

THE GIFT OF THE STRENGTHENER

Before I read our Gospel lesson, I'm going to briefly share with you a few of my favorite prayers. They come from the book, Children's Letter's to God, compiled by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample. To be quite honest, I'm including these prayers here because I couldn't find a way to include them in my sermon and I am convinced you will find them enjoyable. They might even, help you to approach God in an uninhibited manner when you pray. (Children's Letter's to God Quotes)

Scripture Reading – The Gospel of John, Chapters 13, 14, 15 (selected verses) John 13:31-35; 14:1-3; 15:20; 15:1-12

John 13:31-35 – When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John 14:1-3 – “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

John 14:15-20,27 – “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Text: - “I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another...And I will ask the father, and He will give you another Strengthener to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...” John 13:34; 14:16,17a

Walter's wife had crushed his heart by breaking a long-standing promise. "I'll never be able to trust her again," he cried. "Is there anybody, anywhere whom I can trust these days?"

Walter flashed his fiery eyes at me. "Don't tell me that I can trust God. Where is God in this messed-up world?"

Jesus' disciples went through that same kind of gut-wrenching struggle, only their problem was with Jesus Himself. Jesus had come into their lives and built up their hopes that something good and lasting would happen to them and to the people whom they lived and worked. In Jesus, they had met a person whom they thought they could trust, a compassionate teacher, a powerful healer. But one night, as Jesus was hosting a dinner for them, He announces: One of you is about to betray me. Judas can't escape this moment of truth and he flees into the night. The whole scene scares the disciples. They're close to panic when Jesus further announces that He is leaving them. His friends can't handle what feels like sudden rejection. They rise up in protest. You can't abandon us now. With this scary betrayal business going on, we need you more than ever. Peter says: "Lord, where are you going? I have to know, because wherever it is, I'm going with you." Thomas echoes Peter's words by trying to get Jesus to be very specific, "Lord, if we don't know where you are going. How will we know how to get there?" And Philip adds: "I know what will make us feel better, Lord. Just show us God then we'll be okay. Jesus assures them that they will make it without Him. He lays on them a blanked of instructions and affirmations:

- They must now love one another just as He loves them.
- Yes, He really is leaving, but He will prepare a place for them to join Him. He'll be back, gather them up, and take them there – to heaven.
- If they really love Him, they must keep His commandments, especially the imperative that they love one another.
- Then comes an amazing promise, so full of comfort and hope: Jesus says: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Strengthener who will be with you forever." This is the Spirit of Truth...

That is verse 16 of Chapter 14 in John's Gospel. Scholars usually render the Greek work "parakletos" in this passage as Advocate, Helper, Comforter, or Counselor, but the clearest translation of the Greek is "Strengthener", one who will enable the disciples to live in the midst of their troubled world, as though the Kingdom of God has already arrived.

How desperately we need such a Strengthener in our day. Sometimes our feelings of Spiritual abandonment reflect the condition of our quivering earth. We keep hearing reports of people killing each other on the streets, in their homes, even in churches. Every time we make peace or overcome injustice, bigger issues emerge. "O Lord, please send such a Strengthener to us," we say.

Sometimes, the feeling that our Lord has left us get closer to home. We face menacing family problems, brick-wall people at work, ugly church squabbles, or intense pushes and pulls within ourselves.

Because Jesus knows how urgently we need help, He has prayed for a Strengthener, and the Strengthener has come. Holy Spirit returned to the disciples 3 days following Jesus' crucifixion in those days of resurrection joy, and later, Pentecost. That same Strengthener infuses our hearts day by day.

In John 14:16 Jesus promises that the Spirit will be with us forever. He wants us to see Holy Spirit as more than the director of Rescue 911. We can and do know God's presence when the path is smooth, and in life's mountain-top moments.

But these days, we often feel that pain and tragedy are choking the world, and our Savior has actually abandoned us. This is especially true when trouble attacks us personally in the form of raw suffering.

My family and I have lived through consecutive Morton Salt years (You know, "When it rains, it pours" _ of personal pain and tragedy. You surely don't need to hear all the detail – perhaps some of you have been enduring your own seasons of suffering. However, I am going to tell you one story.

On October 11 of last year, my wife's oncologist admitted me to Lafayette's Home Hospital immediately following a bone scan that showed prostate cancer had metastasized into eight bone areas in my body. The pain literally enslaved me. I couldn't move. Every so often, the nurses had to come in and shift my body, trying to help me find a comfortable position. In time, the only pain killer that worked was morphine but, the medics carefully rationed how much and how often. It would be hard to envision a more God-forsaken picture.

For a while death shadowed my room like an ominous cloud. First, I panicked. Then I worried about my family's future and then I started to mentally repeat healing Scripture passages. I kept saying them over and over to myself. One of them illuminated me: Romans 14:8 – "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:8) The Strengthener came alive within my tortured body in a special way, as though God was enabling me to release my death anxiety. I didn't have to possess my life any more, or know exactly what happens after the Strengthener enabled me to let go of my death to Christ Jesus. God's peace invaded my whole being and cancer changed from an enemy that kills the body, to a diseased stranger through which God gives strong and certain trust.

Sometime later, I was telling my doctor that I had received the grace to deal with death. To which he replied: "That will be a great help to you. Now, all you have to do is face life."

That is the main issue for most people, isn't it? It's immensely liberating when the strengthener enables someone to stare down death. But, for most of us, the urgent question is: Can we find a way to get in touch with the strengthener as we live? Jesus says that we can. His answer is simple and promising. It's in the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, beginning with verse 4. Jesus says: "Abide in me." He repeats the invitation several times, wanting his disciples to know how deeply He yearns for them to stay connected with Him. And He gives two practical ways of dwelling in Him. The first is prayer.

I - ABIDE IN HIM THROUGH PRAYER

- A. John 15:7, Jesus says: "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask for whatever you like and it will be done for you."

That passage sounds a little confusing. Surely Jesus isn't saying: Just telephone heaven, place your order and I'll deliver. Clarity comes when we focus on the first part of that passage, "If you abide in me and my words abide in youfor Jesus, prayer is companionship with god. He is saying, as you develop your friendship with God through me, then, you can ask for whatever you like and it will be done for you, because your friend Jesus will guide you into what you are to pray for, and how you are to pray.

1. Acts 1:14 illustrates this for us several weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, the Strengthener came to the disciples. The same Spirit that moved in the heart of Christ came to dwell in them. Not only did Holy Spirit enable them to overcome their despair, the strengthener also empowered them to speak of God's love in Christ with so much power that they were able to communicate with people who did not even speak their language.
2. But what does Acts 1:14 mean in the words: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer...?" How does anybody pray constantly? I think the author of the Book of Acts is telling us that, after Jesus left the disciples, they developed an attitude of prayer. They prayed as they worshipped, when they ate together, as they supported one another, and perhaps they also found ways to pray alone since Jesus had taught them the integrity that public prayer has when people pray in solitude. Acts 1:14 means to tell us that the disciples developed an outlook of prayer.

Katherine Dyckman and L. Patrick Carroll in their book, Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet, mirror their perspective when they write: "(Prayer) consists not in becoming more and more responsible in the fulfillment of a duty, but in becoming more and more faithful in a love relationship."

Prayer is a live-giving stream through which God keeps pouring the strengthener into us. How forlorn and shallow life can be without the depth of compassion and wisdom which

God gives in prayer. As someone once said: “Most of us Christians are like half-filled cups trying to overflow.”

But we have to begin somewhere. If you haven't been doing very much praying, don't waste your energy bashing yourself with guilt. Just begin to abide in Christ. Just start resting in the love and forgiveness of Christ-like God for you.

Begin wherever you can. Maybe some of you pray best in a group. You and your church can begin or sustain prayer groups that can help you to deepen and lengthen your attitude of prayer.

Some of you may prefer praying in quiet solitude banking your prayer life so that it overflows into your days and nights. In our retreat this afternoon, we're going to suggest some specific ways of praying that are practical and achievable for our fast-paced lives.

As we begin to develop an attitude of prayer, the Strengthening Spirit of Christ-Like God empowers us to conquer our feelings of abandonment.

And the strengthener actually leads us one step farther. God's Spirit uses our praying to build in us the power to discern ways in which we can minister to each other. John 15:5 Abide in me through prayer, Jesus says, and I will enable you to minister to others and yourselves through the gift of the Strengthener. Then, in verse 10, John 15, Jesus uses a different approach to connect prayer and loving each other. He says: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love.” In previous verses, Jesus has already summarized His commandments in one imperative – “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 3:34) So we can re-phrase this verse: “If you love one another as I have loved you, you will abide in my love.”

II – IF YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU WILL ABIDE IN MY LOVE.

It's a paradox that comes full circle when we develop an attitude of prayer; the Strengthener enables us to stay connected with Christ Jesus, through who we receive power to love each other as He loves us. And, in the very process of pouring the love of Christ into each other's lives, we connect with the Strengthener and abide in Christ.

Haven't you experienced the second part of the paradox? Haven't you gone out of your way to help another person with love that goes beyond duty and caught a glimpse of God's Spirit in the process?