

Wow. Help. Thanks.

Reflection for Sunday Feb. 3, 2019

Gospel reading: Matthew 6:7-21



Have you ever asked yourself what we're all doing here on Sunday mornings? Seriously, why did you come here?

For many of us it's this community. And it *is* special to spend time with one another, to know that we're included by a loving community like this one, isn't it? The other week I overheard someone say during the passing of the peace: "Who else can I hug?!", which I think summed up that part of church life perfectly. And I just love that this is part of that person's church experience.

For others it's also important to be called into service. To find ways as people of faith to make a real difference, both here at our faith community and in our community around us. To serve as Christ's hands and feet in the world. That, too, is a fantastic reason for being involved with a church, and an important part of our calling as Christians.

But: neither community nor service is really the reason we come here – I hope. Enjoying sharing handshakes and hugs, friendship and community we can do in any number of places, from book clubs to coffee shops and yoga classes. And you only have to look around to know there is a great need to be of service out in the world, to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak truth to power.

We come here – not just for socializing, not just for activism – we come here to *worship*. We worship because we are *not* the center of the universe; God is. We worship because our Father, our Parent in heaven is hallowed and holy, eternal and amazing, infinite in power, infinite in wisdom and grace.

When we bring our offerings we sing "*Praise God* from whom all blessings flow" "*Give thanks* to God in love made known". Because God is worthy of our praise and our thanks.

That's the real reason we're all here, to be reminded of the One who created *us*, not just me – *us*; the One who called *us* here, the One who gives *us* the gift of community and the gift of service, the One "from whom all blessing flow".

In other words, we don't come to worship because the choir's anthems are beautiful and inspiring, though they are.

Or because we want to reconnect with our friends, though we do.

Or because of the absolutely amazing, earth-shaking and life-changing sermons you hear every single Sunday (hey, I can dream, alright?).

Because worship isn't really about us. It's about the *object* of our worship: that which we call God, the Divine, the Great Mystery, that cosmic Force of Life and Love.

I'm part of a Facebook group for UCC clergy, called Below Average Ministry (or BAM! for short). It's a great place to exchange ideas and resources, but also to occasionally whine and rant to an understanding audience. One of the things clergy like to rant about is this sense of entitlement that seems to be spreading with regards to worship. Or as one colleague posted last week: "When people sometimes tell me they don't get anything from worship, I am tempted to answer, 'Deal with it! Because it's not about you.' "

Of course it's not as simple or easy as that, and of course he'll never actually say it, but you get the idea. We need a place in our lives to remind us that not everything is always about "you", about your personal happiness, your convictions, your convenience, your frantic timetables. Some things are bigger than any of us. And worship is a wonderful means to help us discover that and grow into it.

Earlier this week I had a real visit with a real person, and we talked about worship. And we both realized that a big part of worship is – or should be: prayer. In particular corporate prayer. The kind of prayer Jesus teaches his disciples in this morning's Gospel reading.

You'll notice that in the prayer Jesus teaches there, there's not one single "me" or "I" in there, it's all "us" and "we". It's us, the *community* coming before God, expressing our thanks and praise and our need for God's help; because on our own, we'd sink.

Something else we tend to overlook: the plain fact that Jesus is teaching them. He doesn't tell them to leave it to the experts, the priests and spiritual leaders in the community, which was the norm in those days. Instead, he teaches them to pray as a community of faith, to voice their own praise, their own thanks and their own needs.

Nowadays we'd say he cut out the middleman by empowering them to speak for themselves. And by the way, he says, less is more. God doesn't need to be convinced by flowery language; God knows what you need, and is waiting to hear you say it. It's that simple, he says. And then he gives them this outline, the prayer we now call the Lord's Prayer.

Christian author and activist Anne Lamott once made the helpful observation that all prayer can essentially be boiled down to three simple words: Wow. Help. Thanks. The prayer Jesus gave us is a point in case:

Wow: Divine dad, you name is so holy and blessed. May your reign of shalom soon become a reality right here. May your amazing dreams for us materialize!

Help: Give all of us this day the food we need. Help us to let forgiveness flow like a river between us. And lead us to holy innocence beyond the temptations and evil of our days.

Thanks: For *yours* is the power and the glory and mercy, always. Amen, may it be so! [This was added later by the early Church, based on then-familiar traditional patterns of Jewish prayer.]

And as I was driving back from the visit that I mentioned, I thought: you know, "liturgy" means literally "the work of the people": we, God's people, making an honest effort to

give God thanks and praise for all that God does, and to acknowledge we need God's help. The work of the people in response to the work of God.

But if that's so, then why is it so often that there's just one person up there running the show, so to speak. Just one guy or gal with the power to make pretty much all of the decisions for how we worship, what gets said, what gets done, what gets prayed. Where are "the people"?

Prayer is in our DNA, we're wired for prayer. There's so many ways to pray... but somewhere along the line we forgot. I vividly remember a Time and Talent fundraiser at a previous congregation. People brought their gifts of music, poetry, song, storytelling... and then there were two 6-year old girls. In tutus and tights. And they started to dance in that sanctuary, flitting back and forth between pulpit and lectern, twirling, giggling, kicking their legs, laughing and twirling some more. It was joyful and lovely, and they wouldn't quit until their mom made them stop.

And I realized: this is prayer, public prayer. We're born with it, it comes natural. But then we grow up and the church makes us stop by making prayer complicated and hard, with all kinds of rules and formats. And we begin to believe that it's something better to be left to the professionals, the priests and ministers who have studied this kind of stuff.

So, where am I going with this...? I guess I'm leading up to an invitation, if anywhere. An invitation to cut out the middle(wo)man, the professional Christian, and to reclaim the voice that Jesus has given you, the voice to pray and to speak behalf of "the people". An invitation to restore a St. John's tradition that has members of this community offer the Prayers of the Community. Maybe not all the time, but on a regular basis, starting again this Lenten season...

Next week we'll announce a date for a workshop (more of a "playshop", really). We'll explore a bit what corporate prayer is about (and is not about), and hopefully unlearn some of the ideas and fears that might stop you from offering them. You'll be offered some tools, templates, ideas and resources to make the writing of a corporate prayer something to actually *enjoy*. Less is more. Wow – Help – Thanks.

And when it's your turn to offer the Prayers of the Community, you won't be on your own but work with me on that Sunday's theme, offering you a soundboard, helping you shape the words and find the imagery, if you want.

Mystic and theologian Saint Teresa of Avila once said, long ago: "Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God." Maybe it's time for us as a community to take that friendship a little less for granted...

Amen.

Matthew 6:7-21

⁷ “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. ⁸ Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! ⁹ Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
 may your name be kept holy.
¹⁰ May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on earth,
 as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today the food we need,
¹² and forgive us our sins,
 as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
¹³ And don’t let us yield to temptation,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. ¹⁷ But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

¹⁹ “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.