

Proper 14A- August 7, 2011

A wise person once illumined my understanding of prayer when he said this: "Pray as you can. Not as you can 't." I have never forgotten his words. It suggests to me that no two people pray the same way. Each of us brings a different temperament to prayer and each of us prays differently. In the last few years, however, these words, "Pray as you can, not as you can't" have taken on a different meaning for me. Lately I have come to interpret it this way – the way we pray corresponds to the cycles and rhythms of our lives. There may be some days or periods in my life or your life when all we can do is bless God or sometimes when all we can do is intercede to God for others or times when our prayers will be characterized by a spirit of seeking or discernment.

Consider the book of Psalms. For there we find that prayer covers all kinds of life circumstances. There we discover Psalms of praise, psalms of thanksgiving. There we find the prayer that asks God teach us God's ways or to show us the way. And there in the Psalms we find cries of lament asking God – begging God – to help us. And some of those are prayers of desperation plead with God to deliver and save us - "Out of the depths I cry to you." Prayer isn't one-dimensional. It covers all kinds of season of life and sometimes our prayer is the desperate prayer of *save us*.

That's Peter's prayer when he discovers he is sinking. The disciples are being tossed about by the wind and the waves on their boat in the midst of a storm. They are terrified. When Jesus walks toward them they think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus reassures them: "Do not be afraid. It is me." So, Peter says "If it really is you, let me walk toward you." So, Jesus extends the invitation. Come. Peter takes the risk, accepts the challenge keeping his eyes firmly on Jesus but the minute he averts his gaze toward Jesus, what happens? He begins to sink. "Lord, save me" he cries out. Jesus extends his hand to catch him and bring him safely into the boat. Then comes the gentle rebuke: "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

Peter prays the only prayer appropriate as he begins to sink, "Lord, save me." He cannot pray another way. And who among us has not prayed a similar

prayer? Who among us has not had that sinking feeling? Our community here at Bethlehem has experienced over the past several months a good deal of grief because several of our members have died. And when we grieve the death of those we dearly love, there is that feeling, much of the time that our lives are bottoming out and we cry "Lord, save us." Jesus extends his hand to draw us into God's loving and healing embrace, always ready and willing to save, restore, heal, forgive, make whole and draw us into the safety net of mercy and grace.

Don't you get that sinking feeling on a really bad day when everything just seems to go wrong? How about that experience of feeling overwhelmed by the stresses and strains of life? We all know that sinking feeling when all we can do is pray "Save us" or "Deliver us."

And Jesus does. He never ceases to love, to give, to forgive, to heal, to offer rest and to give grace and we often feel it the most in our greatest time of need. And it does not depend upon you or me having strong enough faith or needing to do the right thing in order to receive Jesus' healing and saving hand. Peter, at least as the story seems to suggest, was sinking because he had taken his focus away from Jesus, but this did not stop Jesus from saving him anyway. So for us. Jesus saves and loves and it does not depend upon how strong or good we need to be. Jesus saves always and hears the prayers of all who cry out to God and the desperate lament: "Lord, save us." Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

This prayer of the church is borne in the confidence that we are saved and that this is the God we know. We may say "save us," because Jesus already has. We are already loved and it is that confidence in God's love that draws us together week after week.

Once Peter was rescued and Jesus calmed the storms on the sea, we are told that the disciples gathered in the boat and they worshiped him. Truly they had witnessed the Son of God. For they had been saved, rescued, delivered. And that undergirds our worship, too. We worship in the belief that we are loved and that God has delivered us and that makes a big difference in how we live. And so in our worship we depend upon God's saving and healing touch

in the Word of scripture, in the prayers and witness of the community, and in the bread and wine shared around this table. We count on this healing touch and as a result we are changed and go forth taking the risk of living as disciples with our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus. Like Peter, we may take the risk of getting outside of the boat ... taking the risk of loving a neighbor, serving a person I need, loving an enemy, forgiving one who has hurt us, taking a stand for justice or advocating for someone who has been maligned or mistreated, discerning new call, or whatever it might be. Do we do such things perfectly? No. Will we often experience that sinking feeling? Sure. And the good news is that Jesus is always there to extend his saving hand and reassure with the words "Do not be afraid." Amen.