

Anna Burnham:

Good morning. And welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton psalter book, Psalm 16, found on page 8. Please remain masked and stand as you are able to read responsively by the whole verse.

Anna Burnham:

Preserve me, oh God, for in thee do I put my trust.

Congregation:

O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, Thou art my Lord; my goodness extendeth not to thee.

Anna Burnham:

For to the saints that are in the Earth, and to the excellent in whom is all my delight.

Congregation:

Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god; their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips.

Anna Burnham:

The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup. Thou maintainest my lot.

Congregation:

The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.

Anna Burnham:

I will bless the Lord who hath given me counsel. My reigns also instruct me in the night seasons.

Congregation:

I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Anna Burnham:

Therefore, my heart is glad and my glory rejoiceth. My flesh also shall rest in hope.

Congregation:

For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

Choir:

(Singing)

Ryan Jenkins:

A reading from Chapters on Prayer by Evagrius Ponticus, chapters 35 to 41. Prayer is an ascent of the spirit to God. Do you long to pray? Renounce all things. You then will become heir to all. First of all, pray to be purified from your passions. Secondly, pray to be delivered from ignorance. Thirdly, pray to be freed from all temptation and abandonment. In your prayer, seek only justice and the kingdom of God. That is to say, after virtue and true spiritual knowledge. Then all else will be given to you besides. It is a part of justice that you should pray not only for your own purification, but also for that of every man. In doing this, you will imitate the practice of the angels. Observe whether you truly stand before God in your prayer, or whether you are under some compulsion that drives you to seek recognition from men, striving in this manner after their approval. When indulged to this end, your protracted prayer is nothing better than a pretext where you pray along with the brethren or alone. Strive to make your prayer more than a mere habit. Make it a true inner experience.

In 10th grade, I won the Christian Testimony Award for the JV basketball team. Basically, I won this because I was the one who prayed before every game. I would pray not just for a win, but that we would play to the best of our ability, that no one would get hurt, and lastly, that if it was God's will, we would win. Those prayers came naturally to me. In the years since those prayers, for better or for worse, my relationship to prayer has gotten more complicated. Sure, I still maintain that basketball games are not beyond divine intervention, but otherwise I have a lot more questions about what it means to pray.

Does God really hear our prayers? Does God care what we pray for, or just that we do pray? Does God even care that we pray? If Jesus already gave us the words to pray, why would I try to make up my own? These are just a few questions that often come up for me. I read Evagrius in search of some answers about prayer. Evagrius was a monk who lived in the Egyptian desert in a late fourth century, giving up a life of power and prestige as an arch deacon in Constantinople. In Evagrius' Chapters on Prayer, he gives 153 short chapters that give a clue as to what prayer meant to him. We read only seven of these chapters together this morning.

While these chapters have more to offer than I can cover in this short reflection, I'll just highlight three lessons that stood out to me. One, we should seek justice in our prayer. Two, we should pray not just for ourselves, but for each other. And three, we should strive for prayer to be a true inner experience, not just a habit. To expand on these, we should be honest in prayer with both ourselves and with God. No matter if we're reciting something for the millionth time, or expressing something for the first time, we can bring to God our honest thoughts, concerns, and questions. And through this prayer, we should seek not just to transform ourselves, but to prepare ourselves to advance justice in the world.

In conclusion, prayer can be a lot of things. It can be a recitation of the words that Jesus gave. It can be a dialogue with God. It can be a chant, a song, or a meditation. Prayer can happen when we think about our friends and family and wish them well, and prayer can even be a short conversation with a stranger. Evagrius says that prayer is an ascent of the spirit to God. That's an expansive category. Rather than try

to define, label, or conform prayer to some ideal, I think that I'll instead open myself up for encounter with new ways to pray. And in the meantime, I'll keep practicing what I already know.

Let us pray. Dear God, help us to pray, not just for ourselves, but for one another. Help us to deepen our prayer lives through new forms we haven't yet learned, and old forms we haven't yet forgotten. Help us to pray, not just for internal change, but to use our prayer as nourishment as we seek external change, as well. In the name of the Father, and of the son, and the holy spirit, amen. And together, let us pray the words that Jesus taught us. 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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not in temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand as you are able, and together, let us sing to him Eternal Light Shine in My Heart, number 208 found in your Crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation:

(Singing)

Anna Burnham:

Go forth into the world in peace. May the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other. May the love of God's strengthen us in God's service today and every day. And together, let us say amen.