

Through the written word and the spoken word, may we come to know your living Word, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.



Sunday June 2, 2019

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

I have prayed for this day and for the people of St. Bede’s Episcopal Church for months. My prayer has taken a three-pronged approach. First, I have prayed for each of you – while we don’t know each other yet, I know enough to be sure that you are a committed people who are followers of Christ. You have worked to live into the covenant of your baptism in creative and exciting ways, and truly are the primary ministers of the church, as described in the answer to the question, “Who are the ministers of the Church?” in the Outline of the Faith on p. 855 of the Book of Common Prayer. I have prayed for your strength, your resolve; for your openness to a new cleric and your tender hearts as you love and care for one another and those you serve, and I have prayed for your **deepest desires** for this community to be able to be realized.

Secondly, I have prayed for the community around us; for the families and friends who live closest to this branch of God’s church; for the people who are seeking a church home but have yet to find us; for those who are living on the margins of our community - for whom the routines of daily living leave them exhausted, hungry, and invisible to the rest of us. I have prayed for the needs of this community and the desires of this church family to meet in the liminal spaces where the image of God is revealed in the faces of those who are impacted by our ministries. I have prayed for God to reveal the ways in which we “may all be one” as God lives in us and we

in God, just as Jesus prayed at the end of his farewell discourse in today's Gospel selection. Jesus knows what lies ahead for his followers then, just as Jesus knows what lies ahead for those who choose to follow him today, and our living out of our covenant as Christ followers should be something our community just can't live without – this “oneness” – **that** has been a focus of this second part of my prayers in preparation for today.

And thirdly, I have prayed for the work of the Holy Spirit in me, your priest. I come to you with a head of gray-hair's worth of life experience and the child-like excitement of a new priest beginning a new call. I've wrestled with my worth and value for this work together; I've reflected on the skills and experiences in my toolkit – would they be enough for you? Would God truly equip me.....as someone God has called for this time, this place, and these people? I've prayed that I would be able to love you as you are to be loved, to serve you as you are to be served, and to walk with you through the living out of our deepest, most imaginative and created community of Christ followers. I've wondered with God – will I be enough for you?

I have served God's church in many ways as a member of the laity – as most of my life has been spent sitting right where you are. I've taught adult formation classes and attended too many classes to remember them all. I have started ministries, joined committees, served on clergy searches, interviewed for church staff positions, and been a lay reader and Lay Eucharistic Minister and visitor. At times, my school principal skills and my ministry responsibilities have been seamlessly aligned – almost to a tee. I've done just about whatever was needed to be done in the parish at any given time; worshipping and serving in all sizes of congregations. And together with my husband David, raised our daughter in the church to serve others, and to love

and be loved by God. I **“GET” church**. I never really drifted away from church, even in my young adult life as many do. Church life is as much a part of my DNA as are my brown eyes and my love for the Spanish comfort food of my childhood.

When we moved to St. Petersburg in October of last year, it was a homecoming of sorts. You see, our nuclear family is made up entirely of native Floridians. I know – can you believe it? My parents met at University of South Florida – they married and I was baptized at St. Alban’s chapel right on the campus. There are a few needlepointed kneelers still in the pews today at the Church of the Redeemer in Sarasota that my late mother created as my sisters and I sang in the choir and joyfully played with our friends on the lawn by the way. Living back here is a homecoming of sorts, and now that I have joined with you all in ministry, that sense of belonging and HOME has become even stronger.

Jesus’ farewell discourse in John’s gospel has three primary themes, according to Dr. Jaime Clark-Soles, a professor of New Testament and author of the book *Reading John for Dear Life* – **unity, glorification, and knowledge**. To paraphrase Clark-Soles, we are all very much a part of God’s created order, and our job is stay in the mix together with all that we have. That if God creates, redeems and sustains creation and we are one with God, then shouldn’t we be in the very same business?¹ She calls this type of unity as living together in, “Jesus Style.”²

¹ Reading John for Dear Life, pg. 116.

² <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8326/that-they-may-be-one-or-unity-jesus-style>

So here we are *together*, worshipping God in the place *together*, and dreaming of what can lie ahead for us as we walk *together* in ministry. While I continue praying and planning for long-term ministry for us all...and I hope you are as well!...I wonder what would happen if we followed Dr. Clark-Soles descriptions of unity? I would like to challenge us to think about this sense of “oneness” – and that will mean we have to look at it from lots of angles.

Let’s start with the **Why**. Jesus makes a pretty good case for the **why** in today’s Gospel. We are created for this, y’all. We were not created to stand alone, to work in God’s vineyard alone, or to identify more strongly with the ways in which we are different. NO – we are called to be in community with all its joys and messiness and challenges and rewards. My friend and professor explains this so well – “we are called to live REAL, AUTHENTIC, VULNERABLE life together.”³ Jesus actually prays for this specifically and so it seems like more than just a suggestion we might want to consider.

Secondly is the **WHAT**. What is all this Christ-embodied work for, anyway? In the year of our Lord 2019, we stand as the beneficiaries of literally millions of people who have come before us and have done the work of living out God’s call to us in community. On this rock, Jesus built the foundations of the church in his life and ministry, leaving the confines of his comfortable community and intentionally seeking out those who live lives on the edges of society. And in his approximately three years of recorded ministry work, *he never did any of it alone*. He also never did any of it to make himself wealthy or powerful or to create nicer and roomier places of worship. He did not heal the sick, spend time with the so-called *unclean*, violate the Sabbath

³ Ibid.

laws, or allow Mary to wash his feet with her hair and expensive perfume to edify himself. He did it for us and for our salvation. He modeled what ministry should be about and he suffered the ultimate price for his sacrifice for us. He showed us **what** to do, with whom we should do this work, and left us with the tools to get busy following him.

And finally, we have the **HOW**. Let's face it – this is the hardest part to consider. How in the world do we prayerfully and thoughtfully join together to create a meaningful network of ministry and worship as God's church? It's gonna take work. It's gonna take commitment. It's gonna take a ton of grace and mercy and love and forgiveness. It means we are going to have to take a long and hard look at our idols – those things we seem to worship instead of God. Our busy lives are often an idol. Our worries about the scarcity of resources can be one too. And let's not forget the inevitable opportunities for conflict and disagreement, the painful ways we will wrestle with our plans and desires as a community. Doing ministry together in community is the model Christ teaches us – community with one another and with God. But – **real talk right now** – this is gonna cost us. We will have to put aside our egos, our own personal needs and wants, and see each other – REALLY see each other as the created God-images that we are. For it is only when we KNOW that our sisters and brothers are vital to our ministries together that we can be united and share our gifts and talents for furthering God's kingdom.

In this season of celebration in the church for the resurrection of Christ who overcame death on the cross, I commend to you the vision of Christ's ascension, the feast of which was commemorated on Thursday at our healing service. As Christ ascended, according to the Gospel appointed from the end of Luke, followers of Christ were full of joy and continued to worship

God. They instinctively knew something that those of us living in the post-modern world often forget...God was with them even as Christ's physical presence was absent. They bravely and confidently CARRIED ON with the work. Perhaps, we can imagine an increase in their motivation and desire to pick up the mantle and unite together in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the corners of the world. As we sit here together today, we are that legacy.

There is a Catholic prayer that has been attributed to several priests and is often called the Romero Prayer, so named after the martyred Bishop Oscar Romero, that speaks to this focus on ministry in community for the kingdom. It's called Prophets of a Future Not Our Own.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an

opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.

The Rev. Cn. Paige Hanks