Practicing Prayer

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2005

Jeremiah 15:15-21 Psalm 26 Romans 12:1-8 Matthew 16:21-27

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers….Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:12-15)

I have spent too much of this Labor Day weekend glued to my computer, reading the latest news articles on Hurricane Katrina. Satellite images of burst levees, the 100,000 people, most of them poor, most of them African American, trapped in their city for nearly a week; the towns in Mississippi and Alabama destroyed by wind and wave.

The images were strangely compelling, but also paralyzing in their horror. I wish I had spent less time reading the news, and more time praying. I wish I had spent less time watching in horrified fascination, and more time listening to God.

In the din of newscasts and speculation, in the angry voices not unlike God's anger in Ezekiel against sentinels who fall down on the job, in the pain and loss and fear, I wish I had turned to Paul's letter to the Romans: "Be constant in prayer," Paul instructed the churches in Rome. Persevere in prayer; pray without ceasing.

There are all sorts of ways we can practice perseverance in prayer. Iza and I are setting aside a place in our house just for prayer, a prayer corner where I put my icons and prayer book. Some people use prayer beads, using the beads to keep track of prayers, finding inner quiet through simple repetition. Our Book of Common Prayer provides a simple daily office for individuals and families; prayers for morning, noon, evening and night.

There are so many easy, wonderful ways to prayer with perseverance and constancy. Yet, there are weeks when I find myself approach prayer with the heaviness that I used to approach clarinet practice.

I liked the clarinet. I liked being able to play well. But it just seemed too much trouble to actually sit down for an hour and go through the scales. There was a heaviness to clarinet practice, out of tune with the lightness of the music I wanted to create.

And the more I put off practicing, the weaker my embouchure became and the heavier my guilt would grow – and the worse the guilt was, the less appealing clarinet practice became.

Which is why I love coming to Messiah. It is so much easier, so much richer, to pray in this company than it is to pray alone. Christ is here among us, Matthew assured his listeners and readers twenty centuries ago. Christ is here among us, Matthew assures us today in Auburndale, Christ is present wherever two or three are gathered together in his name. And when we pray, in song, around the table, in the prayers of the people, Christ is clearly present.

Now, one reason people stay away from church – and there are many reasons – is that they are afraid they haven't practiced prayer enough. Folks see us as the BSO of prayer, already practiced and perfect, getting together with other like-minded folks once a week.

But we are all practicing prayer, all the time, faithfully or irregularly. None of us ever graduates from practicing! What a beautiful word that is, practice. We practice in order to learn, and we practice what we have learned. To practice is to learn through repetition. But practice also means translating an idea into action

Translating an idea into action. In the midst of the loss and sorrow following Katrina, prayer may free us from the noise of the news, but it does not let us turn away from the world. When we practice prayer, we translate ideas into action.

© 2005, The Rev. Devin McLachlan.

In fact, the result of constant prayer follows immediately in Paul's letter. He tells the churches in Rome, *Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

Prayer leads us to work that God calls us to -- *Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints.* Messiah is the place we practice prayer, so that we can return to the world to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep

And so this Sunday and next, in response to God's word, in response to our practice of prayer, Messiah will contribute to the needs of the saints; helping the Episcopal Church extend hospitality to strangers. At the offertory, we will be taking a collection for the life-saving work of Episcopal Relief and Development, providing food, water, shelter and medicine for those in need, sending chaplains to counsel the grieving and support aid workers, and using the existing network of Episcopal churches in order to reach people as quickly as possible.

Episcopal Relief and Development's long-term response will focus on the most vulnerable populations: children, the elderly and disabled, the uninsured, and the undocumented -- people who might otherwise fall through the cracks. We will help rebuild homes, restore businesses, and help traumatized people recover.

And we will pray. And pray. Pray to listen for God. Pray to hand over to God our sorrows and fears. Pray to share with God our joys and celebrations. Pray so that Christ may be present among us.

Prayer for Those Affected by Hurricane Katrina

By The Reverend Wilma Jakobsen,
Senior Associate for Liturgy and Peace & Justice,
All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA

Most Merciful, Most Compassionate God
Hear our prayers for your people affected by Hurricane Katrina
And let their cries come unto You.

O God, the floods have engulfed the land
The storms made a wasteland of water
How can we sing to you
When so many have died or are missing?

Strengthen those who cling to life
Keep their hope and hearts alive;
Revive the weary rescue workers and tired medical teams
Renew the resolve of those who have lost everything.

Quicken all efforts to rush resources and aid
Send our people to help;
Open our hearts to give and give again
That we may be generous bearers of healing and help.

God of the Universe
Pour out your Spirit of mercy and compassion
In Your Name we pray. AMEN.

Please visit www.er-d.org to learn how you can support Episcopal Relief and Development!

© 2005, Devin McLachlan.