

## **“He Is Praying for You”**

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – May 12, 2024*

*Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, John 17:6-19*

Have you ever had someone tell you they are praying for you? Likely we all have had people pray for us, but it is different when someone tells you they are praying for you. It might happen when you are going through a difficult time with health or family. It can make you feel uneasy or a bit vulnerable. But there is also a feeling of wellbeing that flows over you because you know you are not alone, that someone cares for you and you know that God is there in the midst of it all.

Sometimes it comes unexpectedly. I have had emails telling me that someone thought of me and is praying for me. It gives me a lift even if there is nothing particularly weighing on me at the time. Yet sometimes the words come when I feel particularly weighed down and need those prayers but had not thought to ask for prayer.

The story is told of a person driving past a church on a busy street in a city. On the sign was the simple message, “Pray for Ellen Smith,” or whatever her name was. The driver didn’t know Mrs. Smith, they didn’t know the source of her concern, but he said he found himself thinking about Mrs. Smith at different times during the day, imagining how old she was, what her concern might have been and during the whole time lifting her up in prayer. I suspect he was not alone.

I visited a senior member of our congregation some years ago who felt bad that she was no longer able to contribute her energy to the work of the congregation as she had for so many years. I asked her to undertake a very important ministry in the congregation, I asked her to take out her directory each day and look at the names and pray for the people. She may not know if they had a particular concern, and that wasn’t important. She would find herself imagining the kids at school, the parents about their work. Some were widows, someone whose spouse had died. Her heart would go out to each of them as she lifted their situations in prayer. I knew she was praying for me as well and I knew I was not alone.

Sometimes that prayer happens in our presence. To hear someone pray for you after talking about particular health or personal concerns has such power because those concerns are brought concretely into the presence of God, and we feel healing and release. Offering prayers in the hospital or prayers around the time of death is one of the wonderful opportunities that I have been given in my daily work. We all have this opportunity for blessing. When someone comes to mind, pray for them, it might just be what they need at that time, and we don't know it.

The story is told of a Lutheran Seminary professor whose son was killed in a violent way. He found it impossible to pray and went about his teaching and his work feeling empty and without anything to give. Sharing his pain with a colleague, he revealed his apparent loss of faith and inability to pray. His friend told him, "We will pray for you until you can pray for yourself again." As his healing took place, he was not abandoned and eventually he was able to pray again.

As parents, we remember the prayers we murmured when we sent our children off to school that first day. It was a prayer for safety in a rough old world. We continue to say those prayers as they enter each new stage of life, ready to stride into the unknown. Parents, Grandparents, aunts, and uncles, find themselves with such prayers on their lips at the time of graduation, every time a new seemingly perilous journey begins. We want safety of that person but also safety of spirit in a world that we know can be rough and unforgiving.

In today's gospel Jesus knows he is about to leave his disciples and they are being sent out into the world. Jesus prays for them, asking for protection; asking that God would "sanctify" them, make them holy, protect their souls. This could be called his last will and testament. With that prayer comes all the wonder of Jesus praying for us. This is the Son of God, this is the one who came to save the world, including us. This is the one who died for us, and he is praying for you and me. Praying for our safety, praying for our souls. This is the one who has power over evil and death itself, this is the one praying for us. Jesus is the one who sends us out to carry on that which was important to him, the release of captives, to bind up the sick, to pray for those in need.

Jesus also prayed, “sanctify them in truth; your word is truth.” Sanctify means to “make holy,” to have the courage to speak up against bullying, to choose not to get caught up in the materialism of our culture, to dare to be different, to work for peace and justice in the face of a culture that says to look out for yourself.

This is my prayer for each one of you, and especially for the children. I pray that we would take seriously our identity as children of God and seek to live it. I pray that we would all pray for each other so that we might have the courage to live differently in our culture. Ron Rolheiser in a recent article says it this way, “Faith must be expressed publicly, in colorful, romantic ways. We must stop building ‘beige churches’ and build churches that express public faith.”

What if we believed that Jesus was praying for our safety and our holiness? What if we prayed these things for each other? How would it change the way we live together as a congregation? Would our worship be any different? How would it affect the decisions we make as individuals and family about how we spend our time and our resources? I worry about the Church of today because many do not seem to take it seriously. I watch people making choices repeatedly which put the trimmings of life central and push matters of faith to the sideline. Choices are made to be away from worship week after week.

I know of what I speak because I am the one who deals with families at the time of death. That is when the many decisions made in life reveal the logical consequences. If praise of God was something to be done grudgingly if there was not something better to do, it is hard to praise God at the time of death. It is hard to find support and care in a community of faith if one does not take the time to build relationships there. It is hard to see God’s hope and presence when there has been a lifetime spent pushing God away.

We want our children to grow in faith, but we too often fail to make the choices that allow that faith to be nurtured. I know because I see budding faith in young people snuffed out by callous expressions of religious intolerance paraded as faith.

Remember that Jesus is praying for you. Jesus wants us to live as children of God and promises to give us the strength to face whatever comes. Remember to

pray for those around you, and those far away. Pray that we will be protected in our faith and that we will be “sanctified.” Remember that we are to be salt and light to a bland and dark world. Remember that Jesus is praying for us and that all the power of God is with us. Remember that there is nothing that has power beyond the power of God. Remember that God is truth. Then we will be like the tree of Psalm 1, “Their delight is in the law of the Lord . . . they are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season.” Amen.