

Easter 7, Year C
Sunday, May 12, 2013
The Rev. Michael P. Barham

Next to the telephone in her kitchen, my grandmother Lois had a small area where she kept the things she would use for her morning devotions. She would move them to the kitchen table every morning, where she would read from a black Bible that seemed like it was as old as the stone tables Moses wrote on.

With her Bible she kept two small daily devotionals: *Our Daily Bread* which is the United Methodist equivalent of *Forward Day by Day*, and a little hardback book put out by the same publisher containing poems and prayers for each day of the year. Finally she had a little wicker basket, in which she kept the names of the people in her life, each on a separate, folded piece of paper. She would end her morning devotions by drawing a slip of paper from the basket. The person whose name was on the slip of paper became the focus of her prayers that morning. She didn't just name them and move on, but she held that person's name in her heart and mind a little while, praying about what she knew was going on in their life, where they needed healing or courage or hope or forgiveness.

At an early age, I learned from my grandmother that a daily practice of prayer was important, but only much later did I grow to understand the value of daily intercessory prayer for others. I think it was when I walked the Camino in Spain in my mid-twenties that I began to appreciate how praying for others can help bind me to them in a powerful way. Tucked in my prayer book during that journey was a sheet of notebook paper I had folded into quarters.

On one side I had a short list of all the towns that had sleeping accommodations for pilgrims, with a notation as to the number of kilometers between towns – this let me gauge each afternoon whether I needed to stop or had the energy to carry on to the next village.

On the other side I had a small list of prayer requests. Before leaving I had emailed friends and family, and also some of the Camino email lists to which I had subscribed, and invited people to send me

prayer requests they may have. Over the next few weeks, I had received a manageable list of prayer requests and that list grew a little as I walked and as fellow pilgrims began to share their stories with me. Those names and prayer requests are still etched in my mind twelve years later - as much as the image of their graphite names written between the blue lines of the notebook paper.

What I found over the course of my pilgrimage was that the names of people for whom I was praying kept rising up in my heart and mind as I walked. A sense of intimacy grew, what I would feel is a type of love and even unity with the people whose names were on that little list. That love and unity has continued, though many of them I have never met and many of them I have not seen or heard from since our brief encounter on the pilgrimage. When I met in person one of those folks from the other end of the email requests years later, I felt an immediate connection to them bound by those days of prayer.

What made the difference in my memory from all the other people I met as I pilgrimaged is that through prayer, they took root in my heart.

The gospel this morning talks about love and unity – themes found in Jesus’ prayer:

- That God loves the world (us) as much as God loves Jesus
- That Jesus’ fervent prayer was for a communion, a fellowship that transcends the limits both of Jesus’ immediate relationship with his disciples, and of the limits of the time in which Jesus lived on earth.
- That Jesus will be “in us” – part of who we are, and
- That we all may be one

I’ve often wondered how the writer of John’s gospel came to know the intimate prayer of Jesus – I doubt Jesus asked the author to take dictation while he prayed, and there wasn’t time after his subsequent address, as far as we know, for Jesus to share with the disciples what had been on his mind.

Assuming that John’s gospel was written several decades after the death of Jesus, I also assume that the writer or writers of the gospel were trying to convey a story of great meaning, rather than attempting to achieve a factually correct biography. So I find it especially meaningful that the early Johanine community wanted to convey in the

format of a prayer the sense of love and unity with God that Jesus experienced and desired for all of us to experience as well. John not only tells us that growing in love and striving for unity are part of Jesus' vision of the Reign of God, but does so by embedding that teaching within a story of Jesus doing what may best help us achieve that kind of love and unity: praying for others.

Occasionally I will read a new article about studies or questions relating to the efficacy of prayer, especially in the context of medicine. Though I usually read them, I find that I am often uninterested in their conclusions – I think that often they begin with the wrong set of questions, and so their findings are not so relevant to purposes of prayer that I find most valuable! In spite of their conclusions, even when there are days when I am left wanting for answers to my prayers, I still seem incapable of dousing completely the belief that prayer has something to offer me, and all of us.

Generations of Christians have found that through prayer, there can be forged a deeper connection to God and other people, a connection that can both comfort us when we feel assaulted by the world, and that can strengthen us to love those whose differences we find a challenge to overcome. If we pray for one another, including our enemies, if we pray for love and fellowship, we will one day find that we are filled with both, and that will fill us with a sense of God's glory, which glorifies us also.

When do we have time to pray daily in our lives? Aren't there too many other things we should be doing, wouldn't prayer just be one more thing to have to achieve, to accomplish, in a list of things to do each day that already seems too unmanageable? I don't think we are supposed to find time for prayer, I think we have to make time for it – like exercise, like giving time to our children and parents, like doing the things that help give us a truly rich and meaningful life: we make the time. And it doesn't have to be a lot, you know. Actually, just starting where we can, with a single minute of stopping what we are doing and letting ourselves be free from productivity, free from all the distractions. Cell phones can actually be handy for this – I set the alarm clock on my cell phone to ring at different times throughout the day. Sometimes, it's

just to remind me to turn off the coffee pot. But I set some to go off that remind me to stop and take a deep breath, and to say a short prayer.

Now, what if we don't know how to pray? We learn to by doing it, and not just alone but with others. We also can learn more about prayer by making good use of the prayer book – by coming together to pray on a regular basis, but also by making use of the many wonderful prayers contained here to help us find words. We also learn to pray by listening, practicing listening to God. But we start wherever we are – one of my professors used to say “pray as you can, not as you can't” – there's no such thing as a perfect prayer except the one you happen to be praying at that moment. So the trick is just to start, not to start at the level of Mother Theresa, or Theresa of Avila, or any other spiritual powerhouse we might think of. Like each of us, they started praying where they could, and the learned as they did it.

There is a final theme in this passage, and it relates, I believe, to the promises of love and unity bounded in prayer. Irenæus of Lyon once wrote that the glory of God is the human being fully alive. I would add that our being fully alive is also the glory of the human being, a life that glorifies God. A life of glory, a life that is fully alive, is a beautiful thing to imagine, a delightful thing to attain, and it is a life attained in prayer.

In John's Gospel, Jesus prays for love and unity that and assures us that in this he has given us a life meant for glory, our own glory and God's glory.

May you be fully alive, and give glory to God as you lead a life of prayer that will sustain the good you wish to do. Amen.