

Title: Defining Prayer
Date: 5/15/2022 (Easter 5, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Acts 11:1-18](#); [Revelation 21:1-6](#); [John 13:31-35](#); [Psalm 148](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/-JQuinDBHGs?t=1127>

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another (Jn 13:34-35)
Amen.

Last week, I compared preaching every Sunday to following a TV show I can't binge watch; every week I'm eager to see what the new episode brings, except that I'm the person who has to write it.

So...previously, on this season of The Fifty Days of Easter...

- In the first episode, we proclaimed the resurrection.
- The next Sunday, we wrestled with our doubts about the resurrection and with the relationship between doubt and faith.
- Then, the resurrection of Jesus was made more present and real to us through the breaking of bread and the sharing of fish.
- Last week, we turned our focus from the resurrection itself to our response to the resurrected Jesus. We contemplated how we might pick out the voice of our shepherd from among all the voices surrounding us, so that we can follow where our shepherd leads.¹

This Sunday, we continue in that same direction. At the beginning of this service, we prayed that we may steadfastly follow the steps of Jesus in the way that leads to eternal life.² This leads to the question: What are we praying for when we make this our prayer?

Today's reading from the book of Revelation tells us we are praying for the holy city, the new Jerusalem, to come down out of heaven (Rev 21:2). Whether or not we realize it, this is what we pray for every time we say the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven."

This isn't so much about instant gratification as it is about transformation. When Jesus carried out his ministry, he didn't tell those who were sick that he would pray for their healing; he healed them. He didn't pray for demons to leave those who were possessed; he cast out the demons. He didn't pray for the hungry to be fed; he made sure they had fish and loaves of bread. He was all about transforming THIS world, making a concrete difference for people in THIS lifetime.

On Tuesday I spent some time with the youth and their mentors, preparing for confirmation. The topic we discussed was prayer. I asked them how they prayed. They said through painting and drawing, sewing and knitting and crocheting, walking the labyrinth, reading, prayer beads, Zentangles³, and serving together. Next month, they

will be going on a mission trip to Galveston. That, too, is a work of prayer, and you can join your prayer to theirs by buying some breakfast tacos after the service.

After we talked about how they prayed, we turned to the back of the Book of Common Prayer. On p856 of the Catechism, the section that outlines the foundational beliefs of our faith, we are told, “Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.”⁴

During the fifty days of Easter, we are called to respond to God. In response to God resurrecting the Son of God, who is also the Son of Mary, we walk in the steps of Jesus so that we may follow him out of the tomb and into new life.

Today, the book of Revelation reminds us that “the home of God is among mortals.” God will dwell with us as our God; we will be God’s peoples, and God will be with us; God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Rev 21:3-4).

This is what it looks like when the Kingdom of God is on earth as it is in heaven. This is what our world CAN look like when we respond to these words of God by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

Reading these verses this week my mind immediately went to the Community of Hope. I feel like the chapter here at St. Alban’s has made these verses their prayer. When someone makes a prayer request through the Community of Hope, an email goes out to the group, and what follows is this email chain of cascading prayers. They make meals, feeding bodies and souls. They bring the presence of God and the love of this community to those who cannot be present with us.

Members often make visits in groups of two. Recalling that “when two or three of us are gathered together in [the Name of God’s well-beloved Son], God will be in our midst,”⁵ I believe they make God more present and more real for people who might be feeling the absence of God. Though they can’t prevent death or take away the life events that cause mourning and crying and pain, it is through the hands of those commissioned to undertake this work that God wipes away every tear.

These verses were also made more alive to me during yesterday’s vestry retreat. As part of the retreat, we talked about the things that went well during the pandemic.

Parking lot church. The pictures of parishioners holding up candles for Christmas. The phone calls and postcards. The strengthened sense of fellowship, that we’re all in this together, that we CAN lean on one another. Changing expectations of sticking exactly to tradition and becoming more flexible, evolving the way things are done. Zoom formation. Zoom everything. Sustaining our music program and continuing to engage youth. People stepped up and reached out and fostered this sense of fellowship and family and community.

The beauty of coming in from the outside is that I get to ask a lot of questions and listen to a lot of stories. I get to point out all the ways that this parish has been following in the steps of Jesus throughout the pandemic and draw connections between them. As our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, says, the way of Jesus is (wait for it) loving, liberating, and life-giving.

There was a foundation of love that existed here before the pandemic, and y'all built on it by liberating one another from the prison of loneliness and pain throughout these last years. By finding a way to take worship online, by praying for and with one another through thought and deed, with or without words, you have brought life and light into a period of time filled with death.

Death and separation and division NEVER has the last word, not when we continue to love, not when we continue to pray by responding to God with our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole strength.

When we pray to steadfastly follow the steps of Jesus in the way that leads to eternal life, we pray to transform the world, starting with ourselves and our relationships to one another and the whole world.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus gives us what I consider to be the Third Great Commandment, to love one another as he loved us. Loving each other as Jesus loved us is a much higher bar than loving our neighbors as ourselves. In Acts, Peter was reminded that what God has made clean, we must not call profane. As we recognize and call forth the image of God in ourselves and one another, we make more present and real the presence of God in this world. The more this happens, the more we will feel like we are living in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As the season of Easter comes to a close in these next weeks, (I can't believe it's already the middle of May, can you?) St. Alban's will enter a phase of restart, reset, renewal. Whatever we choose to call it, it is about building on the strength of our love and prayer. It is about honoring and giving thanks for what has come before, during the pandemic and long before that. It is about extending and expanding this sense of connection and love to those who still don't quite feel like they belong, and to those who aren't here yet.

Even though I am writing and preaching these sermons. This is not my story alone. I can't wait to see where we go as a parish, as a community, as a family, and I invite you all to pray for this next stage, with your thoughts and deeds, with and without words.

Amen.

¹ Collect from the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C: http://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Easter/CEaster4_RCL.html

² Collect from the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C: http://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Easter/CEaster5_RCL.html

³ <https://zentangle.com/>

⁴ https://bcponline.org/Misc/catechism.html#prayer_and_worship or BCP 856

⁵ From A Prayer of St. Chrysostom