



*Absolutely
unmixed
attention
is prayer.*

—Simone Weil

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 5 JULY 2020

Invitation to Prayer

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.”

Gathering Prayer

You who are found
in the brilliance of creation,
the darkness of life’s valleys,
and the silence we keep:
help us to let go, for a time,
of routines and agendas
that determine so much about us.

Welcomed by your hospitable Spirit,
may our inhibitions and fears ease.
Embraced by your unconditional acceptance,
may we come home to our truest selves.
Knowing that we are loved,
may we live as people after your own heart.
Amen.

Scripture Readings—Song of Songs 2:8–13 and Matthew 11:16–19, 28–30

The lectionary readings for this week provide two contrasting responses to love's invitation, two different orientations of the heart, both of which are part of the human experience.

The Song of Songs speaks of requited love—the longed-for reunion of the lover with the beloved. The Gospel presents the lament of Jesus over unrequited love. He came that all might know God's love, but we sometimes ignore, resist or push away.

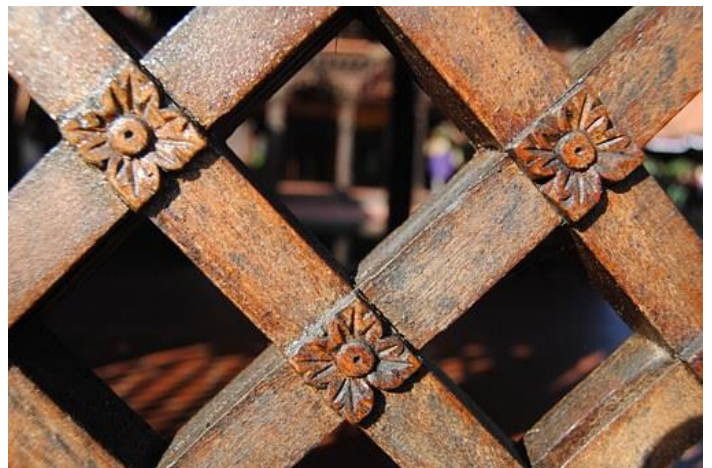
Read slowly each passage in turn, allowing for transition space between them. Notice the responses within you as you read. Where do you sense an uplift or draw? Where do you feel like pausing so you can soak up or try to understand what is being said? What, if anything, leaves you cold, confused, indifferent or distracted? Rather than judging or analysing, simply notice.

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.

Jesus said, “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; We wailed, and you did not mourn.’

“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

“...Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”



Going Deeper—*Gazing in the windows, looking through the lattice*

Spend a few moments pondering the photos of the different windows.

- Look at each one individually for a time. How does it reflect a season of your life?
- Which photo best symbolises your relationship with God at this time?



Bernard of Clairvaux was an abbot living in 12th century France who led a renewal movement in the Christian Church, in part, through his stirring sermons on love. Preaching to celibate priests and monks, Bernard wrote eighty-six sermons on the first two chapters of the Song of Songs hoping to encourage their acceptance of God's gracious gifts. Here is a portion from Sermon 74 in which he speaks of his own encounter with the Bridegroom / Word:

You ask then how I knew he [sic] was present, when his ways can in no way be traced? He is life and power, and as soon as he enters in, he awakens my slumbering soul; he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart, for before it was hard as stone, and diseased. So he has begun to pluck out and destroy, to build up and to plant, to water dry places and illuminate dark ones; to open what was closed and to warm what was cold; to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth, so that my soul may bless the Lord, and all that is within me may praise his holy name.

- How would you describe your experience of encountering the Beloved? Or are you in a time of yearning and waiting?
- What difference has this encounter made in your life? Or what is it like to wait just now?

Reflections in Solitude and Silent Meditation

You might read the Reflections in Solitude now followed by some moments away from thoughts and images, silently basking in God's embrace.

Prayers of Intercession

Like winter rose buds shivering among dried leaves, the harshness of this season has left us fragile and uncertain. The beauty and joy of former days has past and even the shyest hope now takes tremendous effort to hold. So, come to us, Gracious God. Envelope us with warming light and may your love shine on us as we pray.

We bring to mind those who are suffering and in pain at this time—those who are living with disease of the body, mind and spirit; those who await test results or are undergoing treatment; those who are grieving or lonely... We pray: *Let love shine, O God.*

We bring to mind our earthly home, your holy body that provides for and sustains us. Enable us to know deeply our connectedness and interdependence with all that is. Show us how to live with a greater harmony and simplicity... We pray: *Let love shine, O God.*

We bring to mind those who are on our hearts and minds this day...
We pray: *Let love shine, O God.*

Disciples' Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

Blessing

May we know ourselves as those who are loved
by the One who is humble and gentle in heart, who has given this time of rest for our souls.
As we rise and take up our routines and tasks once again,
let us live from the place of stillness and quiet within, loving as God has loved us.

The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Spirit be with us all.

Occasionally, Sean will enfold me in his arms while I am in the midst of preparing our evening meal. More often than not, my response in that moment is to pull away and ask, "What? What's happening?" Similarly, if Sean says, "I love you," out of the blue, I usually respond with, "Why are you saying that?"

Sean's gestures and my half-joking responses reveal differences in the culture of our families of origin and differences in personality, to be sure. We've been married long enough that they've become part of wallpaper of our relationship. This dynamic comes to mind as I reflect on the beckoning of the Beloved to rise and come away, to find rest for our souls with One who is gentle and humble of heart. Like the embrace that is offered when I am concentrating on a recipe or madly stirring sauce, the wooing of God is often a surprising interruption within our ordinary routines and carefully constructed lives.

To come away, then, often requires a turning aside. We must relinquish our preoccupations and investment in what has been and risk attending to what is emerging. Like my cooking, who we are and what we are doing is not necessarily "bad" or "wrong." But the Beloved's call does intend to escort us deeper into and more fully along the gracious, liberating way. Several months ago, I experienced a divine interruption that continues to unfold and give shape to my present. Some have heard this story before, at least in part, but I trust it bears repeating here.



It was a Tuesday afternoon. Avril spoke with me about her concern for John[♥] who was obviously not travelling well. By his own admission, he had not taken his medication and chose to "self-medicate" with an alcohol binge. When we found John, he was dozing on the steps of the church, covered with a dirty blanket.

Mindful that in a few hours, others would be arriving for Mary's Kitchen, we were hopeful that the police might be able to escort John to a safe place where he could spend the night and receive his needed injection. So, Avril rang the police and explained the situation and our time frame. We wished to avoid an emotional scene in front of the other members of the community and to preserve John's dignity, if possible.

Unfortunately, the police arrived at 5:20. (The community meal begins at 6:00.) Most of those who were gathering seemed intent to ignore the situation as John pleaded for help and one of the officers handcuffed and moved him towards the car further down on Chapel Street. But one of our friends helped the other two officers gather John's things into a plastic bag and tried to comfort John by saying, "It's okay... just go with them... they'll help you."

I found the scene emotional, the whole of it—John's wailing, our friend's kindness and reassurances and the community's response. I felt a pull to be closer to John so I walked down Chapel Street and called out his name. He turned and cried out. In hearing our exchange, I saw what can only be interpreted as anger flit across the face of the officer. Without any justification that I could see, he put his knee into the back of John's legs, bringing him to the ground before the open door. Then, just as quickly, he pulled John up by his handcuffed arms and ushered him into the back of the car.

Shortly after, this same officer returned to the hall to speak with Avril and me. His word of advice to us that night was: You shouldn't befriend "people like him." He left us with no doubt that he sees John and others like him as a perpetual problem for whom there is no hope and, if we insist on befriending them, we will be on our own because "we can't keep coming out here to help you."

[♥] Not his real name.

This experience may seem far from the expression of desire in the Song of Songs or the warm invitation to find rest for our weariness in the Gospel. However, through this incident, I clearly heard the voice of Love calling out, asking me to rise from where I was and come away to a new place of being.

To be honest, the officer's warning that night tapped into my own fear of the murky world of mental illness, poverty, drugs and alcohol. In part, I understood where he was coming from because I have held something of his perspective myself in the past. But confronted with the overt view that there is no hope for some people and that my/our response should be to abandon them emboldened and clarified God's love within me. This shattering experience opened my heart and is drawing me into new terrains full of light and air and freedom.



As Bernard of Clairvaux rightly, I think, preached, the Bridegroom / Word enters and "awakens... stirs... soothes... and pierces" our hearts. The Love that comes to embrace us is not the stuff of TV dramas and romance novels. Though warm and non-coercive, God's love intends transformation and conversion. It never leaves us quite the same. In this way, the spiritual experience may be personal, but the fruit is always born in and for community.

Our experiences of God coming near may not be as dramatic as the one I've shared, nor, thankfully, are they always as life-altering. But Love comes to us daily in a myriad of ways and, in our turning aside and conscious reception, we are given an abundance of grace and direction for the living.

The R. S. Thomas poem below was read during a Benedictus Zoom meditation and I chose to incorporate it into our prayer at Church Council that evening. It speaks of the invitation to see the brilliance of love shining in our midst and to turn aside. It seems a fitting poem to contemplate during this time of transition between what was and what will be.

The Bright Field by R. S. Thomas

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

What have been your experiences of the lit bush recently?

Where do you sense the brilliant shining of love in your midst?

How are these encounters giving shape to your heart for the future?