

Date Preached	22-May-2022	Date Initiated	17-May-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Easter 6, Yr C

" The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to *listen eagerly* to what was said by Paul. "



I've been thinking a lot—more than usual—about prayer, of late. For one thing, there's just been so much to pray *about*: ¶episode after hideous episode of senseless, thuggish violence and cold-blooded, hate-soaked murder; ¶an unjustified, and unjustifiable, war in Europe; ¶what feels like a slow-motion, but inexorable, disintegration of social and political norms in this country that, only a few years ago, seemed beyond-question; ¶each week, another new report or prediction about the changing climate that sounds more dire than any that came before. More locally, there's been a noticeable increase in the number of folks we're praying for via our parish prayer list. This list waxes and wanes over time, of course, but as I ponder those names (and the stories behind them) each day, it feels like there's more need—more urgency—for God's healing and grace right now than at any time since I've been with you. And finally, there are some questions that I'm grappling with in my own life. I find myself praying about them again and again, as I seek to know Jesus' will and live His out love.

And this past week, I've also spent a good bit of time thinking about *one specific* prayer: the collect appointed for today,<sup>1</sup> for I found the more I read<sup>2</sup> it, the more circular—even somewhat impenetrable—it seemed. (If you'd like, you can turn to it on page two of the bulletin.) "O God," it reads, "you have prepared for those who **love you** such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts **such love towards you**, that we, **loving you** in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire." On first hearing, it's a beautiful, hopeful, even comforting prayer. But when you go back over it a second or third ... or seventh or eighth ... time, it starts sounding a little confused. "You know we **love** you, O God. **Help** us love you, so that **as** we love you ... ." If we *already* love God, why do we need *help* loving God? But if we *need help*, can our own love ever be *adequate*? The more this collect sounded like a riddle than a prayer, the more frustrated I became.

Therefore, I went back to the source. A little research revealed that this collect is an ancient prayer, originally written in Latin, that we inherited from the medieval Church. And in the Latin text, there is one crucial difference. The verb<sup>3</sup> it uses for our loving God is a cool, practical word that means to pick or pluck or *choose*: to choose the soup over the salad ... or the green shirt over the blue. But the word the Latin uses for the love God pours into our hearts<sup>4</sup> is *AMOR*: a warm, sensual word, from which we get AMOROUS and AMATEUR (that is, one who loves something purely

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<sup>1</sup> Our weekly collects tend not to get a lot of notice: They get prayed once at the beginning of our liturgy and then fade into the background. But they are the most 'common' of our prayers: common, in a horizontal (or contemporary) sense, because they're prayed, in same words and on the same day, in every parish that uses *The Book of Common Prayer*; and also common, in a vertical (or historical) sense, because so many of our collects have come down to us over centuries and centuries of faithful use by generations of our Christian forebears. And they deserve more attention than they often receive, because they help interpret the various lessons that they're paired with: calling out a certain theological theme or lifting up a particular hope-of-faith that we may profitably dwell on.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting choice of words for a preacher, I note. Perhaps I should have focused more on *praying* it than reading it!

<sup>3</sup> *I.e., deligere.*

<sup>4</sup> More precisely, the love we *pray* God pour into our hearts.

for its own sake). AMOR is the tender, emotional ... even passionate ... embrace of another. Knowing this distinction—between our coolly *choosing* God and God's warmly *embracing* us—the thrust of today's collect grew clearer:

O God, we have *chosen* you ... we have *selected* you. From all the many good things in our lives, we've *prioritized* you as being **among** the most important.

But we know this isn't your wish for us ... isn't how you long for us to love you, O Lord.

So, we pray, flood us with your love—your overflowing, spilling, splashing love—so that we can be the ALL-LOVE for you ↓ that you are for us. Amen.

To *chose* or *select* God is cerebral and clinical. We calculate the pluses and minuses of faith and then risk only as much as we think we can 'afford' to lose. The paralyzed man at the pool *chooses* Jesus when Jesus asks him whether he wants to be made well. The man doesn't say "I believe!" or even "Yes, I'm desperate; *please* heal me." Rather, he morosely recounts thirty-eight years of failure and frustration.<sup>5</sup> The man is willing to give Jesus a *chance*—to *choose* Him for the moment; but his heart isn't really in his brief encounter with the Christ. His healing is just a transaction ... a means to an end, not a matter of faith. And maybe that's why, a few verses after the end of today's lesson, the man reports Jesus to the religious authorities for having illegally healed him on the sabbath.

On the other hand, today we *also* hear the story of Lydia, the wealthy, independent, inquiring woman whom St Paul teaches at the river. So passionately ... so exuberantly ... so suddenly and messily and completely ... does she throw her heart open—and over—to **the** Jesus Paul tells her about, that she has herself baptized, on the spot; and not just herself, but also every member of her household.<sup>6</sup> For Lydia, Jesus isn't a mere solver of problems ... not some spiritual peddler to transact business with ... but the all-embracing, all-forgiving, all-loving Savior in Whom she can repose her entire life—and faith. Lydia makes a total don't-look-back, risk-everything commitment to Christ ... loving Him so deeply and passionately that she turns her entire life and livelihood to Him: inviting Him to flood her very being with His love and carry her wherever He will.

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There is relatively little we can say about prayer, definitively. Because Jesus prayed *and* taught us to pray, we know that prayer works. But since prayer is a practice of faith, we can't really know how or why. What we *do* know—and can *control*—however, is the posture of our prayer life: the attitude of our faith from which our prayers proceed.

On the one hand, we can *choose*: We can choose to believe that God cares; we can select God as the best available means to attain the outcomes we desire, for ourselves and for others. Choosing treats prayer like a transaction: I believe in you, O Lord, so, in return, will you please ... . And like the paralyzed man, we can bask briefly in God's grace, until some *other* priority beckons us.

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<sup>5</sup> I take nothing away from this man's suffering and dejection. For almost four decades now, his life has been miserable—and most especially for all the rejection he has experienced at the hands of others at the poolside. And, it is important to note, Jesus *does* heal—restore—him. The man is not outside the ambit of Jesus' love (no one is), and his faith is sufficient for him to be healed. In the context of healings, I am, however, consciously contrasting this man's behavior with those of many others whom Jesus heals in all four of the gospels.

<sup>6</sup> In the ancient world, it was common for a head of the household to ask (or require) all its members to take up the same religion she or he takes up.

On the other hand, we can *love*: We can throw open our lives and our hearts to God ... embrace Christ with every fiber of our being ... share every thought with Him—every hurt and every joy; every need and every dream; every emptiness and every fullness; every PLEASE and every THANK-YOU—and let Christ's love flood the entirety of our lives and carry us where He will. And like Lydia, we can invite Jesus to come and stay with us—to reside in our hearts; to center our beings—and pour His love into us without measure.

The choice is ours. But in the end, why would we *not* choose love?



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