

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Eighteen Sunday after Pentecost: September 26, 2021

In All Things Pray

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good Morning and welcome to another Sunday. Again, just as last week, I am going to focus on the Epistle, the reading from James. Our reading could simply be summed up as “in all things – pray.” James is so bold as to state that healing can take place through prayer. So we need to unpack that just a bit. Most scholars when looking at this reading feel that James is speaking of actual physical healing, and for some this can be problematic. I am sure every person here, has prayed for healing at some time, or for another’s healing, only to be disappointed as they fill their prescription or attend a funeral.

So at some point one has to include thoughts about whether we have free will, if God listens to our petitions, or if the over-arching plan of God overrides anything we might desire in prayer that is not be part of His greater plan. We also need to look at the fact that James could be referring to spiritual healing, and of course there is a whole psych-social aspect beyond anointing one with oil, or reciting some familiar words.

Well, all these ideas and questions with scientific aspects have merit except for one thing, what if the lens we are looking through is facing the wrong direction? What if prayer were not done to change God’s mind or beg for healing, or even to praise God for God’s sake? What if it is actually not about changing the present situation? What if prayer, especially done with mindfulness and humility, is about changing us, the ones in prayer. Perhaps giving us acceptance of a situation, giving us strength to move forward through the rough patches, or giving us insight?

Dr. David Spiegel states, "Praying involves the deeper parts of the brain: the medial prefrontal cortex and the posterior cingulate cortex — the mid-front and back portions." He then adds that this can be seen through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which renders detailed anatomical pictures of internal organs. Dr. Spiegel concludes that during prayer, "These parts of the brain are involved in self-reflection and self-soothing."

For those of you who have ever seen the women who gather at a Catholic church to pray the rosary, the sense of peace within the air is almost palpable. For the conservative Jew who faces a wall rocking back and forth on his heels reciting a now ancient language, there is an energy of awe and reverence that can only be experienced by those who have witnessed this. For the Muslim on his hands and knees, prayer is reverent and addicting, making them stop everything for just a moment of peace. Yes, the world continues to involve struggles, just as in the lives of those who are praying. But for those in meditation, lamentation, petition or praise, they are the ones being changed.

Dr. Spiegel's research shows that while praying, the reflective regions of the brain are activated, including parts of the brain associated with taking action, while other brain components can even become inactivated. It's an interesting combination that Spiegel says could play a role in why prayer helps people struggling with addictive urges.

When you are in prayer, even if your mind wanders, you become reflective. The MRI data show changes in parts of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for the control of emotion and "the semantic reappraisal of emotion." When Psalm 139 states we are "fearfully and wonderfully made", it reminds us God's works are too marvelous for us to understand, and that about sums it up.

Dr. Paul Hokemeyer, a marriage, family and addictions therapist explains, "Prayer and meditation are highly effective in lowering our reactivity to traumatic and negative

events," and "they are powerful because they focus our thoughts on something outside ourselves." Dr. Hokemeyer goes on to explain, when we sit down and engage in prayer or meditation, we are able to shift away from a frightened and stressed survival mode into "an intentional state," and ultimately "reengage our prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that rules our executive functioning and enables us to make intelligent mindful decisions."

I always find it amazing when science and spirituality meet. Historically we have looked at peoples from ancient times as rougher, uncivilized, or unskilled in knowledge because they lacked our Western way of explaining things. Yet, people have been praying - I believe - since they first looked at the sky and realized how tiny and insignificant people are compared to the Universe.

Dr. Loretta G. Breuning, founder of the Inner Mammal Institute and the author of "The Science of Positivity" and "Habits of a Happy Brain," explains that when we pray, we can activate neural pathways we developed when young to release hormones such as oxytocin. "Oxytocin is known for its role in maternal labor and lactation, but it also enables social trust and attachment, giving us a good feeling despite living in a world of threat." Also included in these meditative acts may be a way of being real with yourself — of locating where you are right now, what you're feeling, and identifying your needs. Whether you are lamenting in your grief; figuring out that you need to forgive someone or yourself; or that you are grateful to the tune of tears in appreciation; you are truly (by God's grace) healing yourself, strengthening yourself, organizing your thoughts, and being open to intuition and good executive decisions.

Dr. Hokemeyer states, "One of the purposes of prayer and meditation is to regain our footing so that we can step out into the world and take positive action: we reconnect,

re-center, recharge and gain the strength necessary to take steps that will create real change. In other words, prayer is the fuel that lights the fire of action.”

A favorite meditation that Dr. Anna Yusim recommends is the Loving-Kindness meditation, which blends breathing techniques with positive thoughts for all beings. She suggests that after you complete this meditation, you straighten up and ask yourself the question: “What is one thing I can do to help somebody I love right now?”

I know we live in a world of pain and strife and have heard the remarks about “thoughts and prayers” being a trite response to real tragedy. However “thoughts and prayers” do make a difference and actually help us rebalance, heal, and prepare to move forward in a reflective and respectful way. Thoughts and prayers then become the beginning of the inspired action of change.

As we enter the season of Fall and the days grow shorter and the weather changes invite us inside and inward in our thoughts; let us pray. We have inherited a prayer book that expresses more than we can express ourselves. We have access through media, libraries and movies to experiment and learn about various ways to pray, historical prayers, ritual prayers, bedtime sayings and blessings.

As our daily office prayers state, “O Lord, let our prayers come to you”. Because when we pray, the healing can begin. We are not little children and have no need to pray with Santa Claus expectations, but instead understand that praying is healing what needs to be healed - even if we don’t notice it in our moment of struggle, or in our moment of amazing gratitude.

I ask us now to take a moment of silence, a breath -- and realize you have just prayed. Be open to receive healing. May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord. Amen