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## ***Life-Giving Prayer***

Christ Church NY • Lenten Service • March 7, 2024

Scripture Readings:

Matthew 6:7-8 and Matthew 7:7-8 (adapted from *The Inclusive Bible*)

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I am so grateful for Rev. Park's invitation to offer the message for tonight's Lenten service. I joined Christ Church in 1999 but my time here was way too short, because within two and a half years I headed off to seminary. It's so good to be back at Christ Church. It always feels like home in important ways.

I know the general theme of these Thursday night Lenten services is Life-giving discipleship. Tonight, I want to reflect with you on prayer as one mode of life-giving discipleship – of following the Way of Jesus. I am not here to tell you how to pray, but I would like to share how I think about and practice prayer.

I don't think our call to follow the way of Jesus means doing exactly what Jesus did. Instead, it asks that we base our attitudes and actions on *the principles* Jesus expounded and the example he gave us through his life and ministry. It means modeling our lives on the ways Jesus practiced being in relationship with

God and with people and the world. Most fundamentally, that means loving God, loving our neighbors as ourselves, including our perceived enemies. And Jesus showed us that entails seeking justice, showing compassion, promoting healing, and praying for others and ourselves.

Our communal and liturgical prayer that we engage in worship and other spaces are a very important of our spiritual lives. But tonight, I want to focus on personal prayer. Many stories in the Gospels tell us Jesus saw prayer as a crucial way of staying connected with God. For him, it was about building an ongoing relationship with the one he called “Abba.”

We know Jesus prayed frequently. Certainly, he did that at meals and other times with his followers, but often he would go off to pray on his own. Jesus taught his followers how he thought they ought to pray and how *not* to pray, as we heard in the scripture passages.

I don’t think he meant we should pray in a rote manner. Jesus wanted his followers to emulate his creative, loving spirit, including in the ways we pray. The universe is evolving, changing, and filled with novelty and creativity. Our understanding of God and our relationship with God has evolved and changed, too. Prayer is a dialogue, so it’s just as important to listen. Remember, too, that God is intimately present in us and in everything in all places and times. God experiences every moment of our lives, even more deeply than we do. God experiences our whole being *and* experiences the life and action of every atom and every cell in our bodies.

There is no “wrong” way to pray because no matter how haltingly or incoherently we communicate with God and in whatever language, God always understands. We don’t *have to* use words because God *feels* our prayers at a level that is deeper than words. Yet, while God doesn’t need words, often we need them in order to express for ourselves our tentative emotions and the longings of our hearts.

For me, this way of seeing our dialogue with God gives me a much deeper appreciation of the apostle Paul’s declaration in the Letter to the Romans:

“The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For we don’t know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words. And God, who knows everything in our hearts,

knows perfectly well what the Spirit is saying, because her intercessions for God’s holy people are made according to the mind of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Though we may feel like we are the ones who initiate prayer, it is actually God who is always ready and waiting for us to engage in the relationship.

God rarely communicates to us in words. In fact, there was only one occasion when I am certain God communicated to me with words – actually, only one word: preach. That was in 2000 – about a year after I joined Christ Church. I was meditating one morning and sensed just that one word. And I was certain it came from outside of me. Ultimately, I understood it as a call to enroll in seminary and pursue ordained ministry.

Much of God’s leading, luring, and inspiration happens at a subconscious level. Even when we are able to *consciously* sense God luring us or calling us forward, the specific possibility may not be clear immediately. But God is patient and persistent. God does not determine or even know the future. But God employs persuasive, uncontrolling love to beckon us and the whole universe toward goodness, beauty, and love.

Often, when I am getting ready to preach, I have the experience of “accidentally” or serendipitously coming across a quote or article or video or having a conversation with someone that turns out to be extraordinarily relevant to the theme of my sermon. Of course, I am in the mode of seeking so I am open to such promptings, yet it often feels as if God led me to find those previous nuggets. “Seek and you will find,” doesn’t mean you will receive exactly what you ask for, but if you are open, God will lure you to *what you need*. I love the way theologian Marjorie Suchocki describes this relationship. She wrote:

“[O]ur praying constitutes a dance with God that makes a difference to what God can do in the world. For God works with the world as it is to lead it to what it can be. And prayer changes the way the world is, and therefore changes what is yet possible in the world.”

Our prayer relationship with God changes both God and us.

The way I pray and what I pray for has evolved a lot over the course of my life. For a long time, even after I stopped believing God was all-powerful and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Inclusive Bible*

coercive, I still prayed for people to be healed of specific afflictions. Now, I pray for whatever healing may be possible in a person's life, not limited to physical healing, but including mental, relational, spiritual, and social healing. I believe that God's relational power can influence the actions of cells, so I do pray and hope that diseased cells won't spread. Yet, I know God cannot guarantee that.

God is not all-powerful, yet God is powerfully active in loving relationship with us and with every creature to promote the best possible outcomes. That dramatically shifts how I think about prayer. For example, I no longer ask God to heal someone's disease. Of course, *I can ask*, but God can't necessarily deliver on that prayer. On the other hand, I can pray to God to lure and inspire researchers and scientists to develop cures, where possible, and for medical professionals and others and devise better treatments for those who are suffering. I can pray that the person who is ill feels surrounded by love and care. I can pray that the natural healing capacity in that person's body, mind, and spirit be strong and effective. And ultimately, I – *we* – can pray for compassionate hospice care and for deep connection with the Divine Spirit when anyone is approaching death. Of course, God is already actively promoting all those things before we ask. But our asking helps to deepen our participation and cooperation with God's desires.

I have become increasingly aware of the need to account in our prayers for the understanding that we are an integral part of an ecosphere facing climate catastrophe. I dream that we humans can recover the feeling that we are part of a community with the whole of the ecosphere. I long for the focus of our prayers to move beyond human concerns to include animals, plants, reptiles, insects, and fungi, as well as the water, air, and soil. God has a relationship with my dog, just as much as with me. Surely, God experiences deeply the lives of trees and maybe even feels their "prayers." We know that trees have longings since they communicate with each other and work to heal and protect each other. We have learned that the network of mycelium underground cooperates with the trees by transporting signals and chemicals between them. So, it doesn't seem too much of a stretch to imagine God feel the "prayers" of fungi!

We are so blessed to be engaged in this dance with God, praying without ceasing, with words or without, as God works with us as we are and the world as it is to bring us and the whole creation toward what we still can be.