

Sunday, November 15, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Pouring Out Your Soul”

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.

O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant.

The psalmist and Hannah are praying for their lives.

All is lost.

They are in deep despair.

They turn, with trusting hearts, to the one they believe has the power to transform their lives.

Trust is the foundation of authentic prayer.

After last week’s focus on love, love of God and neighbor, this week we turn our attention to lives of faith and trust.

Faith, trust, and love always go together.

When we love, we place our trust in our beloved, and as we live in faith, so our capacity for love grows.

“Faith itself is the soul’s true country, and prayer is its native language” asserts one writer.

In prayer, we place ourselves before God, reaching within and beyond ourselves to a greater purpose and power.

Prayer is meant to be transcendent.

Our goal in praying is to communicate with God –to enter into a relationship, one in which we listen as much as we speak.

It is all too easy for us to try and use our faith or our prayers to control our circumstances.

It’s easy to slip into thinking that, if we can just muster enough “faith”, pray hard enough, we can avoid suffering, trauma and tragedy.

When we allow ourselves to be seduced by this kind of thinking, we end up with something that may look like faith, but is actually far from it.

What we’re actually doing is putting our trust in our own ability to manipulate God or other people or circumstances in our favor.

This is a very dangerous place to put our faith.

The quest for control is futile.

The world is always beyond our ability to understand or steer.

Bishop Reuben Job points out, “Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts.

It is a way of living in awareness of the Presence of God.

While many prayers ask God to do something to us or for us, God wants to do something in us and through us.”

Prayer is a way of opening ourselves up to God’s holy spirit working through us.

What does that look like for you?

This week I had the extraordinary opportunity to host a reunion gathering of the people who served on the search committee that called me to this church five years ago.

This committee, made up of eight very different people, represented the best of the congregation.

The intriguing aspect of our gathering Tuesday night was to witness the love and respect that these folks had for one another.

When they left Joe and I looked at each other and said, “Wow – what an amazing group of people.”

As I reflected on what made the group so special I came to an understanding of several things.

First, the group came together with a shared purpose, but no one agenda prevailed.

The members, when first convened, did not know one another well, so they had to take time to learn about each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

They did this with a sense of respect and compassion.

They took the time to build honest relationships embracing their differences and striving toward understanding.

Each voice was given equal weight – they did not meet unless they could all be present.

The outcome of their work was unknown – they had to trust that God was with them and allow God’s holy spirit to guide them.

Alden Tyrol served as the group’s chaplain, gently reminding them that they were letting God work through them.

When I met this group they had already been working together for several months and I was drawn in by their warmth and faith.

I am certainly happy with the outcome of their experience, and I draw an important lesson from it.

As a church, we are called to let God work through us to build God's kingdom on earth.

As individuals, we are called to work in community, supporting one another, caring about one another, building up the body of Christ.

We lose our way when we forget that.

When we lose our way and become distracted by our own agendas, prayer can bring us back.

The human inclination to pray is as old as creation itself.

We yearn to know God, to sense God's presence – but sometimes we forget.

Sometimes our despair becomes so great or our lives become so complacent that we forget God's power.

We get caught up in our own anxious vortex and we can't see the grace that abounds.

Hannah, whose name means 'grace' is despondent.

Her life, even as the favored wife of Elkanah, is empty without children.

She is taunted and ridiculed by others for her inability to conceive a son.

This has been going on for quite some time, but something on this particular day drives Hannah to prayer.

Bold in her despair, she dares to walk right into the holy place – a place controlled by the high priests where crying women were not most welcome.

She walks in, right past the priest, a woman of faith, trusting and ready to pour out her heart and expose her need.

She leaves that holy place, a woman of faith, radiant with confident joy – trust-- that what she needed would be coming her way.

Prayer is both an emptying of ourselves and the filling of an emptiness.

The power of prayer is in admitting weakness, acknowledging dependence, our need of God.

In our New Testament reading this morning Jesus affirms that no matter how dark things seem – false messiahs, warring nations, earthquakes, famine, beatings God remains faithful and present--walking with us in all of the moments of life--even in the moments when it seems everything is falling apart.

In our bible study this week we heard God's reply to Paul's plea that his infirmities be taken from him.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

We cannot access God's grace without acknowledging our own weakness.

We need God.

Hannah was transformed by her trust in God, her surrender to God's will.

Today we hear her bitterly tearful, hushed, anguished prayer but in the

next chapter we hear her exuberant, energized song of praise, the song that will inspire the song of Mary, the Magnificat, which we still pray today.

These are radical prayers: the mighty are brought down and the lowly lifted up.

Martin Copenhaver suggests that a story like Hannah's (and surely, Mary's) reminds us of an uncomfortable truth, that the amazing things that happen "in holy places" happen because of God, not because of anything we do.

Hannah's prayer is persistent and quite bold.

Some prayer is persistent and quietly humble.

Some prayer is delivered in words.

Some prayer is delivered in music.

Prayer is a way of life.

Kahlil Gibran said:

"I cannot teach you how to pray in words. God listens not to your words save when He Himself utters them through your lips."

God is working through you.

Your thoughts, your expressions of faith all come from God.

I came upon these words of prayer this week:

Dear God,

Beyond the thoughts I think, and the words I say or write, there is a longing in my soul for You.

I have no perfect words to pray, nor perfect form or style.

I seek You in fullness, expressing in and through my life.

I seek also, Your presence in my sisters and brothers on this planet.

Reveal Your will in me, that I might be a living, breathing prayer."

We come to church, to this holy place to seek some kind of connection with God, a sense of God's presence in a way that is perhaps more intense than in our daily lives.

We come for the affirmation that God knows who we are and knows what we need.

God knows who you are and loves you.

Even in darkness.

Even when you feel misunderstood by everyone else.

God knows you.

God knows.

And God is here.