

Devotions – November 4 – 10, 2007
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Sunday, November 4

Be still, and know that I am God! Psalm 46:10

Some time ago my wife and I attended the Clergy-Spouse Theological Conference at Mackinac Island. One of the presenters, the Rev. Dr. Lowell Almen, reflected on a conversation he had with a Catholic priest early in his ministry. The priest told him that he considered it his highest responsibility to pray for his parishioners.

That's a bit different! Preaching, leading worship, teaching, pastoral care, administrative work – all take up lots of my time. When can I find time to pray?

But perhaps the priest is on to something. Prayer connects me with God, and brings God solidly into all the realms of my ministry. Moreover, as someone in my congregation recently noted, "Praying for others has changed me!"

So maybe the priest isn't far off? Maybe amidst all the other tasks of ministry, prayer for my parishioners ought to be my highest responsibility.

Yours too! Yours because while I may be an ordained pastor, you too are a baptized child of God. And you too have a responsibility, because of your baptism, to be a part of the ministry of God's people. You too are called to pray!

That's what the devotions will be about this week. Prayer! Prayer for others, and, I hope, prayers for some folk you might not otherwise think about.

But before we get to that, let's start with how we pray. We sit down, fold our hands, and ask God for what we need, or offer our thanks and praise. Amen! We're done.

Is that how you pray? That's usually my form. Quick and easy. Get the words out and be finished. After all, don't want to waste any time...or forget anything on my list.

But wait a moment...*Be still and know that I am God.* What if we tried listening instead? Would we hear God speak? Do we even need to hear God speak?

My wife and I have been married for over 8 years, and we are still madly in love. Sometimes, after Rebecca is asleep, we sit together on the sofa, cuddling and snuggling together, and never say a word. And yet, that communication is as deep as any conversation we have ever had.

That's what silence can bring to us in our prayer life as well. Not silence, straining to hear God speak, somehow, someday. Rather, silence that simply relishes God's presence in our midst. Silence that perhaps does include hearing God speak, but only if and when God speaks, and in the fashion God chooses.

The next time you sit down to pray begin with silence. A minute, two, maybe five. Just be silent. Cuddle and snuggle a bit with the God who has created, redeemed, and sanctified you. You can bring your cares and needs in prayer in a few minutes. For now, let God direct your thoughts. Let God direct your prayer.

Pray right now. Don't pull out your list of needs or wishes. Gather yourself, empty your thoughts, and simply be in silence with God. "Be still and know that I am God..." Let God hold you tight. Enjoy the cuddling and snuggling with the God of amazing grace!

Monday, November 5

*Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered around you,
and over it take your seat on high. Psalm 7:7*

“I can worship God at camp...”

“I can find God out on the lake...”

“I don’t need to be in worship...God is everywhere.”

Ever hear things like that? Maybe even from your own lips?

True enough, I suppose. But for Lutherans worship is not about some vague notion that God is somewhere around us. Worship is grounded in God’s revelation, even presence, in some very real, concrete places.

For Lutherans worship consists of three elements. It begins in the Word – the Word of God (Jesus Christ), revealed to us in the word (Holy Scripture). OK, I’ll concede that one. Bring your Bible to your deer blind; read Scripture before you bait your hook; share devotions in the Green Bay hotel room before the shopping begins. God will be there with you!

But there is another element to worship – the Sacraments. In the Sacraments God comes to us in the form of bread and wine, in the water poured over the baptized. And not just any old presence – God comes to us in the person of Jesus, the crucified Christ, crucified to bring us hope where there is no reason for hope, and life where there can be no life. Sorry – can’t get that out on the boat! The Sacraments are a gift to the community, to the people of God gathered together. Wal-Mart doesn’t carry it, not even Amazon.com. It comes to us in the midst of the worshipping community.

Which brings us to the third element to worship – the worshipping community! For Lutherans our worship is a function of the community, the gathered people of God. Check out the Bible – from Genesis to Revelation God is always creating community. There are no “lone rangers” in the Biblical story. Community is central to God’s action in the world in Scripture – and in 2007. And that you can’t get either out on the boat or at camp. Separated from the community we lose the richness of the people whom God has gathered with us to form the Body of Christ.

Gone for the weekend? Too bad...unless you seek out another community in which to share. Or check out your own congregation – is there another worship time in the life of your community?

But for now, it’s time to pray. Time to pray for the community around us in worship which we so often take for granted. Time to pray for wonderful gifts of God!

Picture someone who sits near you in worship. Name their name, see their face, and take some time for silence (remember yesterdays devotional?). And then, when God is ready, pray for that person who is a part of your worshiping community, who is a gift of God in your life!

Tuesday, November 6

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Luke 22:31-32

Bishop Skrenes is fond of sharing the story of a shut-in he visited regularly in his first call. The woman was blind, and aged, and yet every visit with her ended with her promise to pray for him. Over and over again Bishop Skrenes marveled at her ministry to him!

I understand that. I have a woman in my congregation, in her late 80's, who regularly reminds me that she prays for me and for my family. What a powerful gift that is from Betty to me and to my family!

It's a powerful gift because leadership in the church is never in a vacuum, or a "solo" job. Leadership is always in the context of the community, the gathered people of God. As an ordained pastor I am a leader of sorts in the congregation I serve. But my leadership is a gift of God given to me through the community. I am a leader because through the community God has called me and empowered me. And through Betty (and others, I hope) God continues to strengthen me, uplift me, and guide me. Betty's prayers are her gift, but even more, they are a gift of God to me through her!

Like Peter I have challenges in my life and in my ministry. Satan is hard at work. I know that. But I also know that God is with me – I know that because I can feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life, and in Betty I experience the gifts of God's grace as she lifts me up in prayer – lifts me up that once strengthened, I can share God's gifts with others. In that way, whether she realizes it or not, Betty is a part of my ministry. Just like an aged, blind woman was a part of Bishop Skrenes' ministry many years ago!

Pray for your pastor and his or her ministry. And if you are a pastor, pray for your Bishop or other spiritual leader. Ask God's blessings upon him/her, upon family, and upon ministry. As you pray, remember that through your prayers you are a part of that ministry too!

Wednesday, November 7

*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...
Matthew 5:44*

“The best defense is a good offense.” Works in football. Works in war. Works with any enemy, of any kind. Strike first, keep the enemy off balance, and never let them get a chance to get you.

Unless of course you are one of those bleeding hearts who thinks there is another way. Hey, get with the program – get your head out of the sand. It’s a rough world out there.

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Well, that’s fine and good for Jesus, but he didn’t have to deal with terror, with evil empires, or even the guy who’s been a pain in your side since 6th grade. After all, doesn’t everyone love Jesus? What enemies are out to get him?

A bunch, actually. Satan...people...evil powers of all kinds! Lots of folk are out to get Jesus. And remember, they succeeded. They took him to the cross.

But wait – it gets worse. My mother always taught me that every time I sinned it was like putting another nail in Jesus. No, my mother wasn’t trying to be all that morbid. What she was getting at was that the death of Jesus on the cross isn’t the fault of the Jews or the Roman soldiers. It’s my fault. I did it.

The remarkable thing about Jesus’ death on the cross is that the Son of the almighty God does nothing to fight back. Jesus is totally passive. What a wimp!

Maybe. Or maybe not. Remember the story? On the cross, Jesus looks down at his executioners, his “enemies”, and says “Father, forgive them...” (Luke 23:34). Words spoken to me!

And there, in that moment Jesus’ death becomes even more remarkable. Jesus does respond! Jesus does “fight back.” He fights back with love...and with a prayer for his enemies! Jesus does not fight fire with fire. He fights hate and a desire to kill with love and forgiveness. You know the rest of the story. You know what happens in the end. It’s not expected, it’s not sensible, it’s not logical, but it is...love and forgiveness become triumphant in the empty tomb of Easter morning.

So...what would happen if we really loved our enemies and prayed for them? Imagine the power that would unleash – not our power, but God’s power – God’s power of love and reconciliation. What would it do if we could look our enemies in the eye and tell them that we pray for them, for their care and well being? Try it sometime! Like now...

Think of an “enemy” in your life – a cranky neighbor, a family member with whom you just don’t get along, your boss or a co-worker. Rather than wishing them ill, pray for them – genuinely pray for them. Ask God’s blessings upon them. Love them and forgive them, just as Jesus has loved and forgiven you!

Thursday, November 8

*You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
Deuteronomy 10:19*

So, where have you been today? Wal-Mart? The grocery store? Maybe the post office? Have you been out in the car, stopped at a traffic light or stop sign, or just driving along? Maybe to work or out for a walk? Wherever you have been, you probably have seen someone, somewhere whom you do not know.

Maybe you looked into their eyes, just for a moment while standing in line. Or you glanced over while waiting for the light to change. Someone you don't know, a face you've never seen before. And probably won't see again.

Think for a moment of those people you have seen this day, or if it's still early in the day, those you saw yesterday. Ponder for a moment their lives. Ponder the joys they may be celebrating. Ponder how life may be treating them well.

But ponder too what else may be going on. What are the hurts and fears that fill their lives? What dark shadows are creeping over their lives? Maybe a relationship is teetering, barely hanging on. Maybe health issues for them – or for a loved one. Maybe the bills are piling up, and the job just has no future. Or maybe they just don't know where they are going in life. 40-50-60 years old – and their hopes and dreams, so carefully crafted in their younger years, just aren't making it.

As you picture that face, as you ponder their joys and sorrows, picture one more thing. Picture him or her as a child of God. For that stranger who is nameless to you, is known and loved by God. That stranger is one for whom Jesus Christ came to die. Almost unremembered by you and me, that stranger is precious in the sight of God. As the rest of this day unfolds, keep that face in your memory. Somewhere that person is living out their life this day – and being held in honor by you, a baptized disciple of Jesus!

Think once more of the stranger you have seen this day. Look once more upon their face; ponder again the joys that might be a part of his or her life, and the hurt that might be weighing heavily upon this precious child of God. Now, lift up a prayer for this person who you will probably never see again, but upon whom God looks even now!

Friday, November 9

Pray for one another, that you may be healed James 5:16

If you are like me, you probably pray a lot for people who need God's healing. We do that all the time. We pray for a friend, for a friend of a friend, or someone we are asked to lift up in our prayers. They are children of God who need God's healing, and we are eager to include them in our prayers. If that's what you do, keep up the good work!

So, as I sit here I am confident that God has heard my prayers on behalf of those who are in need, those who seek healing. But as I sit here I also wonder...it's 6:58 PM. In Escanaba, at St. Francis Hospital, there are doctors and nurses in the Emergency Room. And almost assuredly they have patients. Some are there with small breaks and bruises. After all, it's Saturday evening. Not many doctors in their office at this hour.

Or maybe someone in the ER is there for another, more serious condition. Maybe right now, even as I type, someone is fighting for life, having suffered a heart attack or stroke, seriously injured in an auto accident, or from an act of violence. And while doctors and nurses struggle to stabilize the body and keep life from slipping away, a family waits in the waiting room, wondering why it is taking so long, why won't they let us in. Can you feel the fear of a wife trembling while her husband clings to life? Can you see the desperation in the eyes of a son wondering if he will ever see his mother alive again?

It happens every day. Maybe it's happening right now in Escanaba – Iron Mountain – Marquette – Chicago – or wherever you happen to be. People I have never known, people I will never know, people who aren't just strangers. I don't even know they exist. Yet right now, less than ten miles from where I sit, the world as they know it threatens to come down on top of them. Maybe, right now.

Yet, while they seem alone in their fear and despair, they don't have to be alone. Though I am not there, and I don't know them, I can join them, walk with them, share with them in their pain, and give them hope. I can pray for them! Nameless and faceless (to me at least), but very real, I can pray for them!

Picture the hospital in your community, or the one you would use if you needed hospital care. Can you also picture the ER? If you've been there before, picture the waiting room, treatment rooms, and staff. Now picture someone in a treatment room with whatever ailment – major or minor. Finally, picture anxious loved ones in the waiting room. Though you don't know who they are and your mental pictures are merely inventions of your imagination, they are there, right now. So take a few moments and pray for persons in need whom you will never see, never know, but who, right now, need your prayers!

Saturday, November 10

...Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. Romans 1:4c-6

We all know them. They are around all over the place. They are our coworkers, our neighbors, our friends. Sometimes they are our family members. They are people who have yet to discover the joy of walking with Christ. They do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Perhaps they never really heard about Jesus. They are “un-churched.” They have never been nurtured by a faith community, and while they may have some vague notion of “Jesus”, Christmas, and something to do with a cross, they have no clue how the dots connect.

Some may have sometimes wondered what it was all about, feeling a yearning inside for more in life, and thinking that maybe, just maybe this Jesus stuff might have some significant substance, but they’ve never heard the story – and experienced the witness of faith.

Others have no use for Jesus – life is too good – or too tragic – or just too busy and full to have room for a 2000 year old teacher. What good is Jesus when life is as wonderful as it already is – or what’s the point when one sees all the hurt and pain in life. How can God and Jesus be real with all the bad stuff in life going on?

And still others have seen with their own eyes the ugly side of Christianity – the hypocrisy and hatred that sometimes comes from those who claim to profess faith in the Prince of Peace. If that’s what it’s all about, why should they bother?

But some have been churched. They grew up in a faith community and have now become “de-churched.” They know the stories – well, they know the story lines anyway. But the stories, the real stories of God’s grace through Jesus, those stories have escaped them. Some are bitter, some have become distracted, and some have found excuses to “excuse” themselves from the community. Still others, de-churched, have a sense of faith in something, maybe even in Jesus, but they don’t sense a Jesus who is real in their lives. God and Jesus are out there somewhere, but neither one really makes much difference in every day life.

So what is one to do? Be a witness! Be a witness to the life changing love of Jesus Christ! Show them how Jesus has changed your life. Don’t convince them to be a church member – speak to them about something bigger, something more significant – invite, even challenge them to be disciples of Jesus. Share with them the gifts that the community shares, the gifts of Word, Sacrament, and the gathering in worship – gifts that

empower us in our journey of discipleship. Don't worry about how to convince them. Let the Spirit do that. Just show them the difference it makes.

But first...pray! Pray over and over again for the people in your life who have little or no faith. Pray and let God go to work. It might take a while – 20-30-40 years – who knows? That's God's concern. Yours is to pray, witness, and pray a little more. So get to work...

Pray this day – and every day – for friends, neighbors, loved ones – anyone who has yet to discover the joy of walking in faith with Jesus. Don't give up on your prayers or your witness. God works in God's time. Our calling is to be faithful in our discipleship. And remember what we said on Sunday, November 4? As baptized Christians our highest responsibility just might be to pray. So pray, and pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)!