

Christ in Our Home

October, November, December
2021



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Prayers

Morning

Morning by morning we come to you,
O Lord, little knowing what the day will bring.
Walk with us through the hours of our
waking, that with full and free hearts we may
live without fear, trusting always in
your unfailing presence. Amen.

Evening

Enfold us in the warmth of your embrace,
loving God, that we may rest in peace.
Wake us when morning comes, refreshed
and alive with hope for the dawning of your
eternal day. Amen.

Mealtime

Blessed are you, O Christ, for your kingdom
comes at every table of sharing. Feed us
now with the bread of life that, radiant in your
unfailing generosity, we may reveal the
kingdom of your compassion at this and
every table. Amen.

Festivals and commemorations

Bold type indicates a festival. Plain type indicates a commemoration.

- Oct. 4 Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church, 1226; Theodor Fliedner, renewer of society, 1864
- Oct. 6 William Tyndale, translator, martyr, 1536
- Oct. 7 Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, pastor in North America, 1787
- Oct. 15 Teresa of Avila, teacher, renewer of the church, 1582
- Oct. 17 Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, martyr, c. 115
- Oct. 18 Luke, Evangelist**
- Oct. 23 James of Jerusalem, martyr, c. 62
- Oct. 26 Philipp Nicolai, 1608; Johann Heermann, 1647; Paul Gerhardt, 1676; hymnwriters
- Oct. 28 Simon and Jude, Apostles**
- Oct. 31 Reformation Day**
- Nov. 1 All Saints Day**
- Nov. 3 Martín de Porres, renewer of society, 1639
- Nov. 7 John Christian Frederick Heyer, 1873; Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, 1719; Ludwig Nommensen, 1918; missionaries
- Nov. 11 Martin, Bishop of Tours, 397; Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, teacher, 1855
- Nov. 17 Elizabeth of Hungary, renewer of society, 1231
- Nov. 23 Clement, Bishop of Rome, c. 100; Miguel Agustín Pro, martyr, 1927
- Nov. 24 Justus Falckner, 1723; Jehu Jones, 1852; William Passavant, 1894; pastors in North America
- Nov. 25 Isaac Watts, hymnwriter, 1748
- Nov. 30 Andrew, Apostle**
- Dec. 3 Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, 1552
- Dec. 4 John of Damascus, theologian and hymnwriter, c. 749
- Dec. 6 Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342
- Dec. 7 Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397
- Dec. 13 Lucy, martyr, 304
- Dec. 14 John of the Cross, renewer of the church, 1591
- Dec. 20 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church, 1552
- Dec. 26 Stephen, Deacon and Martyr**
- Dec. 27 John, Apostle and Evangelist**
- Dec. 28 The Holy Innocents, Martyrs**

Writers

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Where the Spirit sings

**For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus
has set you free. (v. 2)**

One of my favorite spots to sit is right outside our home. We have two yellow Adirondack chairs under three towering oak trees. From the chair I watch the seasons unfold. I take deep breaths. I write. I read. I listen. I feel the wind on my face. I hear birds chirping. I watch leaves change colors and fall from the trees. All of this listening and watching points me to the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit calls to us when we're listening and when we're distracted. The Spirit welcomes us to know presence and love. In each moment of listening, we're invited to hear God's words of grace and love: "You are mine, you are mine, you are mine."

Wherever you find yourself this day, sit and listen. Whether you're inside or outside, the Spirit can find you. Open your eyes and your ears. The Spirit is mighty and active, blowing toward you in love.

**Spirit God, keep blowing across this world. Teach us
to be a force of good for others. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who protect and preserve
our land*

A deep cleaning

But God knows your hearts. (v. 15)

Some days I wonder if I really need to talk to God, given that God knows my heart. I believe that God can feel the worry, sadness, anger, and joy I hold. I believe that God knows the gifts I'm celebrating and the people I'm holding close to my heart. But I also know the grace and peace I feel when I offer my thoughts and heart to God. God does know what's on my heart. Yet, with any relationship there's much fruit to be shared when we open ourselves to one another, and it's the same with God.

God delights in us when we meet God with our hearts. God holds our feelings close. God offers forgiveness and unending love. God knows the contours of our hearts and rejoices when we rid ourselves of envy, bitterness, and comparison by giving them over to God.

What's on your heart today? Who are you holding close in prayer? Speak those words. Write your gratitude. Trust that God knows you and is with you.

**Draw near to me, God, as I rest in you and find comfort
in your word. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: People feeling disconnected
from God*



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 27

**And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them,
and blessed them. (v. 16)**

Jesus is known for his never-ending welcome. He welcomes children, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes. Jesus embraces anyone who desires a connection with him and anyone in need of healing. Jesus' posture is one of openness.

As someone with little children, I envision the scene with Jesus welcoming children to him as one of noise and chaos. It's crying and whining. It's joy and smiles. It's fighting to get closer to Jesus. And most importantly, it's an overwhelming welcome by Jesus, who extends his arms ever wider so no one is left out.

Where have you felt Jesus' embrace for you? Jesus is always reaching for you. Have you ever felt like Jesus wouldn't want to welcome you with open arms? On the contrary, Jesus is there to invite you into his life full of good things. Feel Jesus' welcome and blessing. This invitation is never going away.

**Welcoming God, thank you for your open arms. Help me
to show that same welcome to others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those feeling misunderstood

A generous God

It is well with those who deal generously and lend. (v. 5)

Does God love me more when I offer my time and gifts in service to other people? Am I more righteous and just when I use my voice to speak for those in need? I don't think God's love depends on how well I advocate for justice, but I do believe that God calls us all to interact with, call attention to, serve, and love those in need. When I do these things, I feel God's presence more palpably.

God comes to us in the form of our neighbors—the ones we agree with and the ones who make our skin crawl. God comes to us in strangers—the ones who look like us and the ones who don't. God comes to us in the cries for justice—across our streets and across the world. When we act generously, extending a welcome hand, offering food, clothing the homeless, advocating for justice, our lives are filled with God's justice and presence. Each time we acknowledge God in our neighbors, we serve as God's means to bring a more just kingdom to this earth.

**Bountiful God, open our hearts to see your presence
in all whom we meet. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The work of Lutheran World Relief

Milk or juice?

I will not be angry forever.

Only acknowledge your guilt. (vv. 12-13)

Every morning at school my kindergartener eats breakfast and has a choice of milk or juice. Before she goes to school I remind her to only drink milk because juice is high in sugar. After school I ask what she had for breakfast. "Did you have juice?" Some days she immediately covers her face and laughs. On the days she hides her eyes from me, even without words I know this means she drank juice and doesn't want to admit it.

I know it's just juice, but this interaction is the beginning of a lifelong learning that rules and guidance are in place to keep us and others safe and healthy, and that it's important to tell the truth and acknowledge when we have strayed from what we should do. In response to my daughter's downturned eyes, I remind her over and over that I only want to know the truth and that I am not mad. I offer her my love and hopefully am modeling the grand love and forgiveness God offers us. God's commands are for our well-being, God loves us even when we stray, and God's forgiveness is vaster than anything we can imagine.

Loving God, thank you for the unending ways you offer us life and forgiveness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those seeking forgiveness

Listening for God's voice

You have heard that it was said . . . (v. 27)

So many biblical texts are hard to read and understand. They were written for a particular time and place. They bear witness to a people wrestling with who God was in their lives. We do the same wrestling and discernment when we read scripture. God's word is meant to inspire, convict, and encourage. But God's word also brings questions and contradictions. Reading scripture calls for an open mind and a willingness to listen and learn.

Today's texts about divorce might seem especially challenging. However, if we keep in mind the overarching theme of scripture—God's unfailing commitment to all people—we can read the text through the lens of love. In biblical times, divorce privileged the husband over the wife and could leave her destitute. Jesus here reflects a God of love, understanding, and justice for those who are disempowered.

Keep reading God's word. Keep learning and listening. Keep digging for the truths that reveal the God of love, grace, and forgiveness.

God, keep us turning to you for guidance and understanding. May your word enliven our spirits. Amen.

Prayer concern: People struggling in their relationships

Joined with God

The LORD our God made a covenant with us. (v. 2)

One of the things I love about walking is how it makes me feel connected to the land and to the people I pass. With every step I am supported by the ground under my feet. With every person I pass with a wave and a hello, I am connected to a neighbor who is part of God's family. During the pandemic, walking took on even greater significance because it was one of the few ways I could interact with people and the earth. With every step, I renewed my relationships to land and people.

When I reflect on God's covenant with people, I liken it to walking. God continually renews promises with us. God never fails to remind us that we are God's people and that there are no other gods. And with every prayer, confession, and worship we offer to God, our relationship deepens. God made a promise to us to be our God and to take us out of the depths of despair. With every step you take, remember that God walks with you.

**As you walk with us, Lord, open our eyes to your presence.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Sunday school teachers and
faith formation leaders*

Counting the summers

**So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart. (v. 12)**

When my daughter was born I read an article acknowledging that parents only have eighteen summers with their children before they graduate. I can still feel my anxiety rising as I think about that number and the fleetingness of my days. My children are currently six and three. With small children underfoot, the days can seem long, but the reality of how fast they grow is with me every day.

Yet there is hope. Each time I watch my children play with their toys, sit next to them reading a book, make cookies, or take a walk with them, it almost feels as if time stands still. In those moments I'm able to see the gifts in front of me and say, "Thank you, God." God is with us in the day-to-day moments of our lives. God sees us in our waking and sleeping, working and playing, resting and praying. In recognizing the fleetingness of the days, I can reflect on the God who counts the days with us and, more importantly, counts us as beloved children.

**God of tiny moments and grand adventures, help us
see all our days as your precious gifts. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Children in the foster-care system

New traditions

**And why do you break the commandment of God
for the sake of your tradition? (v. 3)**

Life during a global pandemic meant many traditions needed to be altered or canceled altogether. Throughout this time there was a great deal of grief and loss. Very quickly, the way much of life operated had to pivot.

I give thanks for worship leaders and church communities who found creative new ways to be the church, to continue some traditions while letting others go, so we could remain connected to God. My children and I found a new rhythm, worshiping from home on our couch. Yes, there were many distractions. Yes, we missed the community. But yes, God was present.

Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites when their words don't match their actions. Jesus reminds his followers that a call to discipleship is not rooted in specific actions, but in the posture of our hearts. Jesus' words remind us that God is bigger than any human tradition.

Where have you let tradition get in the way of your relationship with God? Ask God to lead you to what is truly important.

**All-knowing God, search our hearts and fill us with desire
to live justly and mercifully. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Teachers, students, school workers,
and administrators*



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 28

**But many who are first will be last,
and the last will be first. (v. 31)**

I have this tendency to think in extremes when it comes to my worth. In school, if I didn't have the best grades, I felt like I had the worst. Too often in parenting, if I lose my patience, I feel like the worst parent. There is no in-between in my thinking. Fortunately, God's kingdom doesn't rely on our traditional ways of measuring. God flips everything we think we know about who is first and who is last and turns it on its head.

I'm reminded that in God's kingdom my worth comes, first and foremost, as God's gift: I am God's beloved child. There's no being first in my discipleship, and there's definitely no being last either. God desires hearts and lives turned toward God, but God is a God of grace who sees the challenges we face and meets us with understanding and help. God doesn't measure how much we know about the Bible; rather, God marvels at the sheer beauty and energy of someone wanting to know God. God doesn't measure how much I get out of a worship service; rather, God marvels at me as a beloved, precious gift—the work of God's own hands.

**God of wisdom, remind me that your ways are not my ways.
Your way is always full of grace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Caregivers

All God's people

**There was a great multitude that no one could count,
from every nation. (v. 9)**

I spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Gambia, West Africa, where I learned the local Wolof dialect. The Wolof word for community translates as “the people of the children of Adam.” I love this concrete definition for community, but more importantly, I love how the Gambian people lived out this reality.

When they said “community,” they were saying they believed everyone deserves respect and dignity. The word itself brings forward a reality that God intends for us all. I saw this reality of community when strangers were welcomed into people’s homes with food and a place to sleep. I saw this reality when Gambians couldn’t understand how it was possible for people to be homeless. I lived this reality when my Gambian family cared for and loved me as their own.

This is the picture of the community God intends: a community rooted in love for all God’s people, a community where there is no more hunger, thirst, or scorching heat. Today when you think of community, think about the people of the children of Adam, and how that image changes how you see others.

**God of all, create in us a willingness to see your people
as beloved children in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Mission coworkers

Singing God's song

**... singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
and telling all your wondrous deeds. (v. 7)**

Sometimes I overhear my three-year-old son singing to himself as he plays with his trucks. Between narrating the trucks’ movements, he sings quietly. His voice lifting into the air stops me, and all I can do is sit, listen, and watch him. He sings songs from shows, the radio, church, and the songs we make up together. In the moment, I want to shout a thank-you to God—for this boy, his voice, and the gift of this moment. But I also wonder if God, too, is singing a song of thanksgiving.

I imagine that God sings for joy when people turn to God and seek forgiveness. I imagine that God sings for joy when neighbors help one another. I imagine that God sings for joy when communities seek justice. We too get to join in God’s song every time we lift our voices in praise and thanks, share our gratitude, and offer each other words of grace. Look around you and see what words rise to your voice in a song of gratitude for this day.

**God, you sing to us a song of love. Open our lips
to proclaim the greatness of that gift. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Worship leaders

Caring for our neighbors

**And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus,
covered with sores. (v. 20)**

As we were driving one day, from the backseat, my daughter Charlotte drew me in with her question: "Where this way leads, Mama?" To my left I saw a road curving around farm fields.

"I don't know where that road goes."

In the rearview mirror I saw Charlotte's fingers pressed into the window glass. We passed another road, and she asked again, "Where that road leads?"

We make many choices every day that affect our neighbors near and far, that affect our daily lives and the years to come. We can choose to reach out to those in need, or to keep to ourselves. We can choose to offer our gifts, or we can hoard them. We can choose to see God in everyone, or not. We can choose to see the Lazaruses lying before us, or we can turn our eyes.

Will we turn toward one another with compassion and a posture of listening? Will we travel together, committed to the good of all? Will we take time to slow down and see the beauty in our midst? The next time I'm in the car and hear my daughter's question, I'll tell her: "Let's go and find out where this way leads."

**Gracious God, we don't know where life will take us.
Teach us to reach out to others along the way. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Social workers

Make a wish

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace
in believing, so that you may abound in hope. (v. 13)**

On a family walk, the kids picked up two dandelions gone to seed. "Make a wish," I said.

"I wish to ride a unicorn." Charlotte blew the seeds into the air. "I wish to ride a horse," Isaac declared. What do I wish? To feel at ease in our world. For healing. For peace.

I imagine Paul, writing his letters to the various churches including the one in Rome. I imagine him wishing—and more, praying—for the people to know how much God loved them, and that they would know and love God in return.

As we made our wishes, the seeds flew away, carrying our words. I lifted my face to the sky, offered my prayers, and watched as the seeds were scattered back to the earth to eventually take root and bloom. This is the gift of our faith: the small seeds we plant when we love one another and love God, and the fruits that are born through the Holy Spirit.

Make a wish today, and offer a prayer of thanks for the seeds of faith that are planted.

**God, our beginning and end: May we find ourselves
rooted in your love, and open to sharing our faith. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who are eager to hear
a word of hope*

Stay here

**When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble. (v. 15)**

I haven't reached the door of my daughter's bedroom before her voice calls me back: "Stay here." Standing next to the light switch, I reassure her, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Stay here, Mama." I flick the switch, bringing darkness into the room. "I love you. I'm not going anywhere." We do this every night. I wonder if she's picking up on my worries about the world, or perhaps it's due to her being away all day at kindergarten. Every night, back and forth, she wants me to stay, and I assure her I will.

Later, when I'm ready for bed, sitting in my chair with my Bible, I offer my own prayers to God, and they're not much different from my daughter's. "Stay here, God. Be with me. Be with our world."

I listen to the chorus of insects outside my window, I see the moon's light, and in the stillness, I hear God's response: "I love you. I'm not going anywhere."

**God, thank you for being with us when we call,
and when we don't know what words to offer. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Parents of young children

Divine service

But I am among you as one who serves. (v. 27)

In the Lutheran tradition in which I was raised, the official worship settings in our hymnals appeared under the heading "Divine Service." This is a literal translation of the German word *Gottesdienst* (God service), and is still used in some English-speaking Lutheran denominations around the world. It etched into my mind early on that this is exactly what God is doing in Christian worship: coming down to serve sinful human beings the forgiveness and salvation we need.

The next time you are in worship, consider that Christ himself really is among you serving those gathered in his name and at his table. This is our Lord in action, giving us his own definition of greatness. The more we fix our eyes on his divine service, the less room we have in our minds for the world's portraits of power and glory. When we let God feed us, God strengthens us to become a new mode for divine service out in the world.

**Gracious God, how amazing that you stoop to serve me!
Make me too a sacrament of your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Ministers of word and sacrament



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 29

**Whoever wishes to be first among you
must be slave of all. (v. 44)**

Last year at Christmastime I received a happy report from one of the officers of the local Kiwanis Club. The Kiwanians had edged out the Lions Club in raising the most money on our respective days of bell-ringing for the Salvation Army: \$946.51 to \$788.87. I felt a little burst of pride, as I am a Kiwanian and I had personally worked one of those shifts, ringing on a blustery day outside the Piggly Wiggly grocery store. I also smiled when our officer noted, “The Lions’ total is pretty good too, and we tip our caps to them!”

Notice how Jesus does not demand from his disciples that they forfeit their competitive instinct. Rather, he rechannels it toward service. When we compete to gain privilege of place over others, like James and John tried to do, it leads to dissension. When we compete to lift others up through works of love, however, it leads to celebration and a multiplication of blessing. Want to finish first? Do it the Jesus way, then go for the gold!

**Lord Jesus, you are the champion of humble service.
Help me to be great in love, like you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Civic and service clubs

Luke, Evangelist

**I too decided . . . to write an orderly account for you,
most excellent Theophilus. (1:3)**

I have long been drawn to the theory that Luke, the author of the books we call Luke and Acts, addressed his two-volume work to the whole community of believers using a code name, “Theophilus.” It adds a level of intrigue to imagine the authorities checking Luke’s “mail” and being fooled into believing this was harmless correspondence to a Roman nobleman. Meanwhile, ordinary Christian folk, as they received the messages, knew that each and every one of them was Theophilus—“friend of God.”

Whether or not the theory is historical, it is certainly true that today, by the Holy Spirit, you really are the addressee of the sacred story, the friend of God to whom the word is delivered. What if every time you opened your Bible to one of these inspired testimonies to Jesus, you began by envisioning these words on the envelope: “Dear friend of God”? How beautiful to realize that God is reaching out to you through Christ with the hand of friendship!

**God, I am in awe that in Jesus you call me your friend.
How can I ever thank you enough! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who don't know God as friend

When we hide

And the LORD said, "See, he has hidden himself among the baggage." (v. 22)

Here's a funny sight: the tall man, Saul, chosen by God to serve as Israel's first king, hiding among the Benjaminite luggage, trying to avoid the call. Have you ever tried to do something similar?

When COVID-19 prevented my congregation from gathering in person for worship, suddenly I only had four other human beings in the sanctuary with me on Sundays. One of them was at the keyboard, another was busy with the tech work. That left a soprano song leader and an alto assisting minister to sing the hymns—plus me. "Pastor, you should leave your mic on. We could really use the lower voice," they said. Now, I've come a long way from my childhood miseducation at the school of Real Men Mumble, but singing as part of a trio over the air on a country radio broadcast shot all over southwest Wisconsin? It made me want to hide in the acolytes' closet!

Nope, not an option. God will find you every time. And anoint you to do what needs to be done.

God, forgive me when I hide from you. Give me courage to answer your call, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are afraid to serve

The real test

Wait for the LORD, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you. (v. 34)

When I was in eighth grade, my first-period religion class was rife with cheating. We had a lot of fill-in-the-blank memory quizzes, and since the pastor trusted us to grade one another's work, many of my peers would leave those blanks empty until a coconspirator could write in the correct answers as they were given. Though I often neglected my memory homework, I always took a stab at filling in my own blanks and had at least one other honest soul nearby to grade fairly. I will never forget the day the pastor read our semester grades aloud in front of the class. There were a lot of As, but when it was my turn, all could hear that Goody Two-Shoes got a dreadful D. In religion!

Psalm 37 says that although the wicked often prosper in the short term, God will vindicate the righteous in the end. In life, the real test is not just the score at the top of the page. It's sticking to God's way and waiting patiently on God's justice to come.

Faithful God, keep me true to your commandments, even when others around me ignore them. Amen.

Prayer concern: Youth resisting peer pressure

Waiting for the rain

**Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses
in the Negeb. (v. 4)**

The Negeb Desert is a large arid region in the south of the Holy Land. People who live there might spend ten or eleven months of the year without ever seeing a drop of rain. The watercourses, or wadis, etched into the terrain are evidence that water has indeed once flowed, but it would take a strong mix of memory and hope to trust that it would flow again.

Sometimes long periods of our walk with God are like that desert waiting. Interestingly, the waiting in Psalm 126 is of an active sort. Ancient farmers in the Negeb knew that they couldn't simply sit around until the winter rains came before beginning their labor. If they didn't prepare the soil and sow their seed while it was dry, they wouldn't be able to capture that water when it did arrive. The psalmist paints a picture of the faithful laboring even through their tears, in expectation that God will come in due time and cause their efforts to flourish.

**God, help me to press on with my work, trusting
that you will fill my watercourses again. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Desert ecosystems

Speaking up

**This man does not deserve . . . death, for he has spoken
to us in the name of the LORD. (v. 16)**

The temple authorities in Jerusalem sought the death sentence against prophet Jeremiah. His crime, they said, was prophesying against the city. These "leaders" were possessed by a "my country, right or wrong" spirit, and they could no longer tolerate a critical word, even one given by God through a commissioned messenger of God.

Jeremiah was not spared from their wrath by a heavenly miracle; he survived because of the advocacy of "all the people" (v. 16), including some of the elders of the land. While some today may shake their heads at faith-based advocacy for being too political, this passage shows that speaking up for others who are threatened with injustice is an act of faith and wise discernment.

Who do you see in the place where you live being judged unfairly or without discernment? How could an act of advocacy on your part be an extension of your prayer time today?

**Holy One, empower me to speak up for the innocent
and the wrongly accused. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The work of ELCA Advocacy

The ministry of intercession

Some people brought a blind man to [Jesus] and begged him to touch him. (v. 22)

In my congregation we have had five medical emergencies during worship in as many years. In each case, I have a feeling the morning's most palpable experience of grace for the majority in attendance was seeing the nurses and EMTs in the congregation respond to a sibling in need and getting them quick transport to the hospital.

In the gospels, there are many examples of individuals who cry out to Jesus for their own healing. I am especially appreciative of the stories, like this one, where someone or a group intercedes on behalf of another. People who care, bringing others to Jesus for help—how's that for a simple definition of the missional church?

As long as we can spot Jesus at work wherever healing happens, we should have no trouble recalling times when others brought us to the Lord for help. Try to name one now. Then ask yourself how the Spirit might be calling you to participate in the ministry of intercession today.

Lord of life, show me how to be an instrument in your mission of healing. Amen.

Prayer concern: Ambulance drivers



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 30

But he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 48)

In the Eastern Orthodox Church there is a centuries-old spiritual practice of praying the "Jesus Prayer." Most likely derived from this roadside cry of the beggar Bartimaeus, the Jesus Prayer offers a way to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). There are several variations on the wording, but the version I use is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me."

A simple, repetitive prayer like this is a wonderful way to practice Christ's presence throughout the day. I pray the Jesus Prayer when out for a walk, while driving, or if I am having trouble falling asleep. It is a particular blessing when I am anxious, my mind is distracted, or I am at a loss for my own prayer words.

How typical that "many sternly ordered" Bartimaeus to stop calling out to Jesus (v. 48)! The world is like that toward all who pray. Nevertheless, our persistence can result in both wellness and discipleship (v. 52).

**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,
have mercy on me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are busy or distracted

Signs of truthfulness

Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me." (v. 1)

A staff that turns into a snake, a leprosy-inducing (and curing) cloak, the power to turn river water to blood! Those would be handy tricks to have at your disposal to prove to others you aren't lying about God. The fact that God provides these signs for Moses' arsenal shows us that God is not opposed to signs as a vehicle toward trust. Indeed, Jesus himself once urged those who did not believe his words to at least "believe the works" (John 10:38) as a kind of entry-level faith.

The question for you might be: What sort of signs best fit the message you've been given to bear? Moses' shiver-inducing signs were a good fit for a "Let my people go . . . or else"—style message. But they wouldn't work for the gospel. Your message is one of liberation through the cross of Christ, the "proof" of God's love for sinners (Romans 5:8). What signs of undeserved compassion might you perform that could pave the way for listening ears and believing hearts?

Dear Jesus, give me courage and insight to bear witness to you through my words and deeds. Amen.

Prayer concern: Social workers

The grace of work

Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!" (v. 34)

One day a woman named Shannon reached me on my pastor's-office phone, asking for \$200 to help fix her car. "But you can't just give it to me," she said. "I'm a resident at Opportunity House, and I have to ask if there's any job I can do to earn it."

I contacted the director of this sober-living program in our town and confirmed that, true enough, handouts were frowned upon. These women had already been gifted a drug-free community, peer support, and professional counseling. Attaining independence through work was an important part of the process. I called Shannon back: "How about you volunteer at the lefse sale Saturday to raise money for the Homeless Coalition?" Shannon loved the idea, if someone could teach her how to make lefse!

Peter's order to the newly graced Aeneas—"Make your bed!"—reminds us that meaningful work is part of restoration too. How can the charitable efforts of your church incorporate this vital truth?

God of healing, use me to guide those in need toward wholeness of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those in recovery from addiction

Bless me so that . . .

**Deal bountifully with your servant, so that I may live
and observe your word. (v. 17)**

Everyone prays that God would bless them with some form of prosperity, be it monetary or in terms of success in specific endeavors. The psalmist bears witness, however, that a soul truly captive to God longs for God's bounty with a more ultimate end in mind: that there be more opportunity to bring God glory.

Sometimes, like little children, we simply ask God for what we need, period. Jesus himself commends such childlike faith and prayer.

At the same time, grown-up disciples have also learned to pray in a way that puts God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will first (see the Lord's Prayer). As you ask for God to deal bountifully with you today, try linking those petitions with others like "so I can have strength to follow your commandments" or "so I can more freely be an instrument of your generosity." In the Psalms, even a prayer for longer life is really a prayer for more chances to sing God's praise on earth (see Psalm 30).

**God of abundance, bless me so that I can multiply
my offerings to you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hymnwriters and church musicians

Simon and Jude, Apostles

**Those who love me will keep my word . . . and we will
come to them and make our home with them. (v. 23)**

When the woman I now call my wife first brought me home to Iowa, her parents pulled out all the stops. At each meal there seemed to be two meals: every veggie, starch, meat, or dessert with its backup option in case there was something I didn't like. A schedule of Cubs games was carefully laid out, her dad in charge of cuing up each broadcast. The best reading nook was offered to me, and the family beagle was practically ordered to go sit on my lap. Everything they could do to make me feel at home, they did.

What makes God feel at home? Jesus' answer is love. When Jude, whom the church honors today along with Simon, asks how the Lord will reveal himself "to us, and not to the world" (v. 22), the answer has to do with keeping Jesus' word. The heart of that word is love for one another. While the world may look for God to appear with great spectacle, rest assured that the whole Trinity is present—and at home—through simple acts of self-giving.

**God, may my home be a hospitable place for you—one
where you are made known. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA missionaries serving abroad

Grace is a gift

They are now justified by [God's] grace . . . through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (v. 24)

There is a memorable moment in the 1982 film *Annie* when the title character, an orphan of age ten, first sets foot inside the billionaire Oliver Warbucks's mansion. The aptly named Grace Farrell, secretary to Mr. Warbucks, has just picked Annie out from the St. Hudson's Home for Girls, where all the orphans are worked to the bone by the cruel Miss Hannigan. "So what do you want to do first?" Grace asks. Annie puts her hand to her chin, looks around, and says, "I think I'll do the windows first, then the floors." When Grace laughs and says, "Oh no, you don't need to do any cleaning," Annie exclaims, "But how'm I gonna earn my keep?"

In our work-oriented society, it can be hard to get used to the fact that God's grace in Jesus Christ really is a free gift. Because Jesus has done it all for your redemption, you don't have to lift a finger to win or to keep God's favor. So, what are you going to do, now that you don't have to do anything?

Lord, by grace alone you have brought me into your kingdom. Let all I do be a sign of thanks. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who work in theater

He changed the question

Which of these . . . was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? (v. 36)

Jesus' propensity for answering a question with another question is on full display in this interchange with a lawyer. The lawyer wanted to know, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded by telling a story and then asking back, "Which of these was a neighbor?"

The lawyer was looking for Jesus to tell him the types of people he was to love, the boundaries for his obligation to love. He was confident he had already cleared the bar and just wanted to hear the teacher say aloud what it was. Jesus would not comply. His story prevents the lawyer, and prevents us, from looking down our noses while we do good deeds or from prejudging anyone as out of bounds. Jesus makes the reviled Samaritan the hero. And he makes *neighbor* into a verb, not a category of person.

Are there questions you ask Jesus mainly to justify yourself? If so, what question do you suppose he would put back to you? Whose story would he tell to flip your script?

God, show me the pictures of mercy I'm not yet seeing. Then help me to do likewise. Amen.

Prayer concern: Attorneys and paralegals



Reformation Day

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. (v. 32)

Truth is a contentious subject these days. Turn on any cable news channel and you will find no shortage of talking heads angrily insisting that the other side can't admit to the plain truth. Flip to another channel and you'll find equally strong advocates for a different truth. Pontius Pilate's old question "What is truth?" (John 18:38) seems to hover in the air amid all that self-righteous shouting.

The really good news comes when we remember that for Christians truth is not merely a "what," but a "who": Jesus himself. "I am . . . the truth," Jesus said (John 14:6). In listening to his voice, each of us "belongs to the truth" (John 18:37). In trusting his word, we experience freedom. To say that you know the truth is simply to say that you know Jesus. Rest today in the confidence that the Truth knows you too, and that for all the battles that may rage around you, this one relationship always holds true.

Lord, keep us steadfast in your word. In your word alone is our peace. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who work in the news media

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