, He acknowledges it while at the same time offering reassurance and granting them His peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid (John 14:27)." He makes a grand promise of His everlasting and constant presence to bring hope into the midst of their anxiety. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you (John 14:18)." "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever (John 14:16)."

Jesus also commissions the disciples by giving them the command to love one another and goes on to paint a picture of what it means to live in community in order to prepare them for how they shall carry out this command in the midst of the difficult times ahead. He reminds them who they are and *whose* they are. "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ... Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them (John 14:20, 23)." He follows that with the beautiful image of the vine and branches. "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me (John 15:4)." And this is the key lesson of Jesus' discourse. **It is not our job to produce the fruit.** It is not our job to change or heal the world. Our job is to love one another as He has loved us. And how do we do that? We abide. We abide in God and in one another. Over and over in this passage, Jesus tells the disciples to abide. "Abide in me as I abide in you. ... Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4, 5)."

In my opinion, this is where the institutional church has lost its way. It has forgotten that in order to love the world it must abide in Christ because the love doesn't come from us, it comes from God.

One of my mentors and seminary professors, Dr. Glenn Hinson, has often said that throughout the history of the church, every renewal and reform has always come through

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a return to prayer. Avery Brooke affirms that in her book, *Healing in the Landscape of Prayer*. She states that the rise of rationalism has caused the study and teaching of prayer to be neglected and that churches need to provide more training in that area but in many cases are ill-prepared to do so. Nonetheless, she maintains that only through prayer will the church be rescued from its decline.<sup>2</sup>

That is the challenge for the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must become communities of living prayer. We must feel the pain and suffering of the world and allow it to be seen and heard while at the same time pointing to the hope that comes in knowing that God is always in our midst. Such communities give us a place to struggle, to feel, to challenge the numbness, to risk vulnerability and the possibility of being taken advantage of all for the sake of lowering the barriers that keep the world from knowing true community and God's presence. It is a journey through the unknown while resting in the security of God's constant love. It is an act of honest and authentic faith, which scripture testifies is the surest way to unity with God. That is what we have to offer a broken and divided world and it is what the world most desperately needs.

My hope for the prayer initiative is that prayer can become a way of life in our church - that it eventually becomes infused in everything we do as a church and transforms our church into just such a community of living prayer. Being a community of living prayer will enable us to know and be known in a way that empowers us to transcend our insecurity and fear. It will free us to be who God created us to be and give us a peace that will allow us to accept the uncertainties of life and embrace the risk of truly living.

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<sup>2</sup> Avery Brooke, *Healing in the Landscape of Prayer*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2004), 38-39.