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## *Ask, Pray, Love*

### **A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa The Seventh Sunday of Easter – Year C**

It has been a heartbreaking week. Our hearts break for those killed in Uvalde, and Buffalo; and for those who grieve for them. Our hearts break for those suffering from mental illness, including those whose mental distress leads to violence against others or themselves. Our hearts break, still, for the suffering we see in Ukraine. Our hearts break, for reasons known only to us.

We bring broken hearts to church today, and confusion, and anger. Perhaps a sense of helplessness, too. And so many questions.

One answer is to spring into action. That is a favorite response for can-do people when we feel helpless or uncertain. It makes us feel in control and distracts us from the pain we don't want to see or feel. And let us be clear: it *is always* time to do what is right. It is always time to right what we can. That *is* urgent!

And. It is also urgent that we pause. And weep. And feel—that we feel the shock and sadness and horror that accompany the violence we have seen. It is also urgent that we grieve with those who are grieving. It is also urgent that we pray.

It is not one or the other. We do not have to choose between prayer and action, or between caring for people or acting politically. They go together. Prayer inspires and guides our actions, and grounds them—and us—in God's love and in love for others.

Just ask Jesus! Jesus prays. A lot. He prays silently and aloud. Alone and with others. On mountains and in synagogues. In thanksgiving, blessing, and distress. In the Gospel of Luke, he prays before or after almost every significant moment or decision or act of ministry: his baptism, temptation, transfiguration. The beginning of his public ministry. Feeding the multitudes. He prays all night long before choosing his disciples. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross.

In John 17, we get to hear one of these prayers. At the end of the Last Supper, right before going out to the garden where he'll be betrayed and arrested, Jesus pours out his heart to God. In the first part of the prayer, which comes before today's lection, he prays that the Father will glorify him and be glorified through him. Yes, Jesus prays for himself! He knows that he matters to God, and that his self is the most important gift he has to give God and the world. He is worth, and needs, praying for.

Then, Jesus prays for the disciples at the table. Knowing that he is going to die, and knowing the world that they are going out into, he asks God to do for them what he'll no longer be able to do himself, in the flesh: to protect them, sanctify them, and make them one.

Finally, in the part of the prayer we heard today, Jesus prays for the disciples who are to come (which includes us). He asks that they may be one, too. That the love God has shown him may be in them, too, and he in them.

It is a profoundly human prayer, isn't it? It's the prayer of a parent sending a child off to kindergarten, or middle school, or college—or into marriage. The prayer of a spouse for a partner who is being deployed or going into surgery. It is the prayer of many a dying person for those they are leaving behind: *Protect them, bless them, hold them together in your love.*

Indeed, it is love, coupled with our humanity—or the limits of our own power—that compels us to pray like this. Jesus is showing us, yet again, how to be fully human. How to be real. How to love. And how to ask.

It is very humbling to ask, isn't it? To admit that we don't know, that we need help or guidance. It is humbling, and scary, to acknowledge that we cannot single-handedly protect or fix the people and things that matter to us. But it is also very courageous—and one of the most loving things we can do: to set aside pride and ask, pray, from the bottom of the heart for ourselves, for loved ones, for the needs of the world. *To entrust them, and our actions on behalf of them, to God.*

We care too much not to ask.

That is a phrase I picked up here, last Sunday, in a helpful and hopeful presentation on mental-health first aid and suicide intervention. It was led by parishioner Mary Chase Mize and based on a training called ASIST.<sup>[1]</sup> “You don't have to be an expert,” she said, in so many words, “in order to make a difference.” Then she told us something that we all can do, every day of our lives: Care. Pay attention. Pay attention to the people in your orbit; listen to the words and behaviors of loved ones; and if you are concerned about them, don't guess. Ask! Ask directly, “Are you feeling depressed? Are you lonely? Are you thinking about suicide?”

We may raise some objections when we hear that. *We could be wrong* (which would be a good thing!). Or, *It could be awkward*. *We could be out of our league*. *We could offend or annoy the other person*. *Wouldn't it be safer, for ourselves, at least, to just let it go? Or to let someone else handle it?*

The fact is that the honest, caring question is far more likely to be met with relief and hope than annoyance. It is an invitation that can be accepted, or declined. Either way, it shows the person who may be suffering that there is someone who sees and cares for them—and is offering to listen, or talk, or just be there.

On the rare occasion that someone does take offense, Mary Chase told us, just tell the truth: “I care too much about you not to ask. I love you enough to risk you getting mad at me.”

Asking someone if they are ok, or asking for help yourself, if you need it, can be a courageous act of love. And it is just one of many simple, daily things we can do to spread love and peace.

So we ask. We pray. Because Jesus does. And because we need to. Because we need a safe place to take our scariest feelings, and deepest sorrows and joys and longings. Because prayer connects us to others and to the needs of the world; it connects us in our humanity, and in God.

And we pray because the world needs people who pray—people whose actions are grounded in prayer; and who seek guidance and help when they need it. The world needs people who abide in God's peace and love, and become vessels of that peace and love for the healing of the world.

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[1] Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training. The Cathedral is hosting an ASIST training on September 23 – 24, 2022.