

Easter 7 C

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17:20-26

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Grace and peace to you from the risen Christ. Amen.

Last week I said in my sermon that God's word, including the preached word, which is God's word to us in hearing it, has the power to move and change us. We trust in that and in Lutheran circles it means for us that God's word is a *living* word. It dwells within us, it travels with us to work and home, through grief, despair and joy. It never leaves us, as scripture tells us God's love is written on our hearts.

And the other side of that very important conversation that happens with the living word, is prayer. Prayer enables us to have an active part in a conversation with God, because that's the kind of God that we have. This God is one who wants to be in relationship with us. It's not as if God simply dictates to us how we should live what we should think about, say or do, but God is actively listening and conversing with us with every breath that we take.

And I know that you believe this. I have to say, that last Sunday was one of my most uplifting moments in this congregation. *I saw you* last Sunday. I saw you in the meeting as we discussed and discerned together about the future of this congregation. And it's not because of the decision you made, but I was incredibly moved by the faithful spirit of the conversation and the prayerful moment just before you voted. I dared to capture you in that moment of prayer. And here you are! This person in the forefront, if you don't know, is Katherine Elford, who gave me permission to use this photo. You can see in the background, the whole people of God are praying. I asked Kathryn's permission to show this, because it's a very intimate moment of our church family deep in the act of prayer. We might call it holy ground. I wanted to show you this picture, because it is a most beautiful and inspiring reflection to you of who you are. There is no greater work that we can do then to be a people of prayer.

Prayer has a long and rich tradition. All through the season of Easter (which as I said earlier today, is the last Sunday of the Easter season) we hear stories from the book of Acts. This entire book portrays the life, with all its humps and bumps, of the Christian church in its infancy. As we read through this book we find all sorts of accounts of God's people at work, sorting out what it means to be followers of the crucified Jesus. Everything was new, everything was different than any other system they had known. Once the gift of the Holy Spirit was disbursed (which we will hear about next week) they knew they could no longer follow the old ways they knew so well nor could they allow themselves to succumb to the power of Rome and its politics. But, there was no detailed plan of what it meant to be people of *The Way* (which is what the early church was

called.) They had to figure it out as they went along and they did so by relying on and gathering together to pray.

Story after story in this book we hear of the early disciples at prayer and of how that prayer became weaved into every decision and action. I suppose it was a way of knowing that Jesus was with them, it was a way to understand that Christ was alive among them. So in Acts 16 we hear that they are on their way to prayer, in prayer Paul casts out an unclean spirit, in prayer they endure torture and are sentenced to prison. In prison they pray and sing hymns knowing that God hears them, as do the other prisoners surrounding them. Even when an earthquake seems the opportune moment to escape, they remain in the prison in favor of sharing the good news of Christ. What an unusual story – there is none of the normal reactions we’d imagine people to take – which gives us a clue to the fact that something had changed.

Those early disciples were a living example of Jesus’ own prayer for unity. In John 17 we hear Jesus at prayer. If I thought that the picture of Holy Spirit praying was intimate, this prayer from Jesus to those who follow him is incredibly intimate. Jesus understood what we face on a day-to-day basis. It doesn’t really matter whether it is the politics of 1st Century Rome or that of the 21st century. A person of that era living in fear of violence and upheaval experienced nothing less than we do ourselves in similar circumstances. Grief and loss have *always* had the ability to break our hearts no matter when or where we live. Knowing all that we experience as human beings, Jesus prayed for us. And he prayed that we would understand that we are never alone. As God’s family, we have one another so that none must bear the trials of life in solitary. As God’s people we have the assurance and promise that we are one with God – this is what Jesus asked. And there is no time limit, there is no expiry, there’s no qualification to be included other than simply to know that this is the will of Christ. Interestingly, this is one of the times we hear of Jesus praying that he didn’t go off by himself. He prays with his followers hearing every word.

Caroline Lewis (Luther Seminary) notes that this is a demonstration of Jesus’ confidence in them. She says Jesus “knows that it will be through their witness and their words that others will come to believe.”

Just imagine for a moment Jesus praying for us, we who face the remarkable uncertainties of our own time. Wildfires, abductions, oppression, unemployment, racism - some days it feels to me as if we can’t even catch our breath before we hear another awful thing. We all thought that the fire in Fort McMurray was a terrible tragedy and yet this week the fires up north rage far wider. We wonder, in the midst of our already growing concern for the environment, on what we can do. Women across North America are deeply disturbed over laws in the US that change their rights to make decisions for their own body. Over and over we face the reality of our shrinking churches and wonder what more we can do to share and demonstrate the goodness of God.

There's no easy answer for any of these things. There was no easy answer for the early church debating about what it meant to be a believer, when they faced losing their families because of following Jesus, when they were imprisoned and fed to lions for the sport of it. But, no one ever said that life or faith was easy. The most important things usually aren't. The most important things take hard work, commitment, dedication, and courage; they take abiding trust to see that God is renewing the world through the work of love, and that love will carry us through challenges we didn't dare to imagine. The most important things cannot be solved on our own – that's why Jesus prays for us and calls us to pray for one another.

I remember the first time someone prayed for me, out loud, using my name. I was a new pastor and we were living in Edson at the time; Bishop Steve Kristenson came to see how I was doing and after we talked for a while he offered to pray. And he did, out loud, using my name, my family's names, and the congregation I served. It was very moving. I still feel that way today when someone prays for me. When we feel we don't have the right words or know what to do, just pray. Even if that person is not with you, pray. When you're not sure what they want or what is best, just pray. But then tell them. Let them know that they are important enough, that you care enough to carry their name and very life into the presence of God. It is a priceless gift that costs nothing at all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.