

October 15, 2023

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Philippians 4:1-9



“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:6-7)

Things were looking grim for the Boston College Eagles football team. Trailing 45 to 41 with only six seconds left, and needing to go 63 yards for a touchdown, a loss to the Miami Hurricanes seemed just about certain. But then, in what would become an iconic moment in college football history, BC quarterback Doug Flutie launched a “Hail Mary” pass, heaving the ball through 30mph winds, connecting with his receiver Gerard Phelan, who snatched the ball out of the air and scampered into the end zone for a most improbable BC victory.

In this sermon, I’d like to talk about Hail Mary prayers—not in the pious, Catholic sense (“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...”) but in the, perhaps somewhat less pious, football sense: prayers lofted out of desperation when time is running out, prayers thrown up to heaven as a kind of last-ditch effort to get something good out of a less-than-great situation.

For example, a Hail Mary prayer in the football sense is the kind of prayer I launch towards God when I oversleep on a Monday morning, rush to BC to teach my morning class, and as I’m climbing the stairs to my classroom, I mentally mutter “Oh God, let this class go well.” Or, a Hail Mary prayer in the football sense is when you roll out of bed and you’re groggy with sleep, and your kids are sick and you’re out of coffee, and you can just feel “today’s gonna be a bumpy ride,” and then as the dog starts barking, you eek out “Oh God, let me survive this day.”

Now, this is where the analogy starts to break down, because God is not your average wide receiver, and the “success” of Hail Mary prayers like these is certainly far greater than Hail Mary passes in the National Football League. But I want us to compare this model of prayer, this Hail Mary-style, desperate heave up to heaven kind of one-line prayer request, a launching of wishes and words often made under stress, worry, and anxiety, I want to compare that kind of prayer with the style of prayer—and the kind of mindset—advocated by Paul in our reading from Philippians this morning.

What does Paul say? “Don’t worry about anything. In every situation, pray to God, supplicate (ask) God for what you need while remembering to give thanks to God.” I’d like to linger a minute on this “in everything.” “In everything”: when times are good and times are tough: pray. When your cabinets overflow and when they are

bare: pray. When your kids are jolly and when they are gloomy: pray. When you feel like praying and when you do not: pray.

This “in everything, pray...” is not only a systematic and comprehensive approach to prayer; it is a systematic and comprehensive approach to life. In other words, Paul is not just describing how to pray. He’s really describing how to live: a lifestyle that begins and ends with prayer, and features prayer all the way through. Praying in the morning, praying in the evening, praying when you burn your breakfast toast, praying when your child comes home crying, praying when you get a promotion, praying when you lose your job, praying after a really good chat with your best friend, praying when you feel despair over Israel, Palestine, and everything else on the evening news... “In everything, pray.” With thanksgiving, speak with God about your requests, your concerns, your supplications. And do so, Paul says, “in all things”—all the time. Not just Hail Mary, last-ditch-effort requests thrown up to God as I’m about to walk into class. It’s not that those don’t work, but that those stress-fueled prayers aren’t really conducive to the deeper kind of life that Paul is showing us how to build.

Because what is the outcome of praying in the systematic way Paul teaches? “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” In telling his readers to pray “in everything,” to pray in this kind of comprehensive way, Paul’s point is certainly not that God only hears “well-organized” prayers. Not at all: God hears all our prayers, and sometimes it’s the most desperate, last-ditch-effort prayers that produce the most amazing, out-of-the blue, miraculous responses. Those prayers are valuable and have their place. The Hail-Mary pass is, at times, a very useful play. But Paul’s point is that such prayers are not really conducive to a life characterized by profound peace, the peace that passes understanding. Paul wants us to pray always not as end in itself, but because praying “in everything,” a life of prayer, leads over time to a life of peace.

To switch metaphors: Paul is describing a process of steeping, like steeping a bag of tea. The longer you leave that pouch of potent tea leaves in the hot water, the more that water is going to transform in flavor. Similarly, the more we steep the potent pouch of prayer in the waters of our hearts, the more our hearts soak up the flavors emitted by God: rich aromas of peace...and not just peace, but the other “fruits of the Spirit” as well—patience, kindness, self-control, love, hope, and so on.

But how, practically, you might well ask, do we do this? How am I to pray all the time with so much else going on? A few suggestions:

- First, there's not really any wrong way to pray. As long as you're praying to God and not to Satan, you're on the right track. So don't worry about making a mistake. God already knows what's on your heart, so you don't have to get the words "right." The point is not delivering a perfect speech but just renewing your link with God—picking up the phone and dialing God's number, so to speak—in order to connect with Divine love and Divine power.

- Second, consider trying different kinds of prayer. I particularly benefit from contemplative prayer, but that kind of quiet, repetitive style doesn't suit everyone. So try a variety of styles and find what fits with your personal makeup. You might start with prayers in our Prayer Book, the Book of Common Prayer, but I'd encourage you to also move beyond that to pray in your own words.

- Third, you might wonder what kinds of prayer, what styles exist: what are my options? Come talk with me or Rev. Garrett. We'd be more than happy to chat with you about different kinds of prayer and what kinds might work best for you. Also, stop by Flint Hall immediately after this service for a special coffee-hour forum devoted to prayer, specifically "sticky situations" in prayer.

- Finally, for times in the day when you just have a very limited window or need to devote your attention to some other task, like driving or cooking, consider using a short prayer that you can repeat, like the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer is a very simple and ancient prayer, used as a devotional tool in the Orthodox Christian tradition. It doesn't require a lot of brain power, so I like to use it when, for example, I'm driving. Very simply, it goes like this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me." "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me." And you just keep repeating this line, silently in your mind, or quietly under your breath for as long as you want. Over time, this kind of repetitive, devotional prayer begins to soak into your heart, steeping it in the peaceful presence of God.

So, to conclude, when you're rushing into the board meeting, yes, throw up a Hail-Mary prayer; it can only help. But if we want hearts of peace, not worrying about anything, but guarded in heart and mind by an unearthly peace that passes understanding, then we would do well to progress beyond Hail Mary's. Instead, may we cultivate lives of prayer—prayer in the morning, in the evening, and as much as possible in-between—trusting that lives of deep prayer will in time lead to lives of profound peace. Amen.