

The Seventh Sunday of Easter – John 17:6-19
St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

Prayer is an essential part of our life of faith. How do you pray? Are there particular times of day when you pray? Do you pray in a special place in your home or outdoors? Do you pray alone, or do you only pray when you are with others? Do you pray with the Book of Common Prayer, or an online app? Do you pray before you eat and sleep? Or do you mostly pray when life isn’t going the way you expect?

When I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, I became familiar with the writings of the highly acclaimed local writer, Anne Lamott. Anne has a quirky, self-deprecating, yet honest, sense of humor. Many of her books offer autobiographical perspectives on her struggles with alcohol addiction, depression, single motherhood, and Christianity.¹ One of her most well received books is about prayer. She writes, “I do not know much about prayer, but I have come to believe, over the last twenty-five years, that there’s something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow.”² These three essential prayers are much easier to remember than the beautifully poetic ones in our Book of Common Prayer. And they are likely the ones we say most often in the moment, wherever we are. These prayers often well up from deep within our hearts before we even know we are saying them. Anne finds that all of her extemporaneous prayers are variations on Help. Thanks. Wow. Although they are simple and direct, they are no less sincere than those we pray from our prayer books at home every day, or in church every week.

“Help!” is the kind of prayer we put off until we are so desperate that we finally admit to God that we don’t know what we are doing, or don’t have the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Lamott

² Anne Lamott. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books (2012), 1.

strength to get through life's challenges on our own. We find ourselves surrendering to the situation and admitting that we are powerless to continue without God's help. This is hard to do for those of us who like to convince ourselves that we are in control of our lives – that is until something unexpected happens and we get stuck. Then we will swallow our pride and take all the help we can get to be released from the mess we find ourselves in.

The second kind of prayer that Anne relies on is, “Thanks!” Actually, she admits that the prayer is a bit longer: Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you! Again, this prayer is likely offered after being rescued from a desperate or dangerous situation, and possibly is blurted out after an initial prayer of Help! Thanks, is an abbreviated version of longer prayers that materialize after we realize what just happened and what could have happened. Thank you, God, for helping me see that person in the crosswalk in the nick of time so I didn't run them over. Thank you, God, that I came through that surgery without any complications. Thank you, God, that I finally found a job after being unemployed for longer than expected. Thank you, God, for helping me get through another day of loneliness or depression. Thanks God for always being there when I need you.

The third prayer that Anne finds herself saying is, “Wow!” Such as, Wow, that's amazing, Or, Wow, that's beautiful! Wow can be combined with, “Thanks!” Or, Wow! can be a prayer in itself when you are surprised by God's unexpected grace. According to Anne, “Wow' is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous . . . When we are stunned to the place beyond words”³ by the veins in a leaf, birdsong, or volcanoes.

³ Ibid, 71.

Help. Thanks. Wow. These three essential prayers are especially convenient when our minds are so overwhelmed that we can't put two words together to make a sentence. And yet, those simple words can propel us into deeper prayers that come with more thought and practice.

Prayer practice may have begun with your family when you were a child; when you were taught to say grace before meals and prayers at bedtime. But prayer practice for older children and adults draws us into a more enduring relationship with God and other people. A consistent prayer practice invites us to consider how God is teaching, guiding, and renewing us each day, focusing our lives toward God's desires for us, rather than on our demands of God. Of course there are times when we lose our way and finding the right path begins with an anxious or exasperated plea of, "Help!" But the practice of daily prayer helps us to recognize God's abiding presence in our lives, and to celebrate the abundant joy we experience when we follow in God's way of love.

In today's Gospel reading, the deep and intimate prayer that Jesus offers for his disciples comes from a source of great love. The love that God and Jesus share with one another, and the love that God and Jesus have for the disciples. We hear about Jesus' prayer life throughout the Gospels. He often prayed on a mountain in solitude at the end of a long day. Other times, he prayed with his disciples even though they do not have the stamina or inclination to pray as Jesus does. And yet, the disciples have come to know and share the prayer that Jesus taught them. In some ways, what they have learned through praying the Lord's Prayer is reinforced in Jesus' more expansive prayer. Jesus essentially prays that God's will be done, but the prayer is not for himself. It is for his disciples. Jesus prays for their protection

and sanctification because he knows they are loved by God, and because he knows the dangers they will face in the coming days, and weeks, and years.

Jesus is offering this prayer on the night before he died. He and his disciples have gathered for a meal to celebrate their intimate friendship and shared ministry. He has washed their feet to model faithful servanthood. He has given them a new commandment that they love one another as he has loved them. He has promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. And now, Jesus is offering a special prayer for which the disciples are not only present, but can overhear. What is distinctive about this particular prayer is that Jesus is praying with them, and about them, and for them. Although they hear the words that Jesus is praying, much of what he prays for is difficult to accept and understand. Jesus' prayer lifts up words of encouragement, protection, commissioning, and unity. But his prayer also speaks of danger and evil, and what could be interpreted as abandonment. There is so much more to this prayer than Help, Thanks, or Wow. This prayer is complex and confusing. There won't be much time to ask questions for clarification because the next thing to happen will be the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, his trial and torture, and crucifixion. And yet, amidst the uncertainty and fear, there is a glimpse of hope in Jesus' prayer for the disciples when he asks that his joy be made complete in them.

The joy of which Jesus speaks is no ordinary joy. It is the joy experienced in their unity with one another and God through mutual love. True joy is more than happiness and optimism. It is the joy the disciples will express in their future ministry in the world after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. It is the joy that will be shared among believers and non-believers by offering compassion, mercy and love amidst great suffering, oppression, and death. This is the unexpected truth

revealed through Jesus' prayer, that God's abundant joy is always present and available to us despite the world's suffering and pain.

A few years ago, the Dalai Lama and retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote about finding joy despite suffering in *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. The Dalai Lama has survived more than fifty years of exile, and the archbishop has endured the soul-crushing violence of oppression during apartheid. "Despite their hardships—or, as they would say, because of them—they are two of the most joyful people on the planet."⁴ According to the Dalai Lama, "[w]e create most of our suffering, so it should be logical that we also have the ability to create more joy. It simply depends on the attitudes, the perspectives, and the reactions we bring to situations and to our relationships with other people."⁵

Desmond Tutu believes that, "[j]oy is the reward . . . of seeking to give joy to others. When you show compassion, when you show caring, when you show love to others, do things for others, in a wonderful way you have a deep joy that you can get in no other way. . . [Y]ou suddenly feel a warm glow in your heart, because you have, in fact, wiped the tears from the eyes of another."⁶ "In short, the way we heal our own pain is actually by turning to the pain of others. It is a virtuous cycle. The more we turn toward others, the more joy we experience, and the more joy we experience, the more we can bring joy to others."⁷

Much of Jesus' ministry was about bringing joy to others through healing and teaching. He was able to bring joy to others because he was grounded in a joyous

⁴ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/533718/the-book-of-joy-by-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-and-archbishop-desmond-tutu-with-douglas-abrams/>

⁵ Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Carlton Abrams. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group (2016), 14.

⁶ *Ibid*, 293.

⁷ *Ibid*, 63.

relationship with God through prayer. Jesus prayed for his disciples, and Jesus prays for us now that we may be united in joy through him. The promise of joy is forever in our presence because Jesus has overcome death. Through his resurrection, joy breaks into every experience of suffering and pain and transforms it through the grace of everlasting love. Jesus will continue to pray for us – that we all may be one; that we all may be united in love. Although we may not hear Jesus praying for us, we know what it is like to hear someone else pray for our needs and concerns. We feel our hearts warmed and our spirits lifted. Whether in person or online, together or apart, the prayers that others offer for us and that we offer for others strengthen our faith and sustain our hope in God’s promise of everlasting joy. United through prayer, we participate in God’s ongoing mission of joy and love for the world. And for that we can pray both Thanks and Wow.

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