

Prayer is an amazing gift from God! Not only does it provide us with a way of talking to our creator and redeemer, but it also benefits us in so many different ways. For instance, when we are sick it can make us feel better knowing that others are praying for us, and it has been medically proven that prayer can help us in our recovery. A number of years ago I had to have open heart surgery to put in a badly needed pulmonary valve. Although I was scared and nervous about the procedure, I was told by my father, who is now a retired Pastor, and by members of my church family, that before, during, and after my surgery I would have a ton of prayer warriors praying on my behalf. That not only calmed me down, but it also helped me let go of some of the anxiety that I had been having.

Prayer can also help us when we are experiencing difficulties in life that are out of our control. If we are on the verge of losing a job or have been unemployed, if we are having trouble in a relationship with a friend or a spouse, if we are struggling with a debilitating illness, or if we are overwhelmed by the bad things that seem to keep happening in our lives, we can give these things over to God knowing that he will help and guide us through them. Those of us who pray often generally experience less stress, because we find comfort and assurance knowing that we have someone who is always there willing to listen to our struggles, our worries, or concerns and even our joys and celebrations.

Prayer can also unite us! As we gather on Sunday morning to pray together, we experience a unique oneness as we lift up needs for peace, healing, and any concerns we may be dealing with in our lives. I have often found that when people share their joys or their concerns during the prayers of intercession I become united with them as I pray with them, and all of a sudden their joys and concerns become my own!

Today, our scripture lessons focus on what it means to be ONE in faith, and on the importance of unity among God's people. In fact, the integrity of our

gospel witness is dependent on our Christian community being in harmony and of one accord. So...this morning as we dwell in God's word, we will explore the church as a "*community of resilience, unity, and hope*".

In our first lesson as the Disciples consider a replacement for Judas, someone who can help them witness to others about Jesus' resurrection, they are united in prayer. Although their teacher was no longer with them to give them personal direction, they were not without his leading, for they had his Word (featuring a Gospel message of forgiveness, grace, and love), they also had the gift of his Spirit, remember Jesus had breathed upon them, and last but not least they had Prayer.

In our Gospel story we witness Jesus praying shortly before his betrayal and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Anticipating his impending death and departure, Jesus prays not for himself but for his disciples, and for us. And what does he pray for? He prays that his followers might be one, just as he and his Heavenly Father are one. We who call ourselves Christian are to be an example of the unity of the three-in-one Godhead. This unity theme in Jesus' prayer stresses the need for all of us to be "team players"—working together for a common mission and common purpose in the name of our Lord. Whenever we gather together on Sundays to worship together, we gather in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we pray using his name.

In the Bible, "a Name" often refers to an individual's "nature," because names so often were given to reveal something special about the nature of the person bearing the name. Jacob's name comes from the Hebrew meaning "to take by the heel", the name Isaac, means "laughter" because he brought joy to Abraham and Sarah. Even the name Jesus reveals that he is our Savior.

As Jesus is praying, before he is arrested, he declares that he has made God's name know to those whom God has given him. In other words, he has

revealed God's nature to them. As we encounter Jesus in the Bible, we observe a very compassionate and loving man who is concerned with the poor, the outcasts the sick, the oppressed, the downtrodden, people who needed his Father! As he ministered to these people, and as he taught them, he showed them and he shows us a way to God. Keep in mind that Jesus did not instantly reveal the Father in a blaze of blinding glory, but gradually by his words and his deeds, he revealed to his followers and to us the nature of God.

As Jesus continues to pray for the unity of his disciples, we hear that he has given them divine resources to help us be one. We are given his Word, which provides us with faith and assurance. We have the Son of God interceding for us on our behalf and His prayers of intercession can help us feel safe and secure. We also have the fellowship of the church: "that we may be one, as Jesus and God are one." In fact, the New Testament knows nothing of isolated believers; wherever you find saints, you find them in fellowship. Why? Because God's people need each other.

Church consultant Peter Steinke suggests that those congregations who are focused on a clear vision for mission are the ones most able to deal with change or crisis in a healthy way. Where there is a unity of purpose, God's people can rally together—focusing their energy not just on problems, but rather on God's mission. In other words, rather than spending time blaming one another or despairing about everything they believe to be wrong, the community rises to the challenge and *together* they seek solutions.

In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul reminds us "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism..." Paul admonishes a community that is divided, which threatens the integrity of their Gospel witness. He suggests they focus not on their differences, but on their common mission—sharing the love of Christ with the world!

The challenge is how different we are from one another. Even in the same Lutheran family, we have different opinions on certain issues, diverse perspectives on ministry, and various views on race, gender, politics, mask wearing, vaccinations, etc. It would be easy to focus on our differences and become divided. The question then, is how do we find oneness in our diversity? Can we maintain our unity in the face of our differences?

I truly love a quote from a Pastor friend of mine, “UNITY is not uniformity or sameness. Rather unity is holding on to everyone so tightly that no one falls out of the boat.” This is true when we can agree that it is Christ who binds us together as one, and when we can respect one another in spite of our differences. In fact, if we are able to see and understand that our diversity actually enriches our life together, we may actually begin to celebrate our differences while claiming our unity in Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was killed by Hitler during W.W. II, wrote a beautiful book called *Life Together* in which he reminds us that our oneness in Christ is a gift, one that is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who take it for granted. “It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brothers and sisters is a gift of grace...Therefore, let the one who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of their heart. Let them thank God on their knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with other Christians.”

Bonhoeffer goes on to remind us that our community with one another consists solely on what Christ has done for each of us: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. The more genuine and deep our community becomes, the more everything else between us recedes, the more clearly and purely will Jesus and his work become the one and only thing that is

vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, and through Christ we have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.”

Even though he knew his days on this earth were coming to an end, we detect in Jesus no anguish of separation; for Jesus was in the process of becoming re-united with his Heavenly Father, and thus uniting the disciples with him for the sake of the gospel. He knows that the unity between Himself, His Divine Father, and all believers can cause the world to believe and to know that Jesus came to show the depth of God’s love.

Just so, it is important to note that we are a community for whom Jesus prays. The effectiveness of our ministry as individuals, and as a congregation, is dependent on prayer. Prayer is not just a gift but a necessity. We are all in need of prayer. We can’t do it by ourselves. And isn’t it amazing to think that the Son of God prays for us and for our ministry?

Let me close with a story that I hope will help illustrate the point I’m trying to make. It happened on a cold January morning in a little town on the shores of Lake Superior. The town was holding its annual dog sled derby on the ice and a one-mile course had been staked out by sticking little fir trees in the snow. This particular event was for the youth of the town and the contenders ranged all the way from older boys with several dogs and big sleds, to one little guy not much more than six with a little sled and his small dog.

The group took off at the signal, and the little guy was quickly outdistanced. All went well until about halfway through the course, the team that was in second place started to pass the team in the lead. They came too close, and their dogs got into a fight. And as each team tried to pass, other dogs joined in the fight. Soon there was just one big mass of kids trying to separate their fighting dogs. And that little guy with his one dog, and his eye on the prize, managed to sail past the conflict and was the only one to finish the race.

Perhaps this is a parable for life and ministry in this world. It is easy to become distracted and discouraged by conflict, disagreements, or disappointment. The moral drawn from this story and from scripture may be obvious. No matter how difficult the challenge, or how impossible, or hopeless the task may seem, if we are reasonably sure of the course, and of our mission, then we must keep our eyes on Jesus and keep going forward, until at last—in this life or in the next—we too cross the finish line. Thanks be to God. Amen.