

## **Homily – Our Prayers Unite Us**

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Each month here at St. Barnabas we have a Vestry, or governing board, meeting. And, in the middle of each Vestry meeting we spend thirty minutes on a spiritual exercise. Yes, our Vestry is responsible for the business of our organization, but we also try to be at the center of the spiritual life. We call our spiritual exercise, Mutual Invitation, and each month a different person leads. This past month I led, and I brought two prayers for Ukraine for us to reflect upon. In a moment I am going to share these two prayers with you, but first I want to look at this week's Gospel reading.

Today our reading from the Gospel according to Luke is what we usually call the story or parable of the Prodigal Son. I think most of us are familiar with this story about a father and his two sons. It is a story that has been told and retold so frequently that it has lost some of its punch, but it is still a story that has deep meaning. We can see ourselves in the main characters and depending where we are in our own life's journey, we have compassion, empathy and understanding with one or more of the characters. Perhaps it is the careless son who is only focused on his own pleasure. He takes his wealth, squanders it, and then has a turn of heart, repents, and returns on his knees to his father. Or perhaps you can relate to the father who grieves the loss of his son, and then rejoices and forgives when he returns. Or perhaps you can relate to the elder brother who was the dutiful son who did all the right things. Except when his brother returned, the elder son could not forgive. He was furious at both his brother and father, and he clung to his resentment of both. Which of the three are you today? Are you the younger son, the father, or are you the elder brother? Who are you today?

Now, we usually look at the differences among these three characters, but today I want to look at something that I think unites the three. I believe the three are united in prayer. I think they all spent time on bended knee lifting their pleas to God. They were united in talking with God, though they prayed for very different things. Imagine the prayers of the younger son, first so full of himself, and then so full of shame. He shifted to pray that his father would take him back, and shifted again to joy when he was received with open arms. Now imagine the prayers of the father as he prayed for his son's return, then thanked God for the return, and then prayed in bewilderment for the enraged elder son. And now imagine the prayers of the elder son as he was full of pride at his own goodness, and then shifted to prayers of rage. I believe the three characters in today's parable are joined in prayer, though they are praying for very different things. During the NCAA basketball tournament this reminds me of watching the fans of opposing teams toward the end of a close game. The basketball fans are all praying but for opposite outcomes. They too are united in

prayer, but praying for very different things. And, I am sure that this is happening with the invasion of Ukraine. What prayers are being said by the invading Russians? What prayers are being said by the Russian people? What prayers are being said by the people of Ukraine who have been thrust into the midst of uncertainty and horrible violence. And what are our own prayers about this viscous invasion?

Today, I want to share two prayers about Ukraine. I shared these prayers in our last Vestry meeting, and you have them as a bulletin insert or on your screen. The first prayer is an untitled prayer offered by an unnamed woman after evacuating from Ukraine. She has asked that her name be withheld. Her husband is a Ukrainian pastor, and she noted that his family is currently in occupied territory and she is unable to have contact with them. She wrote this prayer.\*

Father-God, may the attackers' fingers freeze; may they drop things; may they not see clearly; may their equipment malfunction; may they experience overwhelming hopelessness, enormous fatigue and a complete loss of any desire to fight; may their communication be broken; may there be confusion. Lead them to surrender. Stretch the kilometers before them into endless kilometers of nonadvancement. Remove their leadership and replace them with people who make decisions that reflect a fear of you.

Oh, God, infuse defenders with incredible surges of renewed alertness, strength, hope, courage. Inspire those who want to help. Show them specific, effective ideas. Move them swiftly and safely.

The worst is yet to come, Lord, if you do not stop it. But please, no peace where there is no peace. We ask for peace united with righteousness and truth.

God of all comfort, be physically present with all the mothers, fathers, grandparents and children who are hiding, hearing, smelling, enduring. Warm them; fill them with food; give them water, toilets, communication with their loved ones, the Gospel, hope in you.

We repent of making idols of political leaders and news outlets. Forgive us for wanting them to be our gods and saviors. Forgive us for being unreasonable, for not wanting to admit both the good and bad in all of our leaders. It is this spirit that leads us to dictators because we abandon responsibility and reason. We confess the seeds of war that live in our own hearts.

We humble our hearts, our bodies. We ask you for mercy. Thank you that you love mercy and have all power.

This is a very powerful prayer from the heart. The first time I read the prayer it sort of took my breath away. This unnamed Ukrainian woman doesn't pull any punches. Sometimes we are tempted to make our prayers to God sort of sweet and pious, but that is not what this woman does. This prayer is from a place of deep pain and even agony. Can you open your own heart to this prayer? I sort of can, but at the same time the prayer makes me squirm.

And here is a completely different prayer by Fr. Richard Rohr called "It Can't Be Carried Alone." You also have this in your bulletin insert or on your screen. Fr. Richard writes,

How can we not feel shock or rage at what is happening to the people of Ukraine—  
As we watch their suffering unfold in real time from an unfair distance?  
Who of us does not feel inept or powerless before such manifest evil? In this, at least, we are united. Our partisan divisions now appear small and trivial. Remember what we teach: both evil and goodness are, first of all, social phenomena. The Body of Christ is crucified and resurrected at the same time. May we stand faithfully inside both these mysteries (contemplation). In loving solidarity, we each bear what is ours to carry, the unjust weight of crucifixion, in expectant hope for God's transformation. May we be led to do what we can on any level (action) to create resurrection! The people of Ukraine have much to teach the world.

This is also a prayer from the heart, but it is a very different prayer from the first. It is not a prayer that is soft and sugary. There is pain, but it is not the pain of being in the midst of terror. It is pain from a distance. It is pain from a place where we don't know what action we can take, but we want to do something. It is a prayer that recognizes that contemplation must lead into action, and vice versa. This second prayer is a bit closer to the vantage point we have of the invasion. And, you may be like me, but while I feel convicted by this second prayer I also find it to be more recognizable than the first prayer. That said part of me still wants to take the first prayer and make it my own.

And there is a third prayer that is being lifted up to God about the invasion. This would be from the Russian invaders themselves. To be honest I did not search the

internet for a prayer from the invaders' perspective. I guess this means that in my own small way I am refusing to recognize the Christ that is within the invaders, though in truth, Christ is in all and around all, including the invaders. When I thought about it I imagined that the invading soldiers are like the elder brother in our Gospel reading. First they were filled with pride in what they think is patriotically doing the right thing for Russia. Then they are filled by anger and rage at those who are fighting back and defending themselves. There is probably a sense of fear along with a plea to God for protection. As I have already said, these invaders too have Christ in them, but their actions don't seem to be of Jesus. There are certainly a variety of different prayers being lifted up to God, but the invasion may lead to a second tragedy. This is the tragedy of those who push God away in the face of atrocities. This is when the prayers stop. This would be a second tragedy. So, I hope we are all united in prayer even if the prayers are at odds with one another.

Now, this next week I invite you to take these prayers for the people of Ukraine and craft your own prayer. Make sure it is a prayer that you can feel in your heart. I also invite you to contribute your money to Episcopal Relief and Development so that we can help care for the millions of Ukrainian refugees that have been fleeing the terror. ERD, Episcopal Relief and Development, has people on the ground in eastern Europe. ERD partners with local agencies, churches, and care organizations in the countries around Ukraine that have been welcoming and caring for those escaping the war. Two weeks ago in its monthly meeting, our Vestry approved three special fund raising campaigns here at St. Barnabas. The first is to raise money for the welcoming of Afghan refugees through a new local agency called SLO4Home. The second is to raise money for Ukrainian refugees through ERD. The third is a special Palm Sunday offering for the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the ongoing work they do with the Palestinians. Please prayerfully consider what you might give.

Christ is in all and around all. Christ is in the Afghani refugees, and the people of Ukraine. Christ is in the Russians, and I pray that they repent and turn back to ways that are of God. Let us be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus here in the South County and beyond. Let us lift up those things that are of Jesus and fight against those things that are the opposite of Jesus. Keep praying. In this way you are revealing the Christ that is already within you.

*\* This prayer was published in the the New York Times on Sunday, March 13, 2022*