

PRAY FOR ME

Philippians 1: 1-11

[Augsburg College Chapel, 10 September 2007]

- How could we ask for a more compelling beginning to our academic year than these remarkable words of prayer from Paul and Timothy to their fellow faithful in Philippi? I wish for all of us that we have communities of memory and faith whose prayers hold each of us and all of us in the embrace of such comfort and joy.
- I will say that, as a college president, I have a sense (and some evidence) that there are lots of people out there praying for me. I get letters and phone calls, and it is not unusual that some complainant might conclude a diatribe about some subject or the other with the kind reminder: “I’ll pray for you” or perhaps, “I’ll pray for your soul!” or perhaps...well, I think you get the point – these prayer offers are sometimes tinged with a bit of irony.
- I also get sincere prayers that sometimes make me wonder whether the world is about to end. Shortly after I commenced my tenure at Rockford College, one of my senior staff members, asked to offer the invocation at a major alumni gathering, put on his best Charlton Heston imitation and proceeded to call down the mercy of a benevolent God. “Awesome and all-righteous God, be with President Pribbenow in all the burdens of his office. Keep him healthy, keep him strong, give him wisdom, for the climb is steep, the obstacles many, the outlook not so good.” The sad thing is that he was right about the tasks ahead – I should have listened more carefully...
- So how do we learn to pray as Paul and Timothy pray – the sort of prayer that comforts us when we are lonely, that proclaims joy when we have reason to celebrate, that calls us to common action when the world needs us?
- I have learned much about prayer – especially as it relates to my work as an educator – from the writings of Parker Palmer. Palmer writes in *To Know as We are Known* that “prayer is that capacity to enter into that vast community of life in which self and other...are intricately intertwined.” Prayer then is about our common lives, our relatedness to God and to each other. At the same time, Palmer says, prayer “means opening myself to the fact that as I reach for the connecting center, the center is reaching for me...In prayer, I begin to realize that I not only know but am known.” Prayer is the attitude, the posture, the understanding that we cannot separate our knowing from being known. Too often – especially in our educational journeys – we are much too certain that it is all about knowing and not much about being known – too certain we can do it alone, too certain we can control all that happens in our lives. And that is a most precarious place to be, because it is in that false certainty that we often fail to recognize the love that is ours in being known!
- That is what Paul and Timothy knew as they prayed for their brothers and sisters at Philippi. Our prayers, Paul wrote, are that you will be known, that you will be loved, that you will recognize that you cannot control everything with your knowledge or your behavior. Our prayers are that you will love each other as God loves you in Jesus Christ. Now that is a great prayer!

- So how shall we pray for each other? I'm sure many of you have had a religion class along the way that taught you the various forms that prayer takes in different religious traditions. Allow me to say a few words about how our different sorts of prayer might help us to link knowing and being known, loving and being loved...
- We pray to confess our sins and ask forgiveness I'm drawn again and again to Joseph Sittler's thought that the entire Christian faith can be summed up in the liturgical formula, "Almighty God, from whom no secrets are hid." So how do we find the common and loving in the act of confessing? This seems to me such an important sort of prayer for our Augsburg community. Academic institutions and those of us who populate them are pretty sure of what we know and how important our knowledge is for other people. Prayers of confession challenge us to remember what we don't know, what we can't do without help, the mistakes we make and the need to be forgiven. This is really tough – it's hard to be humble, I don't like to admit that I don't know, I'm supposed to know. Sittler's point is that it is precisely in this lack of knowing that we are known – fully and genuinely known, like it or not – by the One who loves us, and once we accept that gift of faith, we will find the remarkable centering power of lifting up our sins, our lack of knowledge, our pride, and letting the gift of forgiveness free us to be loved, to keep on learning, to serve others who also need the embrace of forgiveness. As a community, may we learn to pray to confess our sins and ask forgiveness so that our common work might be accomplished.
- We pray to intercede Intercessory prayer has always seemed to me rather formulaic. We pray on behalf of those who are ill or dying, on behalf a community coming together after time away, on behalf of a world in need of love and compassion – all important themes but sometimes just a bit too abstract and generic. Abigail and I and the kids were drawn to our church home here in Minneapolis, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, by the ways in which the Prayers of the People, which are the usual form of intercessory prayer, were offered on one of the first times we visited. The person doing the prayers that Sunday used the intercessions to ask for help managing his email, to thank God for the children who cried throughout the church service and made folks uncomfortable, to ask for guidance for the man who has robbed the church building earlier in the week. Now, I thought, this is praying! Our prayers of intercession need to be prayers about the ordinary aspects of our lives because it is in the mundane and ordinary that we are known. We do a pretty good job of this sort of praying here in the chapel – you will hear names and issues in our prayers here that are central to our daily lives at Augsburg. But we could do a better job of this sort of praying if we figured out that our daily lives are prayers – it is in the mundane and ordinary moments of our lives that we connect what we know and do with what it means to be known and loved. God loves us even as we struggle to manage our email or text messages or whatever your favored form of cyber-communication!
- Finally, we pray to give thanks. You've heard me talk from this pulpit and elsewhere about how much joy I find in the daily work of the Augsburg community. I wish we could find the courage and strength and wisdom to give thanks for this college and its mission-based work as if we were praying without ceasing. Whatever it is that gets in the way of our joy – whether it's the Lutheran thing about not boasting or the possibility that we all don't feel the joy – our faithful duty, it seems to me, is to pray

with thanksgiving for the privilege to be in this community, for the gifts of education for service, for the company of witnesses and saints who have helped to build this college and keep it strong, for our neighbors who are our partners and teachers in the city, for the challenge to seek the truth so that we might be free. These prayers of thanksgiving are the fitting and meaningful ways in which we link what we know and do and believe – as insufficient as our own knowledge and practice and faith may be – to the gracious gift of being known, of being loved, of finding peace that passes all human understanding.

- Pray for me and I'll pray for you – to confess and ask forgiveness, to lift up the ordinary, to give thanks – and to join with the apostle Paul who prays “that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.” May we know as we are known. Thanks be to God. Amen.