

Sermon, 6th Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:9-11)

Last week I suggested that if we allow ourselves to come into proximity to that vine that supports our growth, i.e. Jesus, we find our true home: our abode. This week John goes a step further, showing us that the nature of that home is love itself. Jesus can assure us of that truth because he learned to abide in his Father’s love: the Father he calls *Abba* with the trust and pure affection of a child. It is the place where we feel joy. One of the lovely collects we have for Evening Prayer includes prayers and blessings for persons in all sorts of conditions: those who work, or watch, or weep, those who suffer, who are weary, who may be dying. It includes the phrase: “shield the joyous.” I think there is a special vulnerability and humility in those who feel joy in God’s love. It is a gift from God that we cannot create on our own. Yet we can share it.

One of the ways we do this is in our prayers. First we center ourselves in God’s abiding love: simultaneously the source of our prayer, and its goal. Julian of Norwich says this about prayer:

“Prayer is a true, gracious, lasting will of the soul united and joined to the will of our Lord by the precious and mysterious working of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord himself is the primary recipient of our prayers, as it seems to me, and accepts them

most gratefully, and highly rejoicing; and he sends them up above and sets them in a treasury where they will never perish. They are there before God and all his holy ones, received continually, always furthering us in our needs.”

(Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love* (Oxford World's Classics) (p. 92)).

I love this notion of our prayers being placed in a heavenly treasury. It makes me think of Jesus’ telling us to, “Store up your treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes...” Surely our prayers are the “fruits that will last” as Jesus tells us today.

In considering prayer, I think we can really see the reality of the Holy Trinity as not merely a theological construct, but a description of how God works through prayer. God is love. That love is imparted to us—however invisibly—through the motion of the Holy Spirit. It is love’s conduit. Through our prayers we keep this conduit open, and allow God’s love to move ever more freely. God’s love will reach us no matter what. However, Jesus has called us friends. How wonderful to participate in that holy friendship through prayer. To abide in love is to dwell in an expansive, inviting place, a place where we may breathe freely. It is a transcendent place where time and place are fluid. I have always loved this verse from Psalm 18: “He brought me out into an open place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.” (BCP, p. 604) Surely this is the place the Holy Spirit leads us through prayer.

We see the results of prayer as we see the effects of a breeze on grass, in the trees, on the water. The movement of a plant towards the sun may not be discernible with the naked eye. Yet with the help of time-lapse photography we know that plants are astonishingly active in their growth. By paying attention, we can see God's hand at work. There may be those times when we do not know where to turn. Life circumstances, depression, or difficulties can rob us of the physical or spiritual energy we need to respond to God's love—or even to feel worthy of that love. A wise writer on contemplative prayer said this: “It may help to see oneself as the captain of a ship in a fog. It is not in our power to move into the sunlight, but God helping us, it is in our power to move towards it.” (Robert Llewelyn, *Doorway to Silence*, p. 660)

In the monastic tradition noonday prayer is often given over to intercessory prayer. If possible, persons are prayed for by name. However, in one community I visited, at the end of their intercessions they included “all those for whom we ought to pray.” How wonderful to allow the Holy Spirit to seek out in love those unknown to them that were nonetheless in need. I love the movie *The African Queen* with Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. Near the end of the film, they find themselves on a harrowing journey down a river on a steamboat. They finally become trapped in the mud and reeds, not knowing that they are only a hundred yards from the lake they are trying to find. They go to sleep expecting to

die. Overnight a rainstorm comes. The mud flat fills with water lifting the boat so that it floats by itself into the lake. Prayer lifts our boats.

I hope all of you have some sense of what it feels like to be prayed for. It may be hard to describe. Yet you may feel comfort or support during a difficult time that comes, not from a tangible event, but simply a sense that it is possible to endure, to go on. Or you may sense—without being able to put your finger on it—that you are protected, enfolded, even beloved. Or you may simply have an assurance that you are not alone.

One of the most indelible memories I have of being prayed for happened while I was a chaplain intern at Bay State hospital. All of the interns were given on-call hours overnight once a week. Once a month we also put in a 24-hour on-call stint. I scheduled mine for Sundays as I was working full time. We were to arrive at 8:00 a.m. and serve until the next morning. At the end of the on-call there was always a special meeting of all the chaplains to review what had happened, and to let each other know if there were patients that needed further care. One of my 24-hour on-calls was particularly difficult, not least because it involved the death of a child. Still, I needed to drive home, and then go to work. The other chaplains, with their experience and wisdom, knew I had a hard day ahead. As I drove up 91 and passed Mount Tom, I had an extraordinary sense of being enclosed in love and care. I *knew* that the chaplains were praying for me. The

tragedy I had witnessed was not less. Yet I felt as if everything was being taken up into that deep place of compassion that is God. I knew in my inmost being what it was to abide in love.

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