

## **EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, July 26, 2020**

**“A Partnership in Prayer”** (*Romans 8:26-28*)

As most of you know, I was in ministry with Warren McDougall for 23 years and am still collaborating with him to lead workshops for new ministry teams. When we retired, I knew I would miss him. I didn't realize how much until I took my first retired supply position - solo. On Sunday mornings, there was no one beside me, ready to take care of the announcements - the part of worship I dread - act as liturgist and above all else, have my back if things didn't go quite as planned. It was like walking a tightrope without my usual strong, reliable safety net. At meetings, there was no one to pick up the ball and run with it when introvert that I am, I needed time to think. Afterwards, there was no one with whom I could discuss what had happened - analyzing the power dynamics and strategizing where to go from here. It was at Countryside that I came to appreciate fully the partnership Warren and I had enjoyed. Yes, I have rediscovered that ministry is indeed possible all on my own, but it is a lot more interesting, fun, and potentially creative in partnership.

So imagine how my eyes lit up when I came across this statement by the American theologian, Walter Wink: “Prayer is the ultimate act of partnership with God.” Our life of faith is based on a dialogue between God and human beings - not a monologue in which God gives us orders or we list off what we want from God. For me, partnership is an intriguing way of viewing prayer. As a child, I thought of prayer as something I initiated. It was my way of reaching up to God - and in those days, God was indeed up - with either a set prayer like “now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Should I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take” - such a cheery little piece! - or my own which were usually a combination of “thank you's” for beauty in nature and happy events with requests for blessings for my family and friends. Growing up in St. John's United Church where Sunday by Sunday it was always the minister who offered the pastoral prayer, I was convinced that real prayer required special training and language like “Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who lovest all and forgettest none”, and went on and on forever. It was such a relief when I heard him say “Bless we pray thee our sovereign lady, Queen Elizabeth” for then I knew we were near the end.

As a young teenager preparing for confirmation, my understanding of prayer became slightly more sophisticated. I was introduced to the acronym, ACTS - adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, otherwise known as intercession. Are you familiar with this? I felt as if I had arrived. At last, I had the right technique: first, offer God praise - following in the footsteps of the psalmists who urge us to praise the Holy One with musical instruments, voice and dance; then acknowledge personal failures and shortcomings and the ways our world of hatred and violence, of injustice and exploitation does not conform to God's good intentions; then much as I had been doing since childhood, give thanks, recognizing there is nothing like gratitude to lift our spirits and dislodge any lingering sense of entitlement; and finally ask for help for others and myself. I had no problem with intercessions until someone argued as people of faith, we must follow the model of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. While we might ask for what we truly desire as he begged for the cup to be taken away, we need to couple this with his “nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.” That felt awkward at the best of times, and totally impossible when what I longed for was my Aunt Marie to recover from

breast cancer, and her husband, my Uncle John, to retain at least some of his sight. Still, this ACTS model stood me in good stead through High School and even into university where everything was up for grabs.

It took a coup to shake me from this approach to prayer. I didn't think I was naive - I had studied history and political science with a focus on Russia and the USSR, Canada and its relationship with Great Britain and the United States - I was familiar with plots and armed conflicts - but I had hoped they lay in the past: we human beings had learned better ways to settle our differences. It was a shock to hear tanks rumbling through the streets of Santiago and bombs exploding in the government buildings just two blocks away; to see bullet holes in the windows of our Ambassador's office and bodies lying on the sidewalks. It was heart wrenching to listen to the stories of the asylees in our Embassy: they were people my own age, idealists, dreamers like me, who had been arrested, detained, sometimes tortured by the military. They had lost friends, and now faced a future far from home, in a country they had never planned to live. Exhausted emotionally and physically after 12 hour days of interviewing and processing their immigration applications, I did not have the energy or the heart for ACTS. When I got back to Buenos Aires, and went looking for comfort, in my little English speaking Methodist Church, I was greeted with smiles and hugs, and "isn't it wonderful that awful Allende has been overthrown! Chile is in good hands with Pinochet." I felt overwhelmed by what I had seen and heard, and totally out of step with people in my own community of faith.

ACTS just couldn't cut it. There are times in all of our lives when the usual formats of prayer just don't work; when words refuse to come. When we are in pain - physical, emotional, mental. When our lives have been turned upside down. When we are feeling overwhelmed by events. In our highly interconnected world that could be almost anything, anywhere from the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis to the famine in Yemen to a boatload of refugees being turned back to Libya to face abuse or graphs of mounting COVID deaths in the United States, Brazil, South Africa and India.

It's at times like these that it is good to be reminded that "Prayer is the ultimate act of partnership with God." We aren't in this all by ourselves. It is not up to us to create some structure of words to reach up to God like the ladder Jacob saw in his dream linking heaven and earth. As the apostle Paul reminds us, God is already here; the Spirit is at work within us. It is, in fact, God who initiates prayer. As Walter Wink puts it: "God is always already praying within us. When we turn to prayer, it is already the second step of prayer." As if that isn't enough good news, the Spirit even helps us with our side of the dialogue: "that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." It is precisely when our tried and true approaches to prayer don't work; when words fail us that the Spirit has more opportunity to swing into action. God knows us better than we know ourselves. God recognizes our needs before we name them. So we can just allow ourselves to enter into silence and rest in God's presence.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus would go off to some lonely place to pray. No one knows exactly what happened during those hours, but I like the Celtic Christian understanding. They see Jesus as listening for the heartbeat of God - that heartbeat of justice, of longing for fullness of life for everyone; that heartbeat of love not just for a chosen few or for those who ascribe to the correct beliefs or the right politics, but for everyone. They describe Jesus as using these times apart to attune his heart to the

heartbeat of God. We see the results in Jesus' words and action - in his openness to Pharisee and tax collector, man and woman, young and old, rich and poor.

Don't get me wrong: being exposed to different approaches to prayer can be helpful. Until we try, who knows what might open us more fully to the sighing of the Spirit and our own groaning over the state of the world and what is happening in our lives and those of people we love? Who can tell us what might lead us into deeper dialogue with God? It may be focusing on our breath, all by itself, or accompanied by the saying of a mantra like: "I breathe the peace of God within; I breathe all stress and worry out." It may be centring prayer - saying a single word or phrase over and over. It may be listening to the sounding of Tibetan prayer bowls or singing chant or moving to music or allowing our hands to play with clay or pastels or sitting with an image like Henri Nouwen with Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal". Some people may maintain their particular approach to prayer is the best, if not the only one. But I am not convinced. We may all be created in the image of God, but each and every one of us is unique even in the way we enter into prayer partnership with God. What matters is that we engage in this dialogue for in it we are transformed. I appreciate the way Richard Rohr talks about this transformation. We start off with our small house - we are concerned about ourselves, and families, our friends, our nation. As we discover Someone else is in our house, as together we pray, our house expands until we realize it is everybody's home.

Thanks be to God who enters into partnership with us, initiating the dialogue and praying for us when no words want to come. Amen.