

2008 Bishop's Prayer Retreat for Rostered Leaders (Bishop's Convocation)

Sermon by Pr. Kimberly van Driel
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Naugatuck, Conn.

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John 17: 20-26

I began my preparation for today's sermon, at my kitchen window, staring out, and turning over in my head the first verse of today's gospel: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of all who will believe in me through their word."

An onlooker would have said I was staring off into space, but, according to the Bishop's presentation yesterday, I was actually, in good NF Augustinian fashion, "using my imagination to transpose scripture to the present situation."

Anyhow, in the midst of this "transposing," my husband Edwin walked in. Edwin is a Presbyterian. He is a systematic theologian by vocation. And these two factors mean that he is really, really Reformed.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"Well," I said, "I have this sermon to preach on the gospel of John, and I'm wondering what difference it makes that Jesus prayed, not only for the twelve, but for us."

And in what I now know, after the bishop's presentation yesterday, to be a response of a NT personality, a spiritual Thomist, Edwin said, "That's a great Reformed theme! Jesus' ministry after his ascension is to pray for us! It's all over John Calvin! All the great Reformed dogmaticians spell this out! I have at least three books on this upstairs if you want them."

"Thanks," I said, "but this is the Bishop's retreat that we're talking about here, and some of them will be able to smell Calvin from a mile away. Can you tell me how this is good news for Lutherans?"

Since that moment, I have indeed wondered, how it is indeed good news for Lutherans, for rostered leaders, that, on the night before he died, Jesus did in fact pray for us. How indeed it is good news, that he has been raised from the dead, and because of that, "praying without ceasing" is not only a part of the synod mission statement or a theme for this retreat or even a good idea from 1Thessalonians.

"Praying without ceasing" is a description of the work that Jesus did and continues to do, for you, and for me. It is good news that Jesus prays for us, because prayer is connectedness with God and indeed, with other – as Bishop Payne pointed out on Monday.

In the gospel, it is that connection that Jesus specifically asks for: That just as the Father is in him, and he is in the Father, that we also be in them. How comforting to think, that when we pray, even at our loneliest moments – and, let's face it, as rostered leaders, there can be a LOT of lonely moments – we do not do so alone.

Our prayers, like our ministries, are never done in an echo chamber, even if we feel that we are the ONLY one, who cares anymore, about the state of the finances, or the welcome of strangers, or even the life of faith itself.

No. Jesus is already praying for connection among his people. And has been doing so, even before we were called to care about the state of the finances or the welcome of strangers, or the life of faith itself.

What grace to think, that our prayers, like our ministries themselves, do not have to be the whole kit and caboodle. They can just be quiet echoes of the One who is already ministering, already praying, on our behalf.

It is also good that Jesus prays for us, because, at times, our prayers can get a little rusty, and his don't.

A good friend, an Episcopal priest, told me about a Facebook group she belongs to for new clergy. The most frequently topic of discussion, was whether prayer time counted as work time or personal time. It was a heated debate. Until one courageous young priest confessed that for him the discussion was purely academic, since he never really said the daily office anymore, and didn't make much time for other kinds of prayer either. And once he made his confession, the debate stopped, because everyone conceded that indeed, they had spent more time on the internet commenting on prayer than they actually did praying.

Now, you might say that that's Episcopalians for you, but we are full communion partners, and I suspect that we share a lot with them. Prayer lives of all kinds rust out for all kinds of reasons. And when they do rust out, it can be hard to get going again, whether from guilt or from inertia. And the resulting sense of alienation and separation from God – well, I don't have to convince this group that that isn't good for our well-being.

But it occurs to me that, when that happens, that Jesus' own prayer life might be a place to retreat to, and find comfort that, when Jesus prays that he would be in us and we in him, he isn't giving us a program, or advice about what to do in the world. He isn't telling us to pray harder. He is talking to the Father, the source of connection.

And how could a Father not listen to the prayers of his only Son?

But finally, it is good that Jesus prays for us because, if it is indeed true, that he is near, and that we are in him, and he in us, we just might have more of a prayer life than our seminary-trained brains give us credit for.

For since he is near, as near as breathing, he picks up all those little prayers we throw out there. You know what I am talking about – sighs too deep for words – the “thank God!” in the face of the sleeping infant, or the “Dear Lord, help me” when discipline in confirmation class unravels, or silent “holy crap” during the council meeting.

These petitions might not seem very holy, but Jesus, close to us as he is, can gather them up, like fabric scraps from the cutting room floor, and redeem them. And he pieces them together with the scraps of all his servants of every time and in every place, and weaves them together with his own ceaseless petitions, so that they are given to the Father as something good, and holy.

At the beginning of worship today, Joanne Post wondered out loud whether the preaching would “drive us out the door.” I do not know whether this is news that will drive us out, but I do think it is news to take with you when you go:

Jesus prays for you.
Without ceasing.

Amen.