

Easter 7b 2024
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
May 12, 2024
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 Psalm 1 1 John 5:9-13 John 17:6-19

Have you ever overheard someone talking about you? That happens, right? At its worst, we overhear some untruth about our self or our life, or words of scorn; someone description of “what’s wrong with” us. Can you imagine? Sadly, most of us probably *can* imagine that scenario. I have heard many false stories about myself. Our words have powerful results. Sometimes words do great harm.

Now think about a time that you prayed for someone. Uttering those words, or thinking those words for God to take from us, is powerful in a positive way. In praying for another, we extend our care outside of ourselves; we step away from “self” and let the Holy Spirit speak.

By the way, that’s how our lectors read scripture so well, and they all do: they put their sense of self aside and let the Holy Spirit say the words. It’s a powerful ministry – and I invite you to be a lector, too.

I mention prayer in the form of “words that God takes from us;” that comes from me experiencing exactly that. I was working as a chaplain in the trauma unit of Erlanger hospital in Chattanooga, TN. On this night, answering the trauma pager put me in the presence of a 15-year old who had almost lost her life. She and her Dad were driving 4 wheelers in the countryside, and she had inadvertently and tragically driven into a barbed wire fence. Her father, life flight, and trauma personnel saved her life. My role was to visit and pray with her. It was thought that this 15-year old would never be able to speak again because of the damage to her throat and vocal cords. I went to her bedside, and, in deep irony, could find no words; I couldn’t speak. I stood next to this young woman ... in my role as a chaplain ... and could utter nothing. Nothing. Well, I did pray, silently, and I prayed to God that God needed to come and take the prayers from me, because I knew that they were there, and I couldn’t get to them. I needed God to come and get those prayers. I trust that God can find all of our prayers, just as God seeks out even one lost sheep. When you cannot find words with which to pray, talk to God anyway; know that those thoughts are prayer. Ask God for whatever it is that you need. Maybe you will remember what Jesus says in the upper room (John 17.7-8).

⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them,”

God gave words to Jesus, who gives them to us. Surely God can retrieve the words of prayer. (By the way,) for this young woman, God gave her words in a voice that returned. In a few days, she was whispering; in a few weeks, speaking.

In any case, our words said or thought in prayer also have powerful results. If you never have, ask someone to pray for you; and in quiet moments, think about the prayers that are being said. In asking and then listening, you are being given a spiritual, and sometimes life-changing, gift. Ask someone to pray for you.

What if you could hear someone not gossip about, but pray for you? How would that feel, how powerful would that be? This is exactly the gift of today’s gospel reading. We are eavesdropping on, or overhearing, Jesus’ prayers to God for himself and today, for his disciples – for us. This is not Jesus teaching us about prayer, or how to pray; this is not a demonstration, and it is not the Lord’s Prayer. This is Jesus praying *to God for us*: for you! How does it feel, how does it sound, to hear Jesus praying for you?

Just before we go out into the night with Jesus and desert him, Jesus prays for us. Give them my joy; protect them in your name. God, they are yours. Jesus looks beyond our lack of understanding, our betrayals, our abandonment, and prays for us with perfect love.

Notice that Jesus prays directly: God: give, protect, guard, sanctify.

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

Sanctify is the same word that we say in the Lord’s Prayer. We say “hallowed by thy name:” regard God as holy. Jesus prays that we be regarded in the same way. God, think of your disciples having the characteristic of holiness. And we are “made holy” in Christ. We are being blessed by God through Jesus.

Here’s the tough part. *“so I have sent them into the world.”* We are not sanctified to be set apart, enthroned in holiness, if you will. This is our commissioning. It might remind you of how we conclude the Holy Eucharist: there is a blessing and then a dismissal, a *“sending”* into the world. Sanctification comes with a purpose; it is an action word! We are sent into the world to share the Word and the Truth (both big W, little w, big T, little t). We haven’t been sent out ungirded, but prayed into the blessing of God, fortified/lifted up for service. The beauty and power of this prayer, and that we have it, two millennia later, is an immeasurable gift.

All that said, we remember that this prayer is a call to a specific unity. We pray in Jesus’ name, to be of one mind with him; that unity is our guidepost for how we live as a faith community. Today, friends, listen in on Jesus’ prayer. Now, settle in, and imagine God blessing you with these words, from a prayer by Margaret Silf.

God's Blessing

I bless the poverty in your heart, that knows its own emptiness, because that gives me space to grow my Kingdom there.

I bless that in you that touches others gently, because everyone responds to gentleness, and gentleness can capture even hardened hearts.

I bless that in you which grieves and aches for all that is lost or can never be, because that is my opportunity to comfort you with my, much greater, love.

I bless that in you which longs and strives after your own deepest truth and after truth for the world, because even as you pray I am constantly satisfying these deep unspoken longings.

I bless you every time you show mercy and forgiveness, because that is like a little window in your heart opening up a space for me to enter and to heal.

I bless the purity of your heart, because that is the elusive centre where your deepest desire meets mine. That is where we meet face to face.

I bless the peacemaker in you - that in your soul which seeks the peace that passeth understanding, even at a great cost.

I bless even those things in your experience of journeying with me that feel like persecution and misunderstanding because they are the proof that your faith is no illusion.

Margaret Silf

(Cited in Peter Millar's 'Finding Hope Again', p177) found on
spiritedexchanges.org.nz/page/20/GodsBlessing.boss

Words have powerful results. Let us pray. (silence)

To God be the glory. *Amen.*