

The North Star



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The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany

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THE NORTH STAR

All of us are theologians. A theologian is a person who engages in theology. And according to Merriam-Webster, theology is the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; especially the study of God and of God's relation to the world. You are a theologian. We are theologians.

For the 2018-2019 academic year, we have invited some theologians to reflect on a specific part of our practice and experience as we relate to God and God's world. The general and broad invitation is to reflect on prayer. As you may recall, a number of us wrote about incarnation last fall and resurrection this spring. As the staff gathered this past spring, we thought prayer to be a simple and beautiful topic for reflection for this year.

This fall we will discuss prayer as personal piety, and in the winter/spring of 2019 we will reflect on prayer as corporate witness.

Every two weeks, you will receive a new journal post from a member of the staff, clergy and/or auxiliary clergy in and around Epiphany. We hope these reflections will stir your journey with God, and give you pause in your daily life and work in this world to pray.

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PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

The Rev. Dr. Sharon Hiers

Our topic for this fall is “Prayer as Personal Piety” and each of us can take that small topic any direction we prefer.

Growing up Lutheran, I was marinated in Martin Luther’s teaching of solo Scriptura or scripture alone. There was no three legged stool, but only the word of God, the Holy Bible that lead us in our relationship with God and the scriptures alone were sufficient. Thus, I learned about prayer through scripture. And Luther loved Matthew 6:6 which reads: But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Perfect, I often thought. I do not have to pray in public, but can go into the safety of my room and pray to God and not worry who hears me. Becoming a priest may be the ultimate tease from God in response to my smug comfort of secret prayer.

Yet, prayer changes things. Specifically for me, prayer grounds me back to God in a way that matters far less about the words I say, and far more about showing up to receive a word from God. It brings me back to the word abiding that we also hear a lot about in scripture. John 15:9-11 reminds us of this: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

That’s what I believe prayer as personal piety really invites me/us into doing with God. Abiding in God’s love. It is far more the act of abiding than it is the type of praying we do when we open ourselves up to our piety around prayer.

Many of us know the seven types of prayers (Book of Common Prayer 856-857) which we likely use when we pray: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. And certainly I will confess that I pray more prayers of penitence and intercession with a smattering of thanksgivings, than any of the others. But I certainly do not sit down and make a plan for how I’m going to pray. Instead, I often just stop. Sit. Abide with God. Listen. Yes, and I say my prayers too. But what changes me most is simply being aware that God has been waiting all along for me to stop and respond to God’s tug on my life to slow down, to love like Jesus - both myself and others, and to respond to the work that God is already up to in this world.

Abide, my brothers and sisters. Abide with God. Feel God’s yearning for us to stop and be still and know.

The Rev. Dr. Sharon Hiers is our Senior Associate Rector. She has a long relationship with Epiphany as her church home before she returned three years ago to her current role. She likes prayer, people, incense, kayaking, beach time, and Jesus. A few passions include work with the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, nurturing our relationship with our companion diocese in Cape Coast, Ghana, and being present to others as they seek God or a deeper knowledge of God.



PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

Shereetha Jackson

When I was kid, I wanted to be a great warrior—to be a hero and fight for others. Like any hero in training, I practiced daily to prepare for my grand adventure to save the world. I armed myself with a mighty staff and used the trees in my backyard as my unsuspecting adversaries. This is where “Action Jackson” was born or at least my version—at the time I didn’t know *Action Jackson* was a film from 1988. (I thought I was being original.) Nevertheless, even at a young age I understood the significance of devotion.

Many days of my childhood were spent with friends from next door as they joined in—without hesitation—on imagination fueled outdoor battle royals. Our gatherings were far from liturgical but, we were committed to something greater than ourselves. We were a team of warriors that put everything we had into each daring encounter...at least, until the street lights turned on.

Still unbeknownst to us, our heroic endeavors would change. Sixth grade happened, then before we knew it we were in high school. Geometry and hormones were upon us and our childhood imaginings continued to retreat while we journeyed towards young adulthood. Yet, presently, in the throes of full on adult-ing and the continued search for spiritual clarity/fulfillment, I find that I am returning to the ways of my younger, uninhibited self by just simply showing up—wholly and consistently.

The more time I spend with the youth at Epiphany, the more I see each of them retreating from their younger selves. They’re transforming into fantastic young men and women. Fortunately, it isn’t lost on me that many of them are anxious to leave behind their childhood selves, even though this component is an imperative part of who they’ll become.

During their junior and senior high years, they’ll wrestle with and overcome hardships that at times, as adults, we can’t fully fathom. However, as a church, we continue to hold a sacred space for them through youth group and Sunday School formation. As a youth community, we fellowship and we play often—sometimes after the street lights turn on. Be that as it may, I don’t take for granted the trickling silence that falls over a group of talkative teenagers after the words “The Lord be with you” are spoken. This is part of our devotion; what unites us wherever we are, even if it’s on Pilgrimage in downtown Chicago or standing together in the middle of Jones Hall.

Each time we gather our commitment to prayer keeps us grounded, it keeps us connected. I hope each youth that passes through our program holds onto this no matter what stage of life they’re in.

Shereetha Jackson is our Youth Ministry Coordinator. Though she never officially gained the title of Action Jackson, her dream of being a warrior has manifested in other ways; such as, through her volunteer work for the Furniture Bank of Metro Atlanta & as a board member for the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, where she uses both platforms to combat systems of oppression. When she’s not taking on such a large endeavor, Shereetha can be found spending time with her dog Bo & posting fabulous photos of the Epiphany youth on their Instagram page @epiphanyyouthatl.





PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

The Rev. Barbara Ryder

Prayer has changed for me and changed me—maybe all my life, but certainly in the last year and a half. When I was so very ill, I found myself too sick and too scared to pray. Priest, or no priest, I couldn't even think of the words of the 23rd Psalm, my daily strengthening prayer. I could only lie in that hospital bed and heal and be healed. However, I absolutely knew, with certainty that others were praying for me, and that calmed me and greatly affected my healing. A great crowd...

Now, dealing with my grief over the death of my faithful beloved, I find myself again surrounded by caring family and friends who fill me with hope when the loss feels staggering, and help me in many ways to smile and laugh again. Prayer is a phone call, a note, a hug, an invitation that lets me know I am loved and not alone. And I find myself feeling very close to God and others at this time as I remember the Communion of Saints which was just increased by another dear soul. And I am in conversation with all of them in a very different way.

I've often tried to establish a time and place for my prayer life, only to find it breaks apart in no time. So I change—putting my prayer helps and lists in a place I see them first thing in the morning, knowing it's a work in progress and changing those prayer helps and lists as seems necessary.

There's a place in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Page 137) called Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families. There are four one page devotions: In the Morning, At Noon, In the Early Evening, and At the Close of the Day. If I stop and read those prayers during the day, it changes me and changes my day. I think it is important to keep all of these resources in mind and not beat myself up when the day goes by without accomplishing my goals.

And that is because I realize all prayer is not spoken prayer, or lists. I send a good many cards and messages to family and friends—for birthdays, anniversaries, those ill, facing obstacles or hurting. Those are prayers in whatever form they take. Believe me, I know from those previous experiences when I have been the recipient of those cards and messages.

An "attitude of gratitude" is my most important way of praying, gratitude for my blessings (not always easy or even possible) helps the clouds to break.

The Rev. Barbara Ryder has been a member of Epiphany since 2006, presiding at the Wednesday, healing service, filling in at Sunday services when needed and enjoying being in the congregation and reveling in her daughters' participation (Linda & Julie). She also enjoys reading, baseball, the beach (her favorite is whichever one she's on), and time with family. Barbara has a nursing background and was ordained a priest in 1998 when she was 60. And that took a LOT of prayer!

PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

Alex Sherrill

Prayer was never my strong suit. I often felt like I did not deserve to ask for help. I did not feel that I had done enough to earn help. I also felt that I was being selfish to ask for help when there were others with greater needs. I have been working on this and getting into more of a rhythm. It would start simple. When I was feeling stressed or anxious I would say to myself three times:



Christ come to me. Christ comfort me. Christ guide me.

To me it was comforting to have this easy to remember prayer to fall back on but as I said it something felt off. Then one day I realized I was trying to tell God what to do and that just did not feel right. So over time I worked on it and finally revised it to:

Come to Christ. Be comforted by Christ. Be counseled by Christ.

I liked this much better because of the triplet nature of it matching to the Holy Trinity of God, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit. I also liked that all three actions; come, comforted and counseled all start with a "c" just like Christ. Finally, this was an invitation to myself to accept the love God has for me and that I am deserving of it. I can ask God to help me without feeling ashamed or selfish. I am, like we all are, part of God's creation that God loves so much.

Another way I am working on my prayer life is with my family during dinner and evening prayers. It started out simply enough through prayers Penson, my son, brought home from pre-school. There were prayers for different seasons or events and we started collecting them. Anna, my wife, put them into a prayer box so that when we sat down to dinner we would take turns and pull out a prayer from the box to read. It was a simple way for us to add prayer to our daily lives. These prayers then turned into prayers said from the heart about daily events or prayers for others that are hurting. Lately they almost always include our new dogs, apparently, they need a lot of prayer. This has turned into a part of our meals that sometimes the kids will remind us that it is time for prayer.

The new addition I like the best is bedtime prayers with my children. I have not had them say one but I always like that the last words they hear from me as they drift off to sleep is my conversation with God. I always thank God for the day and events that happened during it. Then I thank God for the people in our lives and for our lives and allowing us to be a part of God's creation. Usually I will hear a sleepy voice remind me to not forget about the dogs, like I said they need a lot of prayer. Then I say prayers for others that need help and asking God to hold them close. Finally, I ask God that tonight's rest will rejuvenate our mind, body and soul to prepare us for another day in God's creation.

I realize that prayers don't have to be long or elaborate, they just need to be intentional. Prayers can start at any time and you are never too late to start. Prayer is also a way to remind yourself of the way God works within you and how you can work for God in the ways you interact with others and the world around you. So start simple and grow into a life in, with and for Christ.

Alex Sherrill is a seminarian in the Candler School of Theology, in his 2nd year of a 3-year MDIV program. He is a postulant for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Atlanta. His sending parish is St. Luke's downtown. He wife Anna and 2 children, Penson 7 and Avery 3, are enjoying worshiping and learning alongside the parishioners of Epiphany. When not studying or spending time at Epiphany Alex loves being with his family and watching his children grow. Before starting seminary Alex was in the field or residential construction for 16 years and enjoys working with his hands to diagnose problems and making the repairs.

LOVING KINDNESS

The Rev. Bobbi Patterson

Loving kindness often slips through my fingers like a slippery syrup. I want to be caring toward others, but often enough I do not feel like being generous. I can't pretend I like everybody. I don't. Faking love for others seems to miss the point. I turn to prayer, specifically a contemplative practice of loving kindness. The practice existed in early Christian communities who prayed for generosity of heart in the deserts of Egypt, in and around Jerusalem, across small cities in Syria and further to the east. Before explicit Christian forms of this prayer, Buddhist monks practiced a similar form of loving kindness meditation designed to foster kindness to ourselves and others. Some scholars think these ideas travelled across east to west and back to east trade routes. Humans need encouragement; we need practices that help us learn to love self and others without syrupy or faked feelings.



This prayer practice begins by inviting us to pay closer attention to who, what, or how we relate to others. We begin the prayer by offering loving kindness to ourselves. Some days, this feels uncomfortable for me. I'm better at focusing on my faults. But the practice is about remembering a more balanced and realistic picture of myself. So I try to bring to mind my gifts and caring attitudes and acts. To start the prayer, I calm my mind by focusing on my breath moving in and out. I think of the spaciousness of breathing as an opening to Christ's genuine delight in, well, me (each of us). Sit and breathe in the surety of that love. As my mind calms down and my breath steadies, I offer myself the traditional phrases of loving kindness: May I be safe; May I be happy; May I be healthy, May my life and work unfold with ease. I repeat these phrases as a prayer in and with the presence of Christ. I don't worry about working out what they mean. I just try to assume Christ's or Love's big "yes" to each phrase: Yes! May you be safe! Yes! May you be happy! And so on. The phrases are a container, a frame. They create space for Love to work in and with us. It's traditional and useful in this prayer to then expand out wishes to our neighbors and all living beings, sending them loving kindness.

When I pray this prayer - and it need not be for that long, even just a few rounds can settle me a bit more in Love - I discover that I notice or see myself and other people as if we matter, as if we have gifts. I can pause and focus my attention on the deep good in us all and creation, the deep Love that is God infusing our lives, all life, and sustaining it. Periodically, then, during the day, I check in and ask myself, where's your attention? When I'm talking with a colleague at work, or a child, or a pet, I try to really focus in on them - not the phone call I need to make or the report I need to write. It's at this point that I notice what a gift they are - not perfect, sometimes maddening - but a gift. They are born of and living in the loving kindness stream of God. With practice, some days, I can even offer loving kindness to someone that upsets me, frustrates or hurts me.

Loving kindness as a practice of tuning in to how Love attends and infuses our world. If we can join that prayerful attention, we can embrace Love in ourselves, our neighbors, and sometimes even our enemies. This is my prayer.

Bobbi's current scholarship focuses on questions of place and space in relation to cultural, social, and life systems. Her interests in lived religion in communities also draws on theories and practices of Christian and Buddhist contemplative studies. Bobbi's B.A. is from Smith College with a major in Religion. Her Masters of Divinity degree is from Harvard Divinity School, and her Ph.D. is from the Institute of Liberal Arts, an Interdisciplinary Studies Ph.D. from Emory University. She lives with her husband in Decatur, Georgia, and enjoys kayaking, swimming and hiking and has been attending services at Epiphany since 2006.

LOVING KINDNESS

Julie Ryder

Three years ago on July 29, a group of 9 singers from Epiphany was invited to travel to Helen, Georgia to perform as a choir in the creation of a music video for Zac Brown Band. I had been approached by the video producer regarding interest, so I recruited singers, transcribed the background vocals, rehearsed the choir and then joined with them in a pre-dawn journey to the Hardman Farm State Historic Site where the video was filmed. The scene upon our arrival was everything and more that you might expect: buses and trailers filled with personnel, equipment, "costumes," makeup, food, and instruments. After we were welcomed and visually assessed, we signed consents and then embarked on a hurry-up and wait routine that seemed to take hours. Finally, we were ushered into the 1870's farmhouse where all the action took place: we met Zac Brown and members of the band, the music video director, and all the audio, light, and production crew; we did a sound check; we were given direction and we rehearsed. At last we began filming, and following 6-8 "takes," our task was complete; we were treated to lunch on the grounds before heading back to Epiphany.

The anticipation and excitement that surrounded the production were only eclipsed by the fact that we weren't allowed to disclose that we were even involved. When the music video was finally released a year later, it turned out to be a 2-part, 15-minute short film, and not only were we not in it, neither was Zac Brown! The only physical proof of our participation is a group photo taken that day. You might guess that prayer for a parish musician often comes through the many hymns, psalms and spiritual songs that I teach and rehearse weekly. The lyrics to the Zac Brown

song “Remedy” that we recorded are also prayerful and have remained with me since that time (Writers: Kevin R. Moore, Niko Moon, Wyatt Durette, Zac Brown):

We’re all in this world together
 Life’s a gift that we have to treasure
 Happiness, now that is the measure
 Love is the remedy

Everyone can be forgiven
 One love and one religion
 Open up your heart and listen
 Love is the remedy

Pray to be stronger and wiser
 And know you get what you give
 God is love one another
 Amen, amen, amen



Our adventure in 2015 parallels personal prayer - something that is unseen, unknown, and yet real - it happened, but not many know it; my prayer happens in the outward and visible result of musical practice both in solitude and with the many parishioners who rehearse with me each week.

Julie Ryder has been a parish musician for 31 years, and began here at Epiphany in 2012. She enjoys traveling, spending time with family and friends, and baseball. Currently she is the Executive Secretary for the Steering Committee that will bring the 2020 National Convention of the American Guild of Organists to Atlanta. She lives in Decatur with her wife, Terri (they were married at Epiphany in 2016!), and their furry children Cowboy, Ranger, and George.