

TEXT: Acts 1:14; 1 Peter 5:7; John 17:1-11  
THEME: You are a manifestation of God  
SUBJECT: Prayer  
TITLE: Casting

Seventh Sunday in Easter  
24 May 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
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The theme connecting the readings appointed for our hearing today is prayer. After Easter, the disciples are gathered in an upper room “constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). The striking thing about this is men and women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, are praying **together** in the same space! Evidence Easter changes things.

John 17 is commonly called the high priestly prayer. Jesus “looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father’ . . . (John 17:1). In the Epistle reading we hear Peter command: “Cast all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you.”

I’ve worried about a few things in my life. Okay, if you ask Sherri, she will say I’ve worried about many things. My father worried about many things. Since he died, mom has lamented, “He worried about so many things that never happened.” I can hear dad say, “That is why they never happened, because I worried about them.”

The last time my parents, brothers and spouses, and Sherri and I were all together was the week before Thanksgiving last year. Mom and dad had been in an assisted living facility since April. One of the greater pleasures, especially for mom, was to go out to eat.

Glenn and I thought (okay, I insisted) Gary was meeting us at the assisted living facility. As the appointed hour drew closer, dad started worrying about where Gary was. We were going to be late. Dad wanted us to call Gary. I assured dad Gary would come. Finally, Gary called from the restaurant, wondering where we were. He thought we were meeting him there. Seems father knows best.

On Sunday, dad wanted us to join he and mom for brunch in the dining room of the assisted living facility. He had instructed the servers on what table he wanted and how he wanted it set up. While waiting in my parents room for the hour of brunch, dad worried about whether his wishes would be fulfilled. He and mom had a little back and forth about the competence of the staff. Sometimes good, sometimes not so good. Fortunately, all was well when we arrived.

For the last several years (by several I mean at least ten), dad fretted about funeral and burial arrangements. Mom and dad bought burial plots in a cemetery in Oxford, Maryland. Mom was born and raised in Oxford. Now that they were in Florida, being buried in Oxford became a source of concern. Dad bought insurance that covered the expense of a funeral in Florida, transportation to Maryland and burial in Oxford Cemetery.

The expense was covered. The arrangements for the funeral in the last church dad served, a church that built a large sanctuary in the last years of his ministry, was the worry. Things at the church changed after his retirement. The new order included praise band, large video screens upon which the sermon notes and accompanying photos were displayed, new choruses that repeated the same seven words eleven times. Gone were the old hymns mom knew by heart.

We discussed the issues every time I visited my parents in Florida. Only one thing remained consistent through all the changes made: after the graveside service we were to go to “The Crab Claw” in St. Michaels, Maryland. The crab served comes out of the water the day you dine. Gary, helpfully, pointed out to dad that he would need to time his death carefully since crab season runs from April 1 - December 15.

On the last afternoon of dad’s life, about ten hours before he died, he said to Gary, “I don’t want to think the universe conspires for my benefit, but it has eliminated all worries about a funeral.” Dad’s sense of humor surpassed his capacity for worrying. His humor is one of the things I will miss most.

These worries sound, are, trivial in light of the “plague that prowls in the darkness” (Psalm 91:6 Abbey Psalter translation). “Casting all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you,” as Peter commands, strikes me as naive in a pandemic. How does one cast anxiety anywhere, let alone on God? I don’t even know what that means. How can I get ahold of anxiety? Oh! I can hold onto anxiety with alacrity. Then why can’t I cast it away?

The word translated “cast” or “throw” is in the imperative: do this. The word appears only one other time in the New Testament. In Luke 19:35 the disciples throw/cast their cloaks on a colt as a saddle, a colt Jesus rides into Jerusalem. If only anxiety was as easy to cast off as a jacket.

Peter is merely echoing Jesus: Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, what you will wear. Is not life more than food? Consider the birds of the sky. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Why worry over clothing? Consider the lilies of the field. They are clothed by God. Why worry? Because I am not a bird nor a lily!

In the Gospel reading, we hear Jesus casting his care upon God. Jesus has fulfilled his reason for being in the world, which was to make God known. Now he is leaving and entrusts those who have received his word into the care of God: “Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Ultimately, anxiety is dissolved in the knowledge that God cares for us. “Our True Self, who we really are, is a reflection of God’s self within us,” says Bonnie Thurston, a New Testament scholar and author of *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer*. “Each of us is unique, a manifestation of God which could not exist if we didn’t.” Now that’s a mantra: I am a unique manifestation of God that would not exist if I didn’t exist! That is knowledge hard won.

Bonnie doesn’t claim to know *how* casting all your anxiety on God “works.” She does believe with all her heart, and by God’s grace she has received experiences in prayer that “proved” to her, that God is an active and living presence, a reality not only in her life, but in the lives of many, many people.

Bonnie is profoundly convinced that the lack of interiority, the inability to be still and know, is the most dangerous element of contemporary society and culture. We are entertaining ourselves to perdition. As Dale Allison put it, “Artificial noise has become an unholy liturgy that unites all in the aimless rush towards collective amnesia and banality, away from nature’s God and his self-imposed muteness of love.”

Prayer first of all consists in making ourselves present to God who is present to us. Prayer is more a matter of attention than it is of any particular thing we do or say. What we attend to matters. We can attend to the sources of our anxiety, leaving us in need of distractions or drink. Or we can enlarge our “interior space” through contemplative practices, attending to the God who cares for us.

The prayer my father taught me as a child echoes Jesus’ high priestly prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Does anyone any longer dare teach this prayer to children? It is a prayer of trust in the care of God, of casting one’s very life on God.

This prayer/poem of St Makarios of Egypt in the 4th century speaks to “attention.”

Well yes, we have a need to pray, though not so much a prayer that’s fixed to any habit of the body, nor to any public proclamation, nor tied to some particular custom of silence, and not necessarily fallen to our aching knees. Rather, we ought first to keep an attentive mind, leaning in expectantly, and waiting on the God until He comes visiting the soul, making mysterious entry via any manner of countless paths — the openings and varied senses of the soul. Just so, we should be silent when we ought, or, on occasion, raise a piercing cry, or bruise our knees on stone — whatever — so long as the mind is attached wholly to God’s approach. As the body, performing any demanding task, requires every member to join in fixed attention to the chore, so the soul demands such singleness of rapt pursuit, in loving movement to the Lord — undistracted, undeterred, but firm and watchful, expecting His arrival, even now.