

June 18, 2017

Year A; 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18: 1-15

Psalms 116: 1, 10-17

Romans 5: 1-8

Matthew 9: 35-10:8

**“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”**

**After the contemplation and challenge of Lent, the joyous celebration of Easter, and the energy and call of Pentecost.....we now settle into the long season of Pentecost....a green season on the altar, the longest season of the church year....also known as Ordinary Time, ordinary as there are no major festivals, and ordinary from the ordinals or numbers that count off our weeks, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, and yes, a long season! The last Sunday will be in November and will be the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost!**

**Some might find Ordinary time....well....ordinary, even dull, but I love this long green season that allows us to contemplate and listen, listen more closely to God’s presence and God’s calls and God’s conversations in our ordinary everyday lives.**

**I have always been struck by how, in the Old Testament, so often people seemed to have a conversational relationship with God, speaking, calling out, complaining, imploring, thanking, and yes, even chatting....with God! Moses had constant exchanges with God.....The psalms hold voices of folks expressing every emotion to God, often all of those emotions in one psalm!**

**And our reading today from Genesis includes a number of conversations, as God speaks to Abraham and to Sarah, and they reply.**

**As prayer can be most fundamentally defined as connection with our God, then all of these exchanges are truly prayers....but to our ears they might sound awfully informal, and conversational and yes, even humorous!**

We can stifle our relationship with God by constricting our definition of prayer, by over formalizing it, when all we need is to open our hearts and minds and talk to God.

As I met recently with our Confirmation group at Trinity, one of our tasks together was to write the Prayers of The People

I explained to the kids that the 4 types of prayers are formally called: Thanksgiving, Intercession, Confession and Adoration.....but that it was much easier to remember them and think of the prayer types as.....Thanks, Help, Oops and Wow!

The young people liked these more relatable categories and we brainstormed who we wanted to and needed to pray for. They had thoughtful and insightful prayers, and clearly knew the larger world and the pain and suffering close by and far away.

Finally though one of them asked as we wrote these heart-filled prayers....don't we need to include some thees and thous??

Yes, we Episcopalians, can start a good talk with God, but then we figure God will not hear us without formal language!

But our reading from Genesis reminds us that, though we might have a fairly rigid and formal view of prayer.....in fact prayer is simply conversation with God, God asking and God answering.....and God challenging.

When we join the reading today, Abraham and Sarah have been on a journey for years now, since God called them to leave their home and their land and to simply begin to head out and that God would provide each step of their journey.

At this point they are camped by the oaks of Mamre and it is midday.....the hottest part of the day....and thus a sleepy, restful time.....when visitors, unexpected ones, appear.....3 men, who are heavenly beings, representatives of God, but Abraham does not know this. Abraham simply sees strangers and offers hospitality....welcome and food and respite.

Abraham talks to the visitors as they eat, and one of them asks about his wife and then says: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Sarah is listening in from the tent very close by and, I imagine, laughs in a loud way, perhaps even snorting! What the visitor says is really absurd, and she perhaps rolls her eyes too.

Until God jumps into the conversation, yes, the conversation, all of this is prayer but a give and take and easy and constant connection.

God asks Abraham why Sarah laughed....adding that beautiful line: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"

After God speaks, Sarah back tracks, perhaps a prayer of Oops! Sarah says she did not laugh....the familiar, "not me!" defense....

Then God responds to this conversation, a delightful, playful line, in this conversational prayer...in response to Sarah's denial....."Oh, yes, you did laugh."

And of course, Sarah does become pregnant and she gives birth to a son who they name Isaac, which means, laughter....so she will never forget the laughter God heard from her, and the surprise that came from her God.....all within the conversation of prayer.

The theologian Frederick Buechner has a wonderful devotional called *Beyond Words: The ABCs of Faith*....providing an alphabetical collection of readings....in the letter P is his reflection on prayer, saying in part:

"We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad..... The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy.....These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves, but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world." (*Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABCs of Faith* Buechner, page 320)

This week was a week where we stammered at the pain of another, several times, a week where news of shocking suffering and sadness added on each day, a week where we were called to pray, to reach out to call out to our God on behalf of so many.....on ships, in burning buildings, and even on a baseball field.....

And it may also have been a week where we wondered if God hears our prayers, suffering upon suffering far away or close at hand, can wear us down and make us call out in our conversations with God.....like our ancient brothers and sisters speaking in the psalms....where are you God??

Though we hope our prayers change things, we can so easily get pulled in to having a worldly view of prayer in which more is better....the idea that if we can only get 1000, 2000, 10,000 people praying.....the volume will make God act.... And save and help....

I know that God hears and treasures and responds to all of our prayers....but I have come to understand that prayer is not my work to get God to listen....but rather prayer is God's call, God's invitation to me to listen, to pay attention. Prayer is not to change God, rather prayer is meant to change us.

We need to pray to keep us connected with God, yes in conversation with God, to keep us from closing up and closing inward, to keep us connected to God's call to love our neighbor as ourselves.....Without prayer we can fall into the sin of us and them thinking, of hardening our hearts with those next door or around the world.

The apostle Paul famously said to pray without ceasing.....which always sounded a bit exhausting to me! Until I began to see prayer as conversation with God....yes, even chatting.....so prayer is not confined to church or Sunday or bedtime....all of which are wonderful....but prayer too is freed and available always....and we are invited to speak and to complain and to ask and to wonder and to laugh, with our God.

Amen.

The Rev. Megan Limburg