

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 7.24.16

Scripture: Colossians 2:6-19

Luke 11:1-13

The public art and architecture of the cities of Central Europe struck me, and have stayed with me — as you've likely noticed. This is, what, the third sermon about my trip? For here's the thing: there's nuance to them. There's lament built into them, sculpted into them.

The Old Town Hall of Prague, bought from private ownership (a family home) in 1338, was built onto and expanded over the centuries — once in 1364 (now boasting the tallest tower in the city), again in 1458, again in 1652, and so on and so on even to this day. It was partially destroyed when the Nazis shot it up from armored vehicles, but it's been repaired, and now that's part of the art of it — a photo display of its history lines the walls up and down the stairway to the tower.

The Plague Column in Cesky Krumlov, erected beginning in 1714 to commemorate the plague that beset the city in 1680, was one of many like this we saw — one in Vienna, one in Prague, one in Budapest, one in Bratislava. Europe was devastated by the plague, and those who survived it felt some compulsion to make note of that.

The Shoes on the Danube, installed in 2004, is simple: sixty pairs of metal shoes set in concrete along the bank of the Danube in front of the House of Parliament. It commemorates the Hungarian Jewish victims of the killings committed by the Arrow Cross militiamen, the pro-German, anti-Semitic, national socialist party members of Hungary in 1944-1945. The killings usually took place en masse. Victims were lined up at the embankment, and shot into the Danube, execution-style.

Art and architecture that offer the chance to lament: they say history is written by the victors, but that didn't seem so clear on my trip, or else it seemed like even victors sometimes grieve.

And sometimes survivors celebrate and rebuild. There is an option to stoking resentment.

But, there was one memorial we came across. It was the exception to prove the rule — and I recognized that right away. Though the inscriptions on it were in Hungarian and in Hebrew, two inscrutable languages to me at least; though we came upon it from behind, a

slow reveal; and though it was quiet at the time (a hot day, in the middle of the day): I saw something about this one was different.

The eagle, maybe: an ugly thing, overwrought and oversized, descending dark and taloned from above. The columns maybe: obviously new but built to look crumbling, broken, like the “shabby-chic” nightstand you can buy new at HomeGoods. The standing angel below, maybe: too much of a contrast from the rest of the heavy display, this a flowing, though muscled, show of innocent strength. This one wasn’t simply remembering, honoring; and it certainly wasn’t grieving. This one was making a *statement*.

So was the counter-monument. Barbed wire waist-height blocked the way to the state-sponsored monument. On this makeshift fence hung old photos in Ziploc bags, faded letters wrapped in Saran Wrap, all to withstand the weather, all first-hand accounts of history, it seemed, documented as history unfolded.

What was this? Jesse did most of the deciphering.

Here’s what he figured out: the eagle represented Nazi Germany, a cuff around its right leg reading, “1944,” the year the German Nazis came fully to occupy Hungary. The angel, Gabriel as it turns out, is Hungary, a cross and orb in his right hand safeguarding his innocence, and tablets inscribed with Hebrew laying beside him, a show of his loyalty to the Jews in his midst.

The problem is that this doesn’t represent how history actually happened. Nazi Germany didn’t invade innocent Hungary. Nazism found sympathy within Hungary, among Hungarians, and Nazi Germany was essentially invited into Hungary after the ideology had already taken hold. As to the 450,000 Hungarian Jews who died during that brief period: they were largely rounded up and deported by their fellow Hungarians, or simply shot into the Danube. So, no, Germany didn’t, like a bird of prey, invade Hungary; and Hungary, like an angel, wasn’t innocent. It wasn’t that simple.

History almost never is.

Maybe that’s why the Hungarian government installed the monument under the cover of darkness, one early Sunday morning (two years and two days ago in fact) while 100 police officers closed off so-called Liberty Square. The government did so even in conflict with itself: the highest court allowed it, the prime minister opposed it. The installation of it went ahead.

There's been a protest here every evening ever since — people hanging pictures of relatives they know to have been betrayed by fellow Hungarians, pages from journals written about the truth of the matter while it was happening.

Teach us to pray.

Last time I preached on this text, I likely delivered a well-crafted sermon full of useful bits of information.

I likely pointed out that it should come as no surprise to us that it would be the gospel writer of Luke to remember this exchange between Jesus and his disciples. This, after all, is the gospel of prayer. Luke's version of the gospel of Jesus Christ begins and ends and is shot through with prayer.

Consider: the whole assembly was at prayer when an angel of the Lord visited the High Priest Zechariah. The angel had come to deliver the news that he and his wife Elizabeth, though old, would have a son and they would name him John. The angel had come when the whole assembly was at prayer. And the reason this would all be so is because, according the angel, the Lord had heard Zechariah's prayer. And so it begins — the coming of the herald of the Messiah, according to Luke — because of prayer and at the time of prayer.

Consider: Jesus himself was at prayer when, following his baptism, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. The other two synoptic gospels remember this spirited event as happening at the baptism itself; it was the baptism by which or for which the Holy Spirit came down. But Luke remembers the baptism as an event already happened — past perfect, whereas he regards as crucial the moment when Jesus was at prayer. Baptism is off stage left; prayer is front and center, and the Holy Spirit coming is its fruit, its given bounty.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus according to Luke “withdrew to deserted places to pray,” went up mountains to pray, spent whole nights “in prayer to God” — most notably, of course, his final night.

As for his final words, these too were a prayer, from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And having said this, he breathed his last.

There is one chapter of his life, though, when Jesus didn't pray at all. It was the chapter when, having died and now been resurrected, he appeared to the disciples. Apparently, a resurrected being has little need of prayer, already full of the Holy Spirit.

But Luke picks right back up with prayer when he picks up with the apostles. In his second book, Acts of the Apostles, prayer is even more prominent than it was in his gospel. Averaging one to two mentions per chapter, prayer was to the early church as sunlight is to blooming flowers. The early church was fueled by prayer; the early church existed in and for and because of prayer. Indeed, this is the distinguishing of the church: it is a people at prayer. Together, alone, the church is a people at prayer.

So, of course, according to Luke: “Lord, teach us to pray,” they’d asked Jesus once when he had been praying in a certain place. And so he did teach them — the disciples — to pray. “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

That’s the how of it, plain and simple.

What he said is as instructive as what he *didn’t* say.

He didn’t say you have to find just the right place — that magical place where God is *really* present and so will *really* hear you. You don’t have to hike up a mountain, for example (though you may, as Jesus clearly did from time to time). You don’t have to erect an altar or a build a temple (though you can, as people have done from time immemorial and often to good effect). You can pray from right where you are, wherever you might find yourself whenever you’re given to prayer. It really doesn’t matter.

He didn’t say you have to set everything up just right. Candles lit (yes or no: do as you like), incense burning (that’s fine, or not: whatever), music to participate in (sure, if that’s what you want to go with: it certainly can bring people together). Pray as a group (hence all the first person *plural* language: give us *our* daily bread, forgive *us our* debts) but also on your own, just as Jesus had been doing. Truly, the means are open so long as they open to the end, *serve* the end, which is communion with God.

Finally, he didn’t say you have to say a lot of words. You don’t have to butter God up with praise to get him to pay attention to you (though presumably you may, as glorifying God [*doxa*] is a tradition deep and true). You don’t have to grovel and overly humble yourself — for you can take as granted the intimate love of God already given.

God is, after all, to be felt as father, as daddy even, *abba* indicating the intimate version of father, *abba* meaning “Daddy.”

This is problematic, of course, insofar as not everyone has positive associations with “Daddy.” But this is true about any earth-bound image given to us to imagine God: it’s going to be problematic for someone. And yet we need such images, or I do, anyway. In order to imagine God, and therefore to relate to God, I need images, *we* need images. And the more the better, I say—lest any one image be thought of as exclusive of all other images, lest God be understood in far too limited terms, and lest any one of us be excluded for the chosen image being ill-fit, alienating.

As for God as father: yes, for every one person who knows what a true father is, having been born of a father who was good and true, there is someone else for whom “father” is threatening or aloof, neglectful or gone altogether. So, God as Father is only as comforting as your father was to you, or as you can imagine past your *own* father for *God* your Father to be. Yes, God the father: just as the father you have or had, or just as the father you know yourself to have missed out on: this is the one whom you can approach now, or anytime for that matter—like, for example, at midnight when you’re suddenly in need of something because someone else needs it of you.

Bread: the stuff of life, the stuff that every culture the world over throughout all time has had some version of, the most basic sustenance for life there is. Bread, fish, egg: it’s a little misleading that the examples Jesus chose of why you might approach God in prayer are so concrete, so of *this* world.

Of course, on the one hand it might indicate that our most basic concerns are also God’s concerns for us. There is nothing too small to bring to God in prayer. There is no need too mundane, too basic, to name in prayer. The worries that abound amidst our very bodily existence: these are none too lowly for the though transcendent and eternal God to take to heart.

Certainly, Paul as he presented himself to the Colossians would agree with this. Responding, it seems, to a congregation that had become unmoored to their embodied existence, Paul told them all in essence to calm down, to let go the concerns that, born of some vague spiritualism, they’d become captive to—those fuzzy philosophies and empty deceptions.

They’d become preoccupied by what they ate (whether it would purify them, or toxify them), rather than focusing on whether everyone had enough to eat.

They'd been enticed to worship as if they were angels—worship in some way that is exclusive of the complications and compromises that inhere in human existence—rather than worship as the full human beings that they were. (We are none of us the angel Gabriel, let's remember; but we are beloved of God nonetheless.)

They'd become puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking (and can't you just hear them: "I eat only organic," "We play only non-competitive games," "I only see independent movies," "I read *The New Yorker* cover to cover every week") rather than holding fast to Christ who, by having become human—and therefore bound by time and history, place and limitation—joins with us in love for our likewise being bound by time and history, place and limitation.

To accept, then, these boundaries, even to thrive within them while also holding out hope that what transcends might also break in to guide us, to redeem history, and to liberate all that is that everywhere, for all time like might to abound: this is what Paul aims for the church to attain—both the church in Colossus and the church the world over.

But, even given God's concern for our most basic concerns, we shouldn't mistake Jesus' using these concrete examples to speak to the dynamics revealed in prayer as actual promised fruits of prayer. Prayer is about God's gracious giving to us, but if I pray for an egg, I won't magically get an egg. Prayer is about God's presence and God's fulfilling promise, but if I pray really fervently for an egg, I still won't magically get an egg. Prayer is about our receiving of God's good gifts, but if I persist in praying for a fish, I won't open my eyes to find, suddenly, in my hand a fish. In prayer, I won't get money. In prayer, I won't get business success. In prayer, I won't get glory or favor or for my poison ivy to go away. (I had a bad case recently, my eyes swelling shut.) What I will get in prayer is the Holy Spirit

What I *do* get in prayer is the Holy Spirit—which is to say not a spirit of acrimony and self-righteousness but the Holy Spirit, not a spirit of resentment and vengeance but the Holy Spirit, not a spirit of cruelty or envy or violence but the Holy Spirit, the spirit of wisdom and gentleness, the spirit of patience and faithfulness, the spirit of justice and hope and a divine discontent.

What we *do* get in prayer is the Holy Spirit—God's gift of Godself to us for us already and always with us.

That's why Jesus said to his disciples (said to those then, and says to us now), as a loving adult would give to a hungry child not a snake but a fish, and as a loving adult would give to an asking child not a scorpion but an egg, "...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

This is the fruit of prayer: the Holy Spirit. This is the gift of prayer: the Holy Spirit--not control over the situation at hand, but the Holy Spirit; not mastery of the circumstances that otherwise thwart or frustrate, but the Holy Spirit; not willful, or magical, power over the state of things, but the presence and guidance and brooding protection of the Holy Spirit. When we pray, what we're sure to receive is the Holy Spirit.

But, of course! we might say—for the gospel of Luke is the gospel of the Holy Spirit. Just as is the case with prayer, this writer's two books are shot through with the Holy Spirit.

Of course!

All this I likely said last time I preached on this text—the "how" of to pray, and the "why" of to pray. And it was moving, I imagine, and eloquent, or at least probably quite long.

But then during the Homily of the People, Sally spoke. She said, in essence, that the disciples didn't say, "Teach us *how* to pray," and they certainly didn't say, "Teach us *why* to pray." They said, "Teach us to pray." Mind you, she wasn't correcting me, or at least it didn't feel that way. She was just raising up where her meditation had taken her.

The thing is, she was right. What's more, I'd just demonstrated her point. In searching for instructions, or justification, I'd demonstrated how it only hardly occurs to me simply to pray, it only hardly occurs to us all—as a society, as a race of beings—simply to pray.

Teach us to pray: this is to say, teach us this as an early response to all things in life, teach us this as a first response to fear or threats of crisis, as a first response to accomplishment and victory, as a first response to conflict and confusion. Teach us to pray.

I have a friend whose life has been pocked by deep heartbreak in the last few years. She's tried to outrun it, literally: she runs and runs, and then she bikes, and then she runs some more. And she's told me she'd like to start going to church again. It's been a long time since she's been there with any regularity, and she'd like to start that up again. But here's the thing: when she goes, she just sits and cries.

Teach us to pray.

My high school is roiling due to a sexual assault that the faculty and administration, and most specifically the school minister, responded to poorly, irresponsibly, perhaps even illegally. Facebook is on fire with conversation threads that never end, some of which devolve into accusation and acrimony. Amidst the back-and-forth some voices have arisen: “It happened to me.” “It happened to someone I know well.”

Teach us to pray.

Our society is weary and worried after a week of the Republican convention, after night in and night out the invocation of terrors and rumors of terrors whose sole solutions seems to be a classic one—imprison your opponent, scapegoat to make us all clean. It’s hard not to believe that those who spoke at the event and organized the event knew that the most compliant electorate is a frightened electorate, and that they have interest in our compliance.

Teach us to pray.

I don’t think our society is all that good at prayer. I don’t think we the people of these United States cultivate a cultural proclivity for something so calm and quiet as the yet subversive act of prayer. All protestations to the contrary—that we’re so religious a people, that we’re the most church-going country in the Western world—I don’t think we’re as faithful as we boast ourselves to be. These days, I think we’d be much more likely to erect a memorial that justifies an ideology than to build one that gives voice to the tumult of history with a balance of rejoicing and grieving, praise and lament.

Did you know there is only one memorial to slavery in the U.S.—in Philadelphia?

Did you know is no physical remembrance of where auction blocks might have dotted the landscape?

Did you know there are no memorials to mark lynching as an historical reality and a social force—though one is the conceptual phase thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Trail of Tears, which the Cherokee suffered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is well marked, but there is only one memorial to the genocide of the native peoples of America—and it’s in Moscow. Russia.

Teach us to pray.

When the woman’s son found his way into the gorilla enclosure at the zoo in Cleveland a few months ago, a situation that resulted in the killing of the gorilla, rage broke out. Why should the price for this terrible mother’s bad mothering? What was she doing while her four-

year-old wriggled away? She was probably texting. She was probably playing “Angry Birds.” A friend of mine wrote of it: “Leave the mother alone. We need less blaming. We need more grieving.” This was simply a terrible situation in which no outcome would have been a good outcome.

Teach us to pray.

I’ve complicated this ancient and timely request in the past. But it’s really quite simple.

Teach us to pray.

Thanks be to God.