

**Living Between Ascension and Pentecost:
I Want You to Know I Am Praying for You**

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On May 13th, 2018

Acts 1:12-14, John 17:6-11

Today is Mother's Day on our national calendar. It is also the Sunday before Pentecost on the liturgical calendar. On this past Thursday churches the world over celebrated Ascension Day, a day set aside to commemorate Jesus' ascending into heaven. We often observe that occasion on the Sunday before Pentecost, but today I'd like for us to reflect on the time between Ascension and Pentecost. What is that like for people? What sustains us in that time of waiting?

We'll be reading two bits of scripture today. The first comes from the Book of Acts. It does not show up in lectionary, but it is not a particularly odd text. So that puts it outside of the bounds of our recent sermon series. Listen now for God's word in this passage and pay particular attention to what the disciples do when they come back to Jerusalem from the mountain on which Jesus ascended to heaven.

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Our second text comes from the Gospel of John, the 17th chapter. The passage is part of the lectionary reading for today. It falls at the end of Jesus' long last discourse with the disciples before he is arrested. He has moved from talking to the disciples to now speaking to God in prayer, including prayer for them. Listen now for a portion of Jesus' prayer.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

Mothers' Day is complicated. Can we acknowledge that in this space? For some it is a day of gratitude, joy and celebration. And rightfully so. For others, for a variety of reasons, it is a time of grief, pain and sadness.

The day is freighted with emotions and expectations and fraught with possible missteps for those of us, like me, who would speak a word into the context of the day.

Pastor Katie shared with me and a few others a wonderful prayer poem written by three young clergy women who take the complicated nature of this day and bring it to God. Listen. Here's what these three clergy women bring to God:

I want you to know I'm praying for you if you are like Tamar, struggling with infertility, or a miscarriage.

I want you to know that I'm praying for you if you are like Rachel, counting the women among your family and friends who year by year and month by month get pregnant, while you wait.

I want you to know I'm praying for you if you are like Naomi, and have known the bitter sting of a child's death.

I want you to know I am praying for you if you are like Joseph and Benjamin, and your Mom has died.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if your relationship with your Mom was marked by trauma, abuse, or abandonment, or she just couldn't parent you the way you needed.

I want you to know I am praying for you if you've been like Moses' mother and put a child up for adoption, trusting another family to love your child into adulthood.

I want you to know I am praying for you if you've been like Pharaoh's daughter, called to love children who are not yours by birth (and thus the mother who brought that child into your life, even if it is complicated).

I want you to know I am praying for you if you, like many, are watching (or have watched) your mother age, and disappear into the long goodbye of dementia.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if you, like Mary, are pregnant for the very first time and waiting breathlessly for the miracle of your first child.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if your children have turned away from you, painfully closing the door on relationship, leaving you holding your broken heart in your hands. And like Hagar, now you are mothering alone.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if motherhood is your greatest joy and toughest struggle all rolled into one.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if you are watching your child battle substance abuse, a public legal situation, mental illness, or another situation which you can merely watch unfold.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if you like so many women before you do not wish to be a mother, are not married, or in so many other ways do not fit into societal norms.

I want you to know that I am praying for you if you see yourself reflected in all, or none of these stories.

This Mother's Day, wherever and whoever you are, we walk with you. You are loved. You are seen. You are worthy. And may you know the deep love without end of our big, wild, beautiful God who is the very best example of a parent that we know. Amen.ⁱ

It would be easy, wouldn't it, to just sort of skip by the complications of Mother's Day? But that prayer won't allow us to do that. I love the way those young clergywomen take the complicated nature of this day and what people carry with them into it and bring it to God. Isn't that part of what prayer is about? Isn't that what we're called to do when things get complicated? Not just on Hallmark holidays, but also on all the other days when life doesn't unfold according to our plans? Or when what we get is bit of a mixed bag, a healthy helping of ups and downs?

Life was complicated for the disciples in our text from the book of Acts.

They had been crushed by Jesus' crucifixion, but he had gloriously risen from the dead, and they'd spent forty days with him in his resurrected form, in what amounted to sort of a graduate school for discipleship. Now he was off again, being taken up from them into heaven like Elijah had been taken up from Elisha—but without the fiery chariots. Up, down, up, down, up, down. As they watched him go, they'd been told by a couple of angels not to stand there looking up to heaven, but to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit to come. But they didn't know when the Spirit was going to arrive.

It's what they do next, after they get back to Jerusalem, the 11 of them—along with 109 other people—that stands out for me. *All of these*, the text from Acts says, *were together constantly devoting themselves to prayer*. In the time between Ascension and Pentecost—which is literally where we are today in the liturgical calendar—what these faithful people do is devote themselves to prayer together and with and for each other.

I believe most of us know what it is to live in that complicated time between Ascension and Pentecost. We spend at least some, if not a good portion, of our lives there. Oh, there are moments when it feels like the risen Christ (or for that matter, some other cherished loved one), is right there by our side and everything is clicking along *just fine*. But then a death, or an accident, or the loss of a job, or something we never really anticipated, comes along and that secure sense of having life figured out and God and our loved one right there with us (for at least a little while) gets ripped away. We have to figure out how to deal with a new normal, one which isn't as settled and familiar. We can feel alone, even in a crowd.

And there are times, on the other side of change and loss, when we begin to feel like things are starting to come together again. We know that who or what we said goodbye to is gone, but we gradually find ourselves able to move into what is ahead. We feel the presence of what we lost—we feel God's presence—not beside us anymore, but somehow within us. There is an inspiration, as if the Spirit of God has us and is giving us the right words, or providing us the energy to accomplish a task, or filling us with joy and gratitude, or lifting us up at long last out of sadness and grief. There are those times, to be sure.

But it's the complicated times that I think our scripture texts for today address. When the Hallmark holiday doesn't feel greeting card perfect. Or when we feel lost and alone, left behind by a loved one. Or not really up for the task ahead of us, or for the opposition we imagine we'll face. When we're not sure of the way forward. When we're afraid of and uncertain about what might be coming next. Or disappointed that our best laid plans and fondest hopes have come to naught and it feels like we're back to the drawing board one more time.

What do you do in that complicated time between Ascension and Pentecost? Well, what the disciples and others did in Acts is exactly what those three young clergy women did. They engaged in corporate prayer. As they waited, they came together and lifted their hearts and voices to God.

This, of course, was a very Jewish thing to do. First century Jews like the disciples had a prayer book, in the Psalms, to give them a blueprint for speaking to God in whatever circumstances they found themselves. We don't know—and the text doesn't say—if they prayed any of the psalms in the upper room, or if their prayers were more free form. (It's a question of whether they were more Episcopalian or Baptist, I suppose). But we can surmise that they felt comfortable taking whatever they were feeling—including grief, anguish, uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and a host of other emotions and just letting God have all of them.

That's what you do when things get complicated—and even when they're not, by the way—you pray. If little Timothy, whose baptismal covenant we celebrated earlier today, can learn that about the Christian life in both the Orthodox and Reformed traditions, that will serve him well as he lives out his life of Christian discipleship. "Timothy," you will want to tell him, *we will want to tell him*, "when things get complicated, pray!"

A few words about why we pray and what it accomplishes are in order.

First, we pray, as the disciples did, to remind us that **we are not alone**. The very act of lifting up our hearts and our voices—whether we do that in the quiet of our own rooms or in a sanctuary full of people—is an affirmation of trust that there is something more out there than just us. We aren't left here alone to carry our pain and anguish, our uncertainties and anxieties. We don't have to face life by ourselves. There is a Higher Power at work in the world—a power that works in, through, beyond, and sometimes in spite of us and the community that surrounds us. When we pray for ourselves or for others, we take at least a small step beyond isolation towards **connection** and a *sense that this connection can help us move into the future*. When we pray, even if we have a hard time feeling that the connection is there, we are taking a step beyond isolation.

Second, we pray, as the disciples did, to keep our hearts and minds **open to discernment**. Prayer is a nurturing of our connection to God—and when coupled with meditation or a meditative stance of readiness to listen to what the Divine might be telling us directly, or through the circumstances and people in our lives—an openness gets fostered. The 120 people, including the 11 disciples, who were gathered in and devoted to constant prayer in that time between Ascension and Pentecost were, through that willingness to pray, being made open to receive. Would Pentecost—the Spirit coming to fill them in Jerusalem during the Harvest Festival of Weeks, fifty days after Passover—have come without them praying? Maybe. In my experience and in the witness of the Bible and the history of people of faith, God can do all sorts of things which seem impossible, including coming to people who are not praying. But praying made them ready to see and receive what was coming to them. Martha Whitney was right when she started this service by talking about how God is already here. But sometimes it takes us praying to recognize that truth.

I love the way the great poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it, "*Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit round and pluck blackberries.*"ⁱⁱ Isn't that right? Praying helps us to see how earth *is crammed with heaven* and every bush is afire with God. Being in corporate worship or being part of other groups who take the spiritual nature of life seriously helps us to be aware of and open to how God is speaking. Done intentionally, prayer opens us—opens *us!*—to being *crammed with heaven* and *afire with God*, too. So Chris and Liz, teach little Timothy to pray!

Which brings me to the third thing I think the text says about prayer—the prayer in which the disciples and the rest of the 120 engaged and the prayer that we ourselves can do. It **is not a substitute for action, but a prelude and a prod to it**. Prayer by itself can be a powerful thing.

There are people who, because of their circumstances, can do little more than pray. Some of the best pray-ers I have known have been largely homebound and sometimes bedridden men and women. But what I find is that prayer—and by this, I mean real prayer, not the “thoughts and prayers” that get offered up as a matter of course in the tweets of various public figures on the right and left--“thoughts and prayers” that mean little because they are just ways to avoid really engaging, but real prayer that gets lifted up in sincerity, tends to focus the mind. The more I pray about a situation, or an issue, I mean really pray about it, the more I feel led to do something about the situation or the issue in question. The mind gets focused. When I’m praying for someone or about something, I mean really praying, I am moved—most often—to try to do something to help.

I love the short *This I Believe* piece that was shared by Deirdre Sullivan with Krista Tippett years ago now. She said:

I believe in always going to the funeral. My father taught me that.

The first time he said it directly to me, I was 16 and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. "Dee," he said, "you're going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family."

So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, "Sorry about all this," and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered 20 years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes.

That was the first time I went un-chaperoned, but my parents had been taking us kids to funerals and calling hours as a matter of course for years. By the time I was 16, I had been to five or six funerals. I remember two things from the funeral circuit: bottomless dishes of free mints and my father saying on the ride home, "You can't come in without going out, kids. Always go to the funeral."

Sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to calling hours or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that.

"Always go to the funeral" means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don't really have to and I definitely don't want to. I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully under-attended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour. The Shiva call for one of my ex's uncles. In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic.

Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing. In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity.

She closes with this, and it makes me tear up every time I read it.

On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath

*away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.*ⁱⁱⁱ

You know what we do when we go to funerals, don't you? We pray. We pray with and for the grieving.

What do we do between Ascension and Pentecost, when we're waiting? When we're still caught in grief or faced with complications in life? What do we do when we're not sure what to do?

We pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

ⁱⁱ From Young Clergy Women International, A prayer for Mother's Day adapted by [Heidi Carrington Heath](#) and originally written by [Amy Young](#) (h/t [Emmy Rettino Kegler](#))

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh" Nicholson & Lee, eds. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. 1917.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deirdre Sullivan, "Always Go To the Funeral" *This I Believe* heard on *All Things Considered* National Public Radio, August 8th, 2005. <https://www.npr.org/2005/08/08/4785079/always-go-to-the-funeral>