

Living Saints
Psalm 145:10-18, Ephesians 3:14-21
July 26, 2015
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Both of the beautiful readings today are prayers that the glory of God will be made known. In Psalm 145, a song of thanksgiving and praise, it is that God's mighty deeds and God's glorious splendor be made known.

In Ephesians 3, a prayer of supplication, or request, it is that the love of Christ be made known. The writer of Ephesians prays that the church, which is the community of believers, be strengthened in their inner being with the power of the Holy Spirit, that Christ will dwell in their hearts through faith, being rooted and grounded in love, and that they will be filled with the fullness of God.

We talked last week about Ephesians likely being a letter to the churches in Asia Minor in the latter 1st century. It is a celebration of the unity of the church, of breaking down walls and barriers to God and one another. The reading last week from Ephesians 2 spoke about the kingdom of God being inclusive, accessible to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. The passage today is the prayer that immediately follows.

When I read this exquisite prayer from Ephesians, an image came to mind. I read the passage again and again, and the same image kept coming. *A strengthened inner being with power of the Holy Spirit, Christ dwelling in hearts through faith, rooted and grounded in love, the power to comprehend with all the saints, the breadth, length, height, depth of Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, to be filled with the fullness of God, God's power at work in us being able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.*

The image would not go away as I read and reread these words. When I read Psalm 145, the image became stronger: *All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Faithful in all words, gracious in all deeds, just in all ways, kind in all doings.*

The image that came to mind was revealed in these present-day words:

"You took something very precious away from me. I will never be able to hold my mother again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people, but God forgives you and I forgive you."

“Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof, everyone’s plea for your soul, is proof that they lived in love and their legacies will live in love. So hate won’t win.”

"We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. My son was my hero... as we said in Bible study, we enjoyed you, but may God have mercy on you."

“I forgive you and my family forgives you, but we would like you to take this opportunity to repent... give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ, so that he can change it and change your ways no matter what happens to you, and you’ll be OK.”

“For me, I’m a work in progress. And I acknowledge that I am very angry. But we are the family that love built. We have no room for hate, so we have to forgive. I pray to God for your soul.”

These testimonials were conveyed just two days after having lost family members to a racially motivated massacre, and they were given directly to the person responsible for the killings.

Is this not a manifestation of the prayer in Ephesians 3? Is this not a revelation of *the strength of inner-being with the power of the Holy Spirit*? Is this not *Christ dwelling in hearts through faith*, a faith and an in-dwelling that allows no room for hatred? Evidence that Christ has moved in, taken up residence for good?

Is this not *rooted and grounded in love*? So rooted and grounded as to not be dislodged, as not to be shaken, as to not be moved. Is this not *power to comprehend with all the saints the breadth, length, height, depth of Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge*? Knowledge alone would certainly not evoke this response. Is this not *filled with the fullness of God*? Is this not *God’s power at work, able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine*? This profound display of forgiveness and mercy is the actualization of the Scripture passages read today.

It is indeed God’s power at work; however, the work is not finished. The forgiveness and mercy shown must not be considered resolution. Later that evening, at an interfaith prayer vigil in Charleston, amongst thousands, Charleston’s white Mayor Joseph Riley, Jr., who was first elected in 1975 and is serving his 10th term in office, said it was time for a dialogue about race in America.

It’s time. It is time.

There is a consortium of clergy that has formed in Marin with the goal of being able to address and talk about racial issues. It is well past time. We have a lot of catching up to do. Members of the group have begun to identify and recommend books and movies on the topic to help start us off. The pastor at First Pres. San Anselmo

suggests the movies "Mirrors of Privilege," and "Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequity," to be watched as a group and discussed, as their church has done.

The pastor at Sleepy Hollow Presbyterian recommends an article by Bryan Stevenson, entitled, "On Charleston and Our Real Problem with Race." Stevenson has spent most of his career challenging bias against minorities and the poor in the criminal justice system. He is the founder and executive director of Equal Justice Initiative, based in Montgomery, Alabama, an advocacy group that opposes mass incarceration and racial injustice. In the article, Stevenson, a graduate of Harvard Law School, tells of one of his experiences in the courtroom. He was waiting for the hearing to start and the judge entered and said, "Hey, you go back out there in the hallway and you wait until your defense lawyer gets here because I don't want any defendants sitting in my courtroom without their lawyer." Stevenson stood and said, "I'm sorry, Your Honor, my name is Bryan Stevenson, I am the attorney."

The judge and the prosecutor laughed, and Stevenson joined in the laughter so as not to disadvantage his client. After the hearing, though, he wondered, what is it when this judge sees a black, 55 year old man in a suit and tie in his courtroom at the defense counsel's table, and it doesn't occur to him that the man is the lawyer?

Indeed it is time to address not only the outward, aggressive acts of racial violence in mass killings and police brutality, but also the insidious and persistent power and effect of racial stereotyping. In the article *Black Men in Public Space*, Brent Sanders, an African American journalist, reveals the stark awareness made known to him when he moved across the country to attend graduate school at University of Chicago. He conveys that walking down the street at night to cure insomnia, he saw women tighten their purses to their sides and cross to the other side of the street. He heard the click, click, click of car doors locking as he passed by. As a professional journalist, rushing into the office to submit his article by the deadline, security was called as he was mistaken for a robber. Entering a jewelry store in an upscale neighborhood to kill time before an appointment, the proprietor excused herself and returned with a Doberman pinscher, straining at the end of a leash. Sanders' tone in the article is apologetic. "I understand," he says, "that women are vulnerable out at night alone and that young black men are often perpetrators." The article concludes with his personal solution to this problem of racial prejudice, precautions he takes to make himself less threatening. Sanders finds that when he walks down the street whistling Vivaldi or Beethoven, that on-comers are less likely to assume he is a criminal. Sometimes, passersby will even join along. (whistle)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author of *Between the World and Me*, (the new #1 *NY Times* bestseller this week) was asked to share his thoughts on racial discrimination on a television interview. The interviewer ended the show with a photo of a black boy hugging a white policeman. Coates felt that his entire discussion was in vain. To him, the posting of this photo spoke of the unremitting denial of the situation as it really is. Those of us who do not live with the daily oppression of institutionalized racism want to jump to the photo of peace, by-stepping the pain and struggle of

those that do. Those of us who do not live with the daily persecution and subjugation of institutionalized racism want the image of forgiveness without the thorough consideration of the systems in place that bring about the need for it. The denial runs deep.

A white woman who currently gives tours of a Southern plantation states that she is mind-boggled by the questions asked of her daily, such as, "Were the slaves paid, did they choose to work here, were they loyal, did they appreciate the opportunity to live in such a nice home?" The denial needs to be broken. It is time.

At the Charleston vigil referenced earlier, the Rev. Nelson B. Rivers III said to the crowd of thousands, "I'm maladjusted. I never got used to being disrespected. I never got used to being mistreated."

It is time that these voices be heard. It is time that these voices be heard without a defensive response or reframe, or justification or explanation. It is time to listen. It is time to engage. It is time to allow Christ to fill our hearts so that there is not just "no room for hatred," but also no room for denial.

The prayer from Ephesians read today, the prayer for the holiness of the church, is followed by this line: "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling" (4:1). "Be imitators of God," Ephesians continues later in the passage, "and walk in love... For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (5:1).

The indwelling presence of God, is a sheer and utter gift. God chooses to live among us and God's glory fills us. God graces us, and then we are given the freedom to decide what to do with the indwelling, loving, presence. Will we embrace it? Will we make room for it? Will we partner with it?

Friends, we have been granted a place in God's kingdom, adopted into the family of God, whereby we are strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit and rooted and grounded in Christ's love. Let us look to one another, a family built of love, fellow saints on the journey, filled with the fullness of God, which is faithfulness, graciousness, justice and kindness.

It is time.

