

1 Easter Year B
Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Episcopal Church at Yale
April 11, 2021

Praying Our Lives

Acts 4: 32 – 35; 1 John 1: 1.1-2.2; John 20: 19-31

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Amen.

As we look back on this year in which nearly everything feels “unprecedented,” we each have our own list of “silver linings.” They might be finding you can use the unnatural medium of Zoom to express deeper connections you thought possible; nurturing a new adult – to – adult relationship with your parents and siblings during those long weeks at home; or maybe the discovery, in the many hours of solitary living, of a new awareness of your own interior geography; maybe the beginnings of a new sense of God’s presence in the quieter moments of reflection, journaling, even prayer.

For me, one of the most touching moments this year happened during Andrew Mertz’ sermon in March, one he titled *“The Blind Leading the Blind.”* Remember when he described feeling so broken up over a friend’s death, and so raw, that he couldn’t figure out how to pray about it? So instead, sitting in a pew at the funeral next to his friend, tears flowing down both of their cheeks, they simply reached out for each other’s hands, and held on for dear life? Hearing those words, I thought, *“If that isn’t prayer, I don’t know what is!”*

So many of us spend time thinking something like, *“Prayer is hard. I feel like I spend a lot of time talking to God but never hear anything back.”* Or *“After a while, saying the same prayers over and over feels so rote or mechanical.”* We read scripture or hear it read in church, we reflect on Jesus’ words of counsel spoken thousands of years ago, and wonder how we can communicate across the bridge of the experience of Jesus’ friends who actually got to interact with him in the flesh, and *our* experience of reflecting on Jesus’ words after several millennia have passed.

Sometimes we ask ourselves, *“If Jesus were actually alive today, wouldn’t it be so much easier to believe in his presence, to pray to him?”* Well, I’m sorry to go around bursting bubbles, but apparently being human means our experience of God and our communication with God are by their nature transient. And from what I can see, that was as true for Jesus’ friends as it is for us.

Just look at Thomas in today’s gospel. He’s spent over three years travelling with Jesus, observing his incredible connection with his Abba, hanging on Jesus’ every word, yet all he had to do was go out to run a few errands, and when he got home and his elated friends told him they’d seen Jesus, he was just like Peter on the road to the crucifixion. It was as if Thomas and Jesus had never met. *“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails and my hand in his*

side, I will not believe.” And we think we have trouble holding onto *our* sense of God’s presence!

Some of you know I grew up in an almost exclusively Puerto Rican community in New York, and one of the great blessings of that culture is that it hadn’t fully embraced Western Enlightenment as wholeheartedly as some others have. When my best friend Luis’ grandfather died, for example, he explained that while he was heartbroken, he fully intended to keep in touch by talking with him every day. I thought that made no sense, until shortly afterwards, my own father died at a particularly difficult time in our relationship. I found that what got me through this loss was my ability to continue talking with him after his death, seeing him as now free from the many limitations he’d experienced on earth. At some point during those early conversations, it dawned on me what I was doing. I was praying.

What is prayer? It’s simply whatever form of communication our relationship with God takes – physically, emotionally, spiritually, whatever. Look at it this way. If God is love, and if God’s love is the only constant we can rely upon, maybe prayer is simply *recognizing* the slipstream of God’s love in the world, and *choosing to step on board*.

This is what the great 16th century Jesuit mystic, Jean Pierre de Caussade, called “*practicing the presence of God*,” and what the great guru of contemplative prayer Thomas Keating, simply described as, “...*consenting to the presence of God*.”

My beloveds, prayer is not something we *do*, but something we *live*. It’s a state of consciousness that all we see and taste and touch, we do so in God’s presence, in cooperation with God’s intent and action in the world. As the great Anglican credo affirms, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*,” meaning that which we pray expresses that which we believe. And when we live our prayers in response to God’s presence, we are acknowledging the great truth that the ubiquity of God’s love is every bit as real as any scientific law. It’s just that science hasn’t quite caught up yet.

Prayer’s an awareness that God’s in our midst. When we wake to a beautiful new day, to birds singing and the sweet scent of spring, and our hearts leap with joy – whether or not we actually say, “*Thank you God!*” – that’s prayer. When we breathe in the scent of an infant and feel that boundless love and potential, that’s prayer. When we witness a simple act of kindness, and feel a rush of hope for this world, that’s prayer. When we hug a dear friend, or kiss a beloved partner, and want only what’s best for them, that’s prayer. We’re not called to make prayer a *part* of our life, something we’re either good or not so good at. No, we are called to *pray our lives*, and as we do, prayer by prayer, our faith, our relationship with our beloved Abba, grows deeper every day.

As we move into our reflection rooms, let’s ponder this question, “*When did I see God at work this week, and find myself praying my life?*”