

# Pray Without Ceasing

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Third Presbyterian Church  
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John 17:1-11

Allow me first to share a message from Pati Primerano: "Please pass on my deep, deep gratitude to each and every member of the congregation who even just thought about Andrew and us this past week. Many, many people commented about the wonderfully close family that is our church, and the oh-so-obvious love and care that has surrounded us as a family over this last week. I will never, ever in a million years, be able to adequately express to all how very much the love and support has meant to us. God's greatest blessings on you all, and thanks from the bottom of my broken heart..."

Let me add to those words by saying thank you to the Moms' Group, the Deacons, the Chancel Choir, the entire staff and all of you for your prayers and actions over these days. They have meant a great deal to Pati, Bruno, Nicholas and Benjamin, and they will continue to mean a great deal.

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In a few moments we will recite words that have come to mean a great deal to me: "In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing." They come from the most recent theological statement of faith of the Presbyterian Church. What does that look like, and why and how does it matter? Pray without ceasing. Prayer is our connection to God and to one another, as we share our deepest, most heartfelt cares and concerns. Prayer is not magic, nor does it guarantee anything, but it is powerful, and it matters. And we are called to do it.

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing. Jesus does it this morning for his disciples. He prays to God for his followers, that they may know God, follow God, and continue the work that God has called Jesus to do. "I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours," Jesus prays. "...I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

We are called and given courage to pray. That makes us all experts at it. Whether in the silence of our hearts or aloud at a meeting, we are called and given courage. Words do not matter – prayer does.

What does that look like? My image this week comes from the news. Pope Francis visited the Middle East, Israel and Palestine. This was, as you can imagine, a highly choreographed trip, with significant security concerns. On his way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, he asked his motorcade to stop, and I presume that even though it was unplanned and unannounced and caused great anxiety, when a pope asks you to stop, you do.

He got out of the car and placed his hands on a wall, but not just any wall: the wall that has been built to separate Israel from the West Bank, a separation barrier that has been the primary source of heightened conflict and violence. The pope stopped the car, got out, placed his hand on the wall, and he prayed. He prayed a short, silent prayer. Then he got back in his car and proceeded to Bethlehem. Later he announced that he had invited Palestinian and Israeli leaders to come to the Vatican to talk.

***Pray without ceasing, leading to prayer in action.***

I read this story on an airplane, and inspired by it, I did something quite out of character. I tried it. I didn't stop the airplane, but given the luxury of an empty seat to my right, and lots of sleeping people around me so as not to draw too much attention to my Presbyterian self, I placed my hand on its wall, and I prayed. I prayed for many things in a very few seconds.

- I prayed for the Middle East, for a way out of what seems a violent and intractable situation. And I prayed for the Presbyterian Church as we debate this topic in a few weeks and decide how we will respond.
- I prayed for the Primerano family, as many of you have been doing. Facebook is not always a wonderful thing, but it is a good thing in this case as we prayed in the ways that we do and we shared those prayers with the family and with each other. I prayed for healing, for a way through the deep anguish and sorrow, for some sense of grace and endurance.
- On the same day that Andrew died a man shot and killed people, college students and others, in Santa Barbara, and I prayed for those victims, and their families, and for a nation all too unable to respond when this happens.

I do not know how this matters, my touching the wall and uttering brief and unformed prayers in the privacy of an airplane seat. But I believe it does. I believe it connects me with others, near and far, and my deeper hopes and dreams and fears, and it connects me with God's own heart and God's hopes and dreams and the places where God is calling me.

Courage to pray without ceasing. Anne Lamott writes that "This is a hard planet and we are a vulnerable species. And all I can do is pray: Help. Help us walk through this. Help us come

through... Even as I pray for help there will be tremendous compassion, mercy, generosity, companionship, and laughter.”

That is what we pray for. Becky and Jane dragged me to an educator’s conference in San Jose in January. It was a great experience, and I will remember one moment for a very long time. I attended a lunch for my seminary, and we were talking about the General Assembly, and I was speaking and asked people to keep me in prayer. I meant it, of course, but I am not sure exactly what I meant or how that request landed. I went to a seminary strong in many ways, but not necessarily in prayer. And yet someone at lunch got up and said “let’s do it.” Let’s pray for John right now. It was uncharacteristic, and it initially felt a little awkward, but they did it. They gathered around me and put their hands on my shoulders and offered a heartfelt prayer for me, not that I win, but for the effort. By the end there were tears streaming down my eyes and the eyes of many in the room.

Weeks later at another conference, we entered the sanctuary for evening worship and were given small pieces of paper. On those pieces of paper we included things we were concerned about in our own lives or the life of the world. We handed those pieces of paper in, and later, as they were read aloud, we proceeded to the front of the sanctuary to light a candle. It took a very long time, and the liturgical manager in me became a little nervous. But it became more and more powerful as deep pain was shared, for health, for job prospects in a shrinking church, for the ability to preach, or lead, or have hope. My own prayer was for our ability at Third Church to make a difference in the Rochester schools, a problem that feels so big and so complex.

Pray without ceasing. That is what we are called to do. That will look like many things, but it is what we are called to do, and I believe it makes a difference, to God, and to one another.

You needn’t place your hand on a wall, but do something, aloud or silently. Pray for yourself, your hurting places and your joyful places. Pray for the church and its ministry. Pray for those who hurt, and especially those who grieve and mourn. Pray for those broken and fearful places in the world – where gun violence breaks out, where systems and politicians fail and people, young and old, are left in every kind of harm’s way.

Pray and let your prayers turn into acts by writing a card or baking a casserole or sending a letter or going to a meeting or marching in a protest.

***Pray without ceasing to connect your spirit with God's spirit and the deep needs of the world.***

Hear this prayer from Maya Angelou: “Father, Mother, God,/Thank you for your presence/during the hard and mean days./For then we have you to lean upon./Thank you for your presence/during the bright and sunny days,/for then we can share that which we

have/with those who have less./And thank you for your presence during the Holy Days, /for then we are able/to celebrate you and our families/and our friends./For those who have no voice,/we ask you to speak./For those who feel unworthy,/we ask you to pour your love out/in waterfalls of tenderness./For those who live in pain,/we ask you to bathe them/in the river of your healing./For those who are lonely, we ask/you to keep them company./For those who are depressed,/ we ask you to shower upon them/the light of hope./Dear Creator, You, the borderless/ sea of substance,/ we ask you to give to all the/world that which we need most— Peace.”

Amen.