

Sermon, 4 February 2007—Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Judges 6:11-24; Psalm 85; First Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

This is the final sermon on our three-week trek through the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of our Sunday Eucharist. In the last two weeks, we considered how reading and listening to Scripture opens us up to the way God acts in the history of Israel, in the life of Jesus, in the early days of the Church, in our own day, and in our world. I urged you to treasure the Creed as the heirloom of the Church, the symbol of our faith, which provides the minimum claims Christians transmit over time and presents an articulation of the incomprehensibility of God in Christ, which keeps our faith from fading and softening into something comfortable and inconsequential. Today, we will reflect together on the Prayers of the People: on their context in our worship and on our responsibility in prayer.

Ideally, the Prayers of the People are the second step in our response to the Word of God, heard in Scripture and—God willing—presented in the sermon. A worthy sermon's first result is a meaningful proclamation of the Creed. A worthwhile sermon assists the congregation in moving from hearing to speaking. Just as Scripture proclaims God active on behalf of God's people, so the present people of God proclaims itself aligned with the witness of Scripture in the Creed. We ought to reach the Creed with an enlivened desire to be at one with our forbearers in faith, those in Scripture and those in history, and to affirm ourselves publicly to be their heirs, hoping as they hoped, trusting as they trusted, praising as they praised. Words and concepts change, but our impulse to hope and trust and praise we align with theirs, so that we can walk with them, confessing our faith.

When our prayers arise in this context, it is possible for us to learn to pray with confidence. As we listen to Scripture, we hear how God acts. We

hear that God searches us out and calls us, chooses us and makes a covenant with us, and calls us back to the covenant when we walk away. We hear that God opens what has been closed, frees what has been enslaved, heals what has been diseased, even raises back to life what was dead and buried. We hear that God overthrows the complacent and arrogant, that God rages against those who cause others to stumble and who bind others with heavy burdens, and that God holds a plumb-line that tests even our depths. We hear that God comforts and restores, so the desert blossoms like a rose, and that God suffers with us and dies, so that the cross becomes the tree of life.

As we listen to Scripture, we hear also how God's people respond to these actions—their evasion, their commitment, their rejection, their courage, their fear, their faith. We hear that all these responses have consequences, catastrophic or glorious. The rebellious ambition of Adam and Eve is ours, but so are Sarah and Abraham's risk-taking trust. Gideon's move from skeptical challenge to devoted valor is ours just as much as Peter's collapse at Jesus' feet, crushed by awe and unworthiness, only to stand up, leave his livelihood behind, and embark on new waters—all their stories are ours. David's devotion wrestles with his lust; Moses' humility is hard won out of his rage; Ruth creeps under a kinsman's cloak in the middle of the night without being invited; Esther enters the presence of the Persian emperor in the blaze of daylight without being summoned; and Mary considers that her child might be the hope of the ages and consents—all acted courageously to ensure the survival and salvation of those to come. Even our dear demolished older brother Paul displays his flaws as the public proclamation of Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

When we stand to say the Creed, having heard these things, we are consenting as Mary did to participate in the continuation of God salvific

activity. We are standing with a multitude no one can number who have affirmed and trusted the Triune God. Because of that, we turn to our prayers to ask that God's saving action continue in us. Having heard what we have heard and having affirmed what we have affirmed, we pray that what we have heard and what we have affirmed be so in us and in our own day.

We do not need to wonder what to pray for. What God has promised, we stand up to claim. What God has done for others, we ask to share in, so that our joy might be full. What God has given to us, we put back into God's hands for the good of God's household and of God's creation. Our prayers cannot fail if we pray for what God is already doing among us. Our tragedy is that our routine prayers are too small: too personal or too abstract. We want a parking space and world peace. These are not the prayers of the gathered people of God. The Prayers of God's People are that God be manifest in us as our God, that we be displayed as God's own, that God's power, as it was known in Scripture, be known in us and through us, and that God's love, as it was known in Christ, be active in us and through us, and that God's table be the empowering banquet where Jesus is remembered and where we recognize ourselves as him. That prayer cannot fail, because it asks that God continue in us what God did in Eden, in Egypt, at Mount Sinai, at Mount Zion, in Babylon, in Galilee, in Jerusalem, and in Rome, which is what God intends to do and has pledged to do and waits only for us to be ready to do.

My dear sisters and brothers, this is nothing more than practicing formally and publicly the words of Jesus: "thy will be done." Such is our pessimism—or maybe simply our weariness and grief—that we have come to hear those words as submission and resignation. But the will of God is potent for good. God's will for all people is health and salvation. We

cannot fall short if we come to desire for this congregation and for this community what we know God intends for God's creatures, and to couple our prayers with habits that fulfill the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant. Does this mean we will see it in our own day? Who knows? But what it does mean is that we will know where to invest our life.

I said that too often our grief and weariness—the paranoid panicking drumbeat of our heart—can muffle our ability to say, “thy will be done.” None of us want to suffer. Jesus himself prayed these words in Gethsemane as he faced his arrest and trial and execution. Somehow, though, any plea to escape suffering and death is not borne out by our hearing Scripture, nor does it arise from our standing within the Tradition. Tradition and Scripture are both full of the courage and patience of prophets and martyrs. We are simple fragile creatures, and we desire pleasure and long life; so God entices us, as one offers an apple to bribe a child, with eternal joys. But somehow, what we are about is to be more freeing than happiness and more enduring than survival. We are to know the bliss that has no beginning and no end in our own day. Suffering and death do not overcome it, but refine and distill it, so they need not be resisted—and cannot, in any event, be escaped. I think this is the darkest mystery we face, but so it is.

For this reason, because whatever our joyful affirmation of God, the waters in which we are suspended are 70,000 fathoms deep and it is the middle of the night, as it was in Gethsemane, for this reason, we pray “in Jesus' name.” This is not a talismanic conclusion, not some magic formula that ensures cosmic compliance, but our joy and our strength. To pray in someone's name means three things worth mentioning this morning.

First, to pray in someone's name means that we pray on their behalf. In other words, we ask what they would ask, we request what they would

request, we say what they would say; we do this for them, for their sake. What Jesus walked about among us to accomplish is now what we intend to continue; so we plead on his behalf that his work continue. In his name, we can ask for what he would intend. The prayer we can make in his name is the prayer that asks what he asked. Watch him; listen to him.

Second, to pray in someone's name means that we expect that name to be recognized, perhaps even to be effective in obtaining an answer. In our case, the name we pray in is "Jesus," which means "God saves." This name is of unusual potency, in that its meaning is itself the response. Any request we make invoking it provides by that invocation the answer to our request. What we state in naming Jesus is that God saves; what we recognize when we call on that name is that salvation belongs to God; what effectively answers prayer is God's mighty arm outstretched to save. I ask in the name of the one whose name means "God saves," and that name gives me the answer to my request.

Third, to pray in someone's name means that we join them, that we are identified with them, that we participate in their life. When I request something in your name, I am identifying myself with you in the presence of the one who can respond to that request. In the presence of God, by asking in Jesus' name, we identify ourselves with God's Son, the Incarnate Word. We are bold to make our requests because we are one with him. My dear brothers and sister, if this is not true, then we have no business being here. The name of Christ is the name we have taken on in baptism, the name invoked in healing and absolution, the name remembered at heart of the Eucharistic prayer. In fact, the principal purpose of our Eucharist is to gather as Jesus' own around his table, to remember him, to give thanks, and to pray as he prayed.

So, our prayers are illumined by our listening to Scripture and steadied by our aligning ourselves within the Creed. Coming after those moments in the liturgy, we know how God has acted and promised to act, we know the signs of God's saving intervention in human life, and we also know with whom we pray, standing where they have stood for centuries. Knowing this, we know that, when our petitions are guided by the promises in Scripture and the fulfillments in the lives of the saints, we are praying as God's People. If we can recognize ourselves as God's People when we pray—a ripple on that long-flowing river hope and praise—then we begin to glimpse what makes us one, and glimpsing that, we can pray in his name, because we discern we are all members of his body. And if we can pray in his name, then we can learn to long as he did for the knowledge of God's glorious reign to rise like the dawn over the Sea of Galilee over us all and to walk as he did, calling forth healing and forgiveness and reconciliation among all people, until our oneness with him is revealed on the day we enter into the eternal prayers and praise of the heavenly choirs, who sing to the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, forever.