

Informed Prayer, Prayerful Action

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Second Sunday in Lent

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Scripture

Ephesians 1:15-19

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

Sermon

Have you ever had this experience? Where something's been going on for a long time, but you weren't ever aware of it. And, when it does finally creep into your consciousness, you suddenly discover it's everywhere?! That happened to me recently with the discovery of the World Day of Prayer. I'd been somewhat aware of it years ago; some members of our Presbyterian Women's groups attended local worship services on the designated day, but I can't recollect hearing that anyone has gone to a service recently.

This year though, it has been coming at me from all sides. I've seen it referred to in Facebook posts, denominational worship sources, emails from stores selling religious books and church supplies. And do you know what that means? It means one needs to pay attention.

So here's what I've learned:

The World Day of Prayer is a worldwide ecumenical movement of Christian women of many traditions who come together to observe a common day of prayer and action on the first Friday in March. (They've been doing this since the late 19th century.) Each year a different country serves as the writers of the worship service, interpreting the Bible in their own context and lifting up issues of mission, justice and peace.

This year, the service was put together from the women of Taiwan. [1]

The liturgy that these women wrote for 2023 is based on these words of Paul to the church in Ephesus. The theme of "I have heard about your faith," recognizes and honors the stories of Taiwanese women whose faith has sustained and inspired them in various challenges and life struggles. They are "living out the hope to which Christ has called them" in several ways: by protecting the environment, by working against discrimination in the workplace. One story they share is of a daughter who steadfastly pursues an education despite her father's belief that this is only appropriate for a son. Another tells about a woman's painful past of verbal and sexual abuse, and the support of teachers and social workers that enabled her, Sister Daiken, to write and paint. Through her work, she is encouraging women who have suffered mental and physical abuses to defy negative labels and create new images – to discover the hope to which

God calls them. All these stories are of women who were not defeated by difficulties but rather empowered by God. They express gratitude for God’s presence, guidance and protection --- the immeasurable greatness of God’s power.

Even the artwork on the cover of the bulletin, designed by a young Presbyterian Taiwanese woman, reflects the spirit of the text. Here’s how the artist, Hui-Wen Hsaio, describes it: The women in the painting are sitting by a stream, praying silently and looking up in to the dark. Despite the uncertainty of the path ahead, they know that the salvation of Christ has come. The two birds, the Mikado pheasant – endemic to the mountainous regions of Taiwan, and the Black-faced Spoonbill, a migratory bird traveling thousands of miles each year to spend the winter in Taiwan, symbolize confidence and perseverance in times of difficulty. The (Butterfly) orchids are the pride of Taiwan, which has a worldwide reputation as the “Kingdom of Orchids,” and the green grass represents the Taiwanese as simple, confident, strong and under God’s care. [2]

The worship service which was developed and written by Taiwanese women during the days of peak covid is filled with beauty. It’s powerful, expressive, inspiring. And I’m looking forward to next year, when the liturgy will be formed from the faith experience of Christian women in Palestine. It is a privilege to hear of their faith in Jesus, to hear the voices of women as they share their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows, their opportunities and needs. And it is appropriate, I feel, on this Lord’s Day, to take up the invitation to pray, to pray with people throughout the globe, with words of encouragement and gratitude, particularly as circumstances challenge all of us to prayerful action.

Here's more of what I discovered:

The World Day of Prayer is celebrated in 170 countries and regions. All people are welcome to attend the service, whenever, wherever it is held. In worship, it’s affirmed that prayer and action are inseparable and have immeasurable influence in the world. The motto of World Day of Prayer is “Informed prayer and prayerful action.” It’s described this way on their website: “When we become informed in our prayer we open ourselves to the disturbing consequences that we are responsible for what we know and learn. Through informed prayer we seek out ways to act in solidarity with women in need.” [3]

There are certainly issues that are shared by people around the world that challenge us to prayerful action. There are challenges in our own community and our own nation that call us to listen deeply and compassionately, and to act with courage and with hope.

We’ve heard recently from members of our Dismantling Racism Team which was one of the sponsors of the VoteEquality exhibit held this past week here in Catonsville. That exhibit illustrated beautifully that there is much work to be done to insure equal rights for women in the United States. 97% of Americans say it is somewhat or very important for women to have equal rights with men in this country. And yet, the Equal Rights Amendment has not been made constitutional law. The proposed 28th amendment states: Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. [4]

The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg pointed out that, “Every constitution written since the end of World War II includes a provision that men and women are citizens of equal stature. Ours does not.”

Discrimination plays out in employment, Social Security, education. In the March 1st Business section of the Washington Post, a new analysis from Pew Research noted that the “long-standing pay disparity between the genders in the U.S. has barely improved in 20 years.” In

2022, women made only 82 cents for every dollar a man earns. It was 80 cents in 2002. For Black women, in 2022, it is 70 cents. For Hispanic women, 65 cents. [5]

Just last month, by the way, the Southern Baptist Convention expelled one of its biggest and most popular churches, Saddleback – founded by Rick Warren -- because they ordained women as pastors, preachers of the good news of Jesus Christ. I can certainly express my gratitude for the faithfulness, for the dedication and persistence of those who came before me in the Presbyterian Church, whose steadfastness to the gospel – whose prayerful action – has permitted me to stand here in the pulpit and share the good news.

In a moment, we are going to join together in prayer. The prayer that is printed in the bulletin is from Presbyterian Outlook, written by a member of our denomination based on the principles of the World Day of Prayer. We'll be joining our voices – sometimes out loud – there are parts printed in bold for the congregation to voice – and there will be a time where you may pray in silence, or, if you wish, you may speak aloud those prayers that are on your heart. Just do this in Pentecostal fashion – whisper them, speak them, all at the same time for a moment – God will hear.

So, we are invited to pray... for enemies, for friends, for families, for ourselves, for our world, for our work, for our church.

United with voices of faith, let our prayers be informed, and may our prayers lead us to action.

The sermon concludes with the following liturgy, written by Kyle Walker.

Today, we are called by Christian women throughout the world on this World Day of Prayer into informed prayer and prayerful action. We pray today “with, rather than for, our sisters of other races and nations [to enrich] our experience and release the power which must be ours if we are to accomplish [what we must do]” for peace and justice in our world.

Today, we are bold enough to pray with this community of women:

... For those we call and treat as enemies. May we look for your face in their lives and their story. Center their humanity once again in our hearts, even while we do not forsake accountability for those actions that may diminish your goodness.

... For those we call friends and those whose lives we revere. May we never take for granted the gift they are as a gift from you. We pray that we may be such a gift to the friendless and the lonely. May we give from that which we have experienced with such joy and delight for ourselves.

... For our chosen families. Amidst the diverse configurations of family among us, may we appreciate the gift of our family and the gift of others' families regardless of their structure and gender configuration.

... For ourselves and our bodies, where too seldom we see your image woven in us. May we value these vessels, caring for them at their best and as they ultimately falter and decline over time.

... For our minds, which bring creativity, ingenuity, and collaboration to the human community and to creation itself. We pray with thanks and with a continued calling. May we use our minds for the good you intend and never to harm nations, neighbors, or nature.

... For your world. May we confirm the rights within every people and nation, having the same divine image and righteous potential as our own. We pray for our ailing planet, that we may care for her as the beautiful and only home she is for all.

... For those who labor, that they may find flourishing and just compensation for their work. May we not look to grant the minimum compensation for those who work for us, but rather to grant that which gives them life, home, and health for themselves and those in their care. We pray for a country where living wages rather than minimum wages are the standard, and where family leave is viewed as an investment in better work and better collegiality in the workplace.

... For the Church. May the body of Christ be renewed in her strength and purpose. May we, as the body of Christ in this place, look not to fill empty seats so much as empty hearts. May we be reminded that only after your children no longer struggle for food, clothing, and shelter, can they turn toward nurturing a relationship with you and a love for the world. May we do our part to help people find their basic needs through community in all its forms.

Now hear us as we pray by name and circumstance for those closest to us...

Just as you have wrapped your arms around each circumstance spoken aloud, you have also embraced the unspoken and unknown needs among us and in the world. We acknowledge those private prayers known only in individual hearts and those perhaps beyond the reach of our knowledge in this moment. We pray for all these things in the name of our gracious Savior, joining our voices and praying the prayer Christ taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sources

- [1] World Day of Prayer USA, wdp-usa.org
- [2] “Worship Resources,” World Day of Prayer, wdp-usa.org/product-category/free-downloads/
- [3] World Day of Prayer USA, wdp-usa.org
- [4] VoteEquality, www.voteequality.us
- [5] Gregg, Aaron and Jacob Bogage, “Women’s pay was starting to catch up. Now progress has stopped.” *The Washington Post*, 1 March 2023, www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/03/01/women-pay-gap-pew

Image: Untitled painting by Hui-Wen Hsaio, commissioned by the World Day of Prayer USA Committee and the World Day of Prayer Committee of Taiwan.

