

The Rev. Kerith Harding's Sermon

January 15, 2017 - Prayer and Politicians (2nd Sunday after the Epiphany)

I'm most of us here would agree that the recent Presidential election was particularly contentious. And, that faithful Christians found themselves on opposite sides of the vote. In my own life, this week, it seems like reminders of this keep coming up:

On Wednesday, some clergy colleagues on a conference call shared with me that they had been approached by members of their congregations who had questions about the prayers of the people.

--One was asked by a lay reader if they had to mention the president by name, or even pray for him at all.

--The other was excited that his church's lay reader had spontaneously inserted the name of the president elect.

Then, on Thursday, as I was perusing Facebook I saw that a former divinity school colleague's church will be hosting the Inaugural Prayer Service and their choristers will be singing at the Inauguration. My colleague is the Cathedral Organist, so I trust he will be involved in one way or the other. There was a statement posted from the Cathedral's dean, and quite a few commenters were engaged in an argument about the appropriateness of hosting the event.

Finally, on Friday, I received letters from both my own bishop, and the Presiding Bishop, regarding questions they had been asked about both the Prayers of the People and the appropriateness of the Washington National Cathedral hosting the Inaugural Prayer Service.

So... Prayer and politics (or at least prayer and politicians) has been a reoccurring theme this past week.

Starting next Sunday, the Prayers of the People will be praying for a new president, Donald J. Trump. In some of the prayer forms, traditionally, we say the president's name, as we do the names of the bishop and the local ministers. The

bishop of Hawaii has weighed. The choice of whether to use names is up to the local clergy.

At St. John's, we will say aloud the president's name when the particular form invites it, and here's why.

Prayer is not something we do only for our close loved ones, as if it's a recommendation letter. We don't just get to ask God to bless our favorite people, or the people we know who are suffering or sick. Prayer is not a Facebook "like" or a pat on the back or even a hug. Of course we pray for those people that we love, but prayer is so much more than that.

We follow Jesus and Jesus himself prayed for those in government. As our Presiding Bishop pointed out in his recent letter, "Jesus [prayed] earnestly for those in leadership, that they may lead in ways that serve the common good. Even in the most extreme case, Jesus himself, while dying on the cross, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," was praying for Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Rome who ordered his execution, and for all who were complicit in it." No matter what your political stripes, if you follow Jesus, you pray for those who need it. [And, call me crazy, but I think if there is anyone who needs our prayers, it is the President of the United States, no matter who that might be!]

Prayer is also not an opportunity to passive aggressively complain about someone. Those are the prayers that sound a lot like, "Jesus, please be with so and so, who really needs to stop talking smack about virtually everybody she meets, complains incessantly about her husband, and who needs to be grateful for what she has and stop being so negative." That's not prayer. That's a condescending, holier-than-thou exercise. That's feeling righteous about bringing before God someone who we think clearly isn't worthy of God's attention.

Prayer is also not something that we do just with our voices or just in church. In fact, Jesus tells us that when we pray we should go into our rooms in private and shut the door, so that our prayer is genuine and not for others to see. I have a friend who likes to send me selfies of herself at church, as if attending church is the kind of thing that only counts when everyone knows you did it. It drives me crazy. Real prayer occurs in the heart, where we try to put words to what we are asking for but so often fail. I find great comfort in the assurance that the "Spirit

who knows what you need” and asks for you, even when we ourselves don’t have the words.

Prayer is intentionally placing ourselves in God’s presence and asking God to be present to another person.

I want you all to try something. Think of one person you are really having some trouble with. It could be someone close to you, or a politician, or someone at work, whomever...

Then I want you to engage in an exercise created by St. Ignatius, who was an advocate for using our imagination in prayer. Ignatius believed that the “stuff” of our lives was so rich with God’s presence that authentic prayer could simply be a sustained reflection on our daily lives.

And during this exercise if a child cries or a chicken makes a noise or a cell phone goes off and you get distracted, promise yourselves you will bring your attention back to this place (or do the exercise later, at home).

Now, close your eyes.

Simply imagine that you are presenting in prayer the person whom you most dislike or have some issue with right now. [Give 30 seconds]

What I have found by doing this myself is that I am most upset with people whom I feel have some sort of power or control over my well-being, or my sense of myself, or my calm. But once I place them in God’s presence, I see how tiny their power really is. In light of God’s power, they have nothing over me. Often, they are wounded or lost or disillusioned — as we all are on occasion — and the problem is less about them and more about me.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose instrumental role in the fight for peace and justice we celebrate on Monday with a national holiday was a man of deep prayer. He prayed for those who persecuted him, he prayed for himself (and knew himself as deeply flawed), he prayed for his family, and he prayed for those in authority... even those in government whom he knew lead lives contrary to the

vast majority of his values. And he also said, this... He said, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

Today and every day, we must pray. As our Presiding Bishop, who grew up in a historically black church, put it so eloquently in his recent letter (reflecting on the church of his youth)... He said --"We prayed for leaders who were often lukewarm or even opposed to our very civil rights. We got on our knees in church and prayed for them, and then we got up off our knees and we Marched on Washington. Following the way of Jesus, we prayed and protested at the same time. We prayed for our leaders who were fighting for our civil rights, we prayed for those with whom we disagreed, and we even prayed for those who hated us. And we did so following the Jesus, whose way is the way of unselfish, sacrificial love. And that way is the way that can set us all free."

AMEN.