This morning, we are going to talk about “What’s the big deal about praying with people?” It makes some sense to touch on praying by ourselves first, as it is from there that we move to pray with other people. I have found it helpful to set a few minutes aside on a daily basis so that, just as I eat three meals a day and go through various daily rhythms of life, a daily time of prayer is built right into my life. I like to do it early in the morning before leaving for work, though others prefer midday or in the evening before bed. My pattern is simple. I take the VPC guidebook Ignite: Pray Daily and use it to begin my time with the Lord. Today is day 64. If you don’t have a copy of the booklet, all you have to do is go to the VPC website, www.viennapres.org, and download it.

After reading and meditating on what is in this booklet, I like to read a Psalm a day. I learned from the great Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood to write the day’s date in the margin of my Bible, so that it becomes a sort of a diary of the spirit. Today’s text is Psalm 133 and, according to my Bible, I have read it eight times in the last seven years. Then, I pray about the things on my mind—the people in my life and the concerns I have for them—and for other situations, such as those involved in the bridge collapse in Minneapolis a couple of weeks ago. Finally, I like to pray over the names in our bulletin. So, each Sunday I go to the page with prayer requests, which is page 9 today, tear it out of the bulletin, fold it in half and put it in my Bible so I can refer to it each day. Now, to give you a little exercise this morning, I would like you to see if you can tear page 9 out of your bulletin right now. I asked the ushers to give everyone a copy and we have run extra ones, so there will be plenty of them for the next service(s).

Now, as we establish some routine and rhythm to our personal prayer lives, we begin to think about this matter of praying with other people. If you ask me, the Psalm for today is both wonderful and a bit weird. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” That’s wonderful. But what about this: “It”—it being how good and pleasant it is when kindred live in unity—“it is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.” Now that sounds a bit weird. At least until you understand that anointing oil was precious and rare in the days of Moses and his brother, Aaron, that to be anointed with oil, to be touch or covered with oil, was symbolic of blessing and was how kings and priest were set aside for
service. And, if you were a guest in a home, they would anoint your head with a little oil as a sign of blessing and welcome. So, the oil running down Aaron’s robes was a sign of blessing. Chris Hammond, I have brought two quarts of olive oil this morning, and I thought I might pour it over you as an object lesson in blessing. What do you think?

So what is the blessing that the oil running over Aaron is like, that is like the life-giving dew that falls on the mountains? The blessing is the blessing of kindred, of those who are related to each other, living in unity. It is the one-ness of believers in the family of God. So David writes in Psalm 34:3, “O magnify the Lord with me [unity] and let us exalt his name together!” And Jesus in his high priestly prayer says it wonderfully: “I in them and you [Father] in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” John 17:23.

There is something very special about God’s people being one in spirit and heart, and that is especially obvious when we pray together. Jesus again puts it clearly: “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” Fantastic! Obviously, when we pray by ourselves our Lord hears and answers our prayers. Yet, there is an added dimension when we agree in prayer. It’s one reason there is a big deal about praying with people.

Now one way, and perhaps the easiest way to begin to pray with people, is to agree with them about some prayer request that you are each praying in the privacy of your home. So you are praying with them, though you are not physically with them. When we go home and pray for the prayer requests listed on the page of the bulletin you just tore out, we are praying together even though we are not physically together.

Another helpful way to pray together is through a concept known as a prayer covenant. A covenant is a sacred agreement, and a prayer covenant is a sacred agreement between two or more people to pray an agreed upon prayer for say a month. Jesus said if two of us agree in what we ask, it will be done for us by our Father in heaven.

One of the most interesting personalities I have had the privilege of knowing was Mary Lou Billsborough. For many years, Mary Lou was the Director of Social Activities at Purdue University back in the days students learned the social graces, such as how to dance, how to hold a knife and fork properly, how to introduce someone to another person and so on. Students called her Mrs. B. She also advised the Purdue chapter of the Mortarboard Honorary Society for women. I first met her at a Mortarboard social where I was the escort for my then future wife, Ann Marie, who was also a member of Mortarboard.

Mrs. B. was an active member of our church. I learned that Mrs. B.
had experienced a mild stroke and couldn’t leave her apartment for awhile, so I offered to serve her communion. She accepted immediately. We chatted for awhile when I arrived while I enjoyed her great sense of humor. She owned a huge cat with a gigantic fluffy tail named “Peake.” When I asked her the source of Peake’s name, she told me she had once kept another cat along with Peake with the name of “Chesa!”

Following the sharing of the Lord’s Supper with her, I said, “Mrs. B., have you ever heard of a prayer covenant?”

“No. What is it?” she asked.

I explained, “A prayer covenant is an agreement between two people to pray an agreed upon prayer for each other and for ourselves for thirty days. Jesus said, ‘If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.’ Mrs. B., if you and I are praying the same prayer for each other and for ourselves each day, then according to what Jesus said, God will answer our prayer. Would you like to do it?”

“I’d love to! What do we pray for each other?”

“Here is a prayer I like. See what you think. I wrote it out and gave it to her. “Lord, grant me and Mrs. B. the grace today to commit our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ without reservation, and grant us further the grace to know your strength and your guidance this day. Amen.” “Mrs. B., if we pray it for thirty days, we will pray it from today through June 30.”

“Oh,” she replied, and we began praying for one another that very day.

I prayed our covenant prayer for her and for myself every day for thirty days. It’s a wonderful prayer. Some five months passed. Ann Marie and I were out having dinner in a restaurant when who should come up using a walker but Mrs. B, also out to eat. She chatted with us for awhile, speaking of Mortarboard matters with Ann Marie, turned to leave, paused and turned back to me. “By the way, Stan, I am still praying our prayer covenant!”

Well, I had stopped four months earlier according to our agreement but with that remark I re-upped. Mrs. B and I prayed for one thousand days!

Then, she experienced another stroke, this time a major one. She had no living will and in order to save her life, they put a breathing tube down her throat. Mrs. B., the ultimate conversationalist, could not speak. She could not live and could not die. It was horrible.

Visiting her in the hospital, what could I say? So, after sitting with her for awhile, I would put my hand on her head and, looking her in the eye, prayed the prayer we had prayed for one another literally a thousand times. “Lord, grant me and Mrs. B. the grace today to commit our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, without reservation, and grant us further the grace to know your strength and your guidance this day.” As I prayed each time, I could feel Mrs. B. relax, entrusting her life and soul to Jesus.
The entire Purdue University Varsity Glee Club offered a rare memorial service appearance at Mrs. B.’s funeral. It remains one of the most wonderful memorial services I have had the privilege of being a part of. What gladness to be able to speak clearly to her friends and the entire university community of the hope and strength Mary Lou Billsborough found in the person of Jesus Christ. What a joy to have shared that prayer covenant with her.

We have very nearly 30 days left in our ninety days of Daily Prayer. I would like to invite you to add a prayer covenant with at least one other person to your prayers for this next 30 days. If you take page 9 of your bulletin that you tore out a few moments ago, you will see the very prayer I prayed with Mrs. B., and a wonderful prayer it is. May I invite you to stand up? I would like you to turn to a neighbor and, if you are each willing, write your name in the blank of their prayer covenant. There are pens in the pews. If you are sitting alone, then slide over to someone. If you see someone alone, don’t leave them alone. If you are sitting with a husband, wife or child, I assume you will make a prayer covenant with them so get someone else’s name. Take two minutes to do it and do it right now!

Now, every day, as you use your Ignite: Pray Daily booklet, you may also pray this prayer covenant. And for the willing, I have a homework assignment. Make a prayer covenant with someone who is not in this room. I make prayer covenants all the time. It is a wonderful way to pray with people, and you can, too.

Now, praying with people becomes even more powerful when you go beyond praying with people by praying an agreed-upon prayer. Praying with people becomes really powerful when you can hear each other speak. I did not grow up in a churched home, and prayer was not a part of our life together. Dad prayed at Thanksgiving, but I cannot remember praying a single prayer out loud with anybody growing up. I began attending a gathering of college students that met in a home before church, and discovered they would spend time praying out loud for each other. It kind of freaked me out. One day, while sitting with them, I heard this disembodied voice praying that I didn’t recognize and realized it was my own voice speaking a prayer out loud for the first time. You know something? Not only did God answer the prayer but, wow, there was a wonderful feeling of unity—like the oil running down Aaron’s beard and robe, I suppose.

If you are willing, you certainly could meet with your prayer covenant partner after church or by phone and pray with one another, but only if you want to try it. I remember once talking with my friend Larry on the phone. He managed a major drugstore and had some personnel problems and a health issue, and I was facing a staff problem myself. After we talked I said, “Hey Larry, let’s pray about this. “Lord, I pray for Larry.
Please guide him in his dealings with Matt and the challenges of supervising him and please heal Larry’s arm.” Then I was simply silent and, after what was a rather long pause, Larry said, “Lord, I pray for Stan and for his situation with Marjorie. Please give him wisdom in helping with her work. Amen.” So, a few days later, I bumped into Larry’s wife, Carolyn. She said, “Stan, what did you do to Larry?” “I have no idea,” I said. “What did I do to Larry?” She said, “All I know is all of a sudden he is calling all of his friends and praying with them on the phone!” How special to pray with people. It’s like oil running on the robe.

Enjoy your prayer covenants for the next 30 days. I have a homework assignment for you. I ask you to make a prayer covenant with someone not in this room. For “extra credit,” pray with the person you made a covenant with. I have a “p.s.” to parents. Praying with your children is one of the great opportunities God has given you. Pray with them one-on-one every night. I did it every night I was home with every child until they left home. Pray together as a family. Say on a Sunday night after supper while still at the table. Go around the table and share a blessing from the last week. Then go around the table and share concerns. Then, hold hands and go around the circle a third time praying for one another. It will change your life and theirs. My family calls this time “the family table,” and we still do it when the family gathers, even though they have been out of the nest for years. There is nothing more precious to us as parents. Like the oil on Aaron’s beard! Amen