

## *A Pentecost Call to Prayer*

Last Tuesday, Amy Hepp, Jane Hepp, and Maria Ballas were confirmed in the faith at St. Paul's in Brighton at our deanery's confirmation service by Bishop Wendell Gibbs. I am so very grateful to Pastor Bruce for preparing them for this important milestone in their faith journeys. There's one thing Pastor Bruce did with them that I thought was brilliant and I want to share it with you today. Often in confirmation preparation students are asked to write their own creed – their own statement of what it is they *believe*. But Pastor Bruce asked Amy, Jane and Maria to write their own versions of *The Lord's Prayer*.

I want to share with you, as an example, one of those, written by Maria Ballas and her father, Pablo: *Nuestra Apa, Since the world began, you have always been there to love us. Your name defines what love is. We want to spread that love to the entire world. People will know you as we share your love, as you taught us to do. Let us live in harmony and grace with you and with each other. Help us with the things that you see that we need, and to recognize the needs of others. If we start to wander away from you, show us the way back to your light and love. For you were, are, and always will be the light and love in the world. May it always be so!*

What I love about Pastor Bruce's idea is that it underscores what this faith thing is all about. What this church thing is all about. It's not about giving intellectual ascent to concepts that other people have come up with to describe God, and then being shamed if you get it wrong. It's about focusing on Jesus and his priorities. One of Jesus' primary concerns was his disciples' *relationships* with God. And prayer *nurtures* that relationship. Prayer helps us be aware of God's presence in the world and in our lives.

Today, Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. We're draped in red to signify the tongues of fire, the form in which the Holy Spirit came that first Pentecost. That first Pentecost was the birthday of the church – the Jesus movement. And the church grew fast and furiously after that day. Many of you were reading about that yesterday in the book of Acts as you were working on discerning guiding principles for St. John's. How did those early Christians make their decisions? What principles guided them?

That early church didn't grow because those first Christians were so smart, or because they adhered to the latest, best practices, or because of their ability to do everything correctly. It grew because they were given the gift of the Spirit – and they opened themselves to that power and that presence in their lives. The spirit is simply “God present,” – the present tense of God.<sup>i</sup> Prayer, in all of its many and varied forms, is at bottom, acknowledging God present.

Graham Standish writes about how many people in the “once” mainstream church think that decline in church membership has to do with theological positions, styles of worship, or availability of programs, or of churches being too liberal or too conservative, or too traditional in their worship. People often say that in a declining church “We don't meet enough of people's needs, and we need to offer more programs.”

He says, “What I have consistently noticed in almost all *thriving* congregations, however, is that what makes the difference is the extent to which the community is open to *God* at its core. Many churches simply aren't open to God. They let the will, ego, and purpose of the dominant voices in their congregation drive the agenda. These may be the voice of the pastor or that of a few strong members. Instead of seeking *God's* call and purpose, they argue over who is right and who is wrong. *Declining* churches tend not to be open to God's presence. They worship, meet, and engage in ministry and mission, but their sense is that God is in heaven, we are on earth, and all that matters is doing good deeds. The congregants have no sense that Christ is in their midst, and that this presence of Christ can bless them and make their churches places of love. So they continue to engage in the practices of the church, but they don't *expect* an encounter with Christ.”

God is treated mostly as an abstract idea or thought, or as an entity we encounter when we die, rather than as a tangible presence in the here and now. “These [declining] churches,” he says, “have no awareness that God's grace and power can work in their midst. They have no awareness of the Holy Spirit. They're unaware that when we become open to God, God's Spirit flows through the church to make miracles happen.”<sup>ii</sup>

I had to laugh when I read this again the other day. That's because of what happened when a few of us got together to talk about how we might undergird the *Discovery Process* with prayer. I said I want to challenge the congregation, every one

of you, to pray for this process. And one of them said, “Oh if we do that, people are going to think the church is dying. It’s like the priest coming when people are near death.”

Well after some wrestling – all the details of which I won’t go into, we have a plan. And there’s no better day than Pentecost to launch this plan. Because Pentecost is all about being reminded that God in fact IS present right here, right now, and God is far more than an abstract idea. But you have been through so much, sometimes it’s just hard to be open and vulnerable to the reality of the Holy Spirit at work among you.

So here’s the challenge. I’m asking every one of you – yes, everyone, to at least *pretend* that God is more than an abstract idea, to call God’s bluff, and act *as if* the Holy Spirit is real. And every day, humor me, and take at least five seconds to pray these six words: Thank you, meet us, guide us. If you want to expand on that, you can. We’ll get to that shortly. You can decide when and how you will offer this prayer. It can be while you are brushing your teeth. It can be while you’re exercising. My preference is to offer this prayer when I’m stopped at a red light. The red light is a built-in reminder of the Holy Spirit, like the red here today. In case you haven’t figured it out, I’m trying to take away your excuses for not praying.

I believe with all my heart that God’s grace and power are at work here at St. John’s. I am beginning to see miracles happen. I call them “God-winks.” Someone came in my office last week and told me he is going to double his pledge. We have sixteen newcomers who will be receiving invitations to a newcomer brunch the end of June. We had twenty-four people here yesterday for a pet memorial service who otherwise would never have come through the door. And we had a core of you here yesterday wrestling with Scripture and listening to one another as you were discerning guiding principles – a compass by which you will move forward together. One of the signs of the spirit at work is convergence – when two or more people come to the same conclusion about something, independent of each other. That’s happened at least twice between me and Jayne Watson, the head of the Discovery Process, in one week.

The metaphor for your journey that keeps coming to my mind is my sprained ankle with two avulsion fractures. I have a lot of resources about working with congregations during an interim. One of them includes a Congregational Trauma Self-Test.<sup>iii</sup> There are fifteen risk factors for a congregation. By my count, based on what you have been telling me, you have experienced about 9 out of the fifteen, give or take. You have been through a lot. One might say you’ve been through trauma.

When I fell on the stairs and sprained my ankle on March 11, my foot went through trauma. My toes were bruised. My ankle joint swelled. And it hurt. I couldn’t walk on it. I iced it to reduce the swelling, I took Tylenol to help with pain and inflammation. I wore that big boot and used crutches. And you helped me. Especially the acolytes, who were hands at the altar for me when I needed my hands to hold the crutches. You gave me rides because I couldn’t drive.

Inflammation and disability and trauma go together. When a church goes through trauma, there is also inflammation. But in a human organism, like a church, inflammation takes the form of anxiety. And anxiety manifests itself in many ways: in retreat and withdrawal, distancing, cut-off, low morale, mistrust, worry, negativity, blaming. I guess what I’m trying to say is simply this: if you’ve experienced anything like this, it’s par for the course given what you’ve been through in the last fifteen or so years. You are NORMAL. You have been through trauma. And it’s time to heal.

So what is going to help you, the way Tylenol and a boot and crutches helped me? Well, your vestry made the decision to opt for an interim clergy person. That choice is like wearing a boot and using crutches, taking the weight off the of the injured foot. You get to step back and focus on healing and not push yourselves to walk on a broken leg just yet. And yet you are still being the church. God bless you – you have been through *SO* much – and ministries are still going on.

Focusing on direction, not condition, will help. Focusing on strength, not weakness, will help.<sup>iv</sup> Participating in the Discovery Process will help. And above all, I believe *prayer* will help. Wanting to push ahead right now and rush into the call process, or rush into starting new things before the Discovery Process has run its course, are probably symptoms of anxiety. That would be like walking on a broken leg.

It is no coincidence that you are at this point on your journey as Pentecost arrives – as you are reminded that God is present, that the Spirit has been given to you as a companion, an advocate, as one who helps you to pray. And so today, this is your next faithful step: to commit to pray daily for God’s mission in this community, and to ask how the

community of faith called St. John's can be a part of it. God is real, brothers and sisters. And God's Spirit is here, waiting for you to ask for help. Waiting to be "activated."

So please take out that sheet of paper, make a commitment to pray, every day, for a minimum of five seconds: Thank you, meet us, guide us. If you want to pray for a whole minute, pray this: *For St. John's – for all that it has been, for all that it is, for all that it will be, **thank you.** At the point of our deepest need, **meet us.** To where you want us to go, **guide us.** Show us the next faithful step.* Fold the pledge card and place it in the basket at the foot of the baptismal font when you come up for communion. Please sign your name. Detach the card stapled to it and put that in your wallet or on your bathroom sink or in your car or wherever it is you'll need it.

God is here. God is with you. God loves you. God gives you the Holy Spirit so that the presence of Jesus can be alive and among you now, leading you into a future beyond what you could ask for or imagine. One of you put it this way to me. "Let's pray and then watch God work."

Let us pray: *Nuestra Apa, Since the world began, you have always been there to love us. Your name defines what love is. We want to spread that love to the entire world. People will know you as we share your love, as you taught us to do. Let us live in harmony and grace with you and with each other. Help us with the things that you see that we need, and to recognize the needs of others. If we start to wander away from you, show us the way back to your light and love. For you were, are, and always will be the light and love in the world. May it always be so!*

*Pastor Dana Runestad*

The Day of Pentecost  
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<sup>i</sup> Gordon Lathrop, quoted in *Postils for Preaching, Year B*, by John Rollefson

<sup>ii</sup> Graham Standish, "Rational Functionalism," <https://alban.org/archive/rational-functionalism/>

<sup>iii</sup> Bill Kemp, *The Church Transition Workbook: Getting Your Church in Gear*, [www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org), p. 22

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works, Chapter 9*