

July 24, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Hosea 1:2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)
Luke 11:1-13

Back in 1986, when I was 24 years old, I moved to Mobile, Alabama, for my first job out of college and grad school. I stayed for three and a half years before moving to Seattle. Over time I came to summarize the experience this way: I may have grown up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but I didn't live in the Deep South until I moved to Mobile.

I'm not talking about the heat and humidity, though that was surely worse. Unlike Baton Rouge, Mobile is located directly on the Gulf of Mexico, from which the air sucks moisture before swooping inland. Think about the weather here this week but, oh, about 50% worse. The air is thick, with heat and humidity and with so much else.

A lot of things made Mobile different, but two things really stood out: racism and Christian conservatism. Sadly, I think those two things are related. Baton Rouge was pretty far out, but Mobile was something else. White people frequently said and did things related to race and religion that took me aback, under the assumption that I would *of course* agree with them. It felt like it was always out there, in the air you breathed, and sometimes right in your face. Not everyone participated, but I don't remember a non-participant pushing back. It made me uncomfortable, but I didn't push back, either. For my 24-year-old self, pushing back felt impossible and pointless and even dangerous. And so I'm ashamed to say that I mostly kept my mouth closed and my head down.

There are many things I could say about the racism I observed in Mobile, but today I'll focus on Christian conservatism. And I'll hold myself back and tell you only one story about that. Even though I wouldn't exit the closet for another seven years, like any good lesbian I used to play recreational league softball. On the first day at my new job, my officemate recruited me to play on his wife's team. The season had just started, but they didn't have a regular pitcher, and that was my usual position. It was a kismet, a fortuitous happenstance, and the only thing I remember from that first day. I was very excited about playing again and hoped it would make new friends in this town where I knew no one.

About a week later, just before the start of my first game, something completely unexpected happened, during the pregame huddle. As I remember, it began as usual: the women gathered in a tight circle, reached their arms into the middle, and stacked their hands. They called me over, and I joined them, expecting a simple cheer. But that's not what happened. Instead, one of them *prayed*. I was mortified. To be quite clear, this was not a church-sponsored league or a church-sponsored team. I would soon learn that my team prayed before every game, and the other teams did, too. I don't remember exactly what was said during those prayers; I never could figure out exactly what they were praying for.

I didn't want to pray on a softball field. I didn't want to pray with them. Before every game, I would lurk off some distance away hoping they'd forget me. But they were so nice! Without fail, they would call me over, and over I would go. I abhorred it, and because agitated silence and stealth eye-rolling do not count as protest, I came to abhor myself. I was a grown-up woman, facing peer pressure from other grown women who held no power over me, and still I lacked the wherewithal even to just walk away.

I should clarify here that I was then a "lapsed Catholic." I had wandered away from Roman Catholicism as a teenager, but still yearned for a Christianity that I could embrace, one that I thought would embrace me back. But I didn't think it existed, and my life in Mobile hugely confirmed that misconception. The culture there carried a clamoring pressure to be not just a Christian, but to be a particular kind of Christian, one that to me didn't seem very Christian at all. My experiences there didn't make me that kind of Christians; instead those experiences hardened my heart against Christianity altogether. The result was only to complicate and delay my eventual return to church. That would come about a decade later.

That's a story from long, long ago, in a land far, far away ... and yet. When I checked the readings for today, the first thing I thought of was last month's Supreme Court decision allowing a public high school football coach to pray after games on bended knee at the 50-yard-line.¹ That case came not out of the Deep South but from Bremerton, Washington. It probably goes without saying that the coach who would do such a thing is almost certainly *not* the person I would want to lead my child in prayer. We were told that our uninterested teenagers can just walk away from their praying coach and their participating teammates. Based on my own experiences, that seems like an awful lot to expect.

And so, here we are. Yes, here *we* are, Christians, lumped in with all the other Christians, some of whom we seem to have very little in common with. Those Christians have recently been on a winning streak, legislatively and judicially. In one recent week, the Supreme Court handed them a triple win, with rulings on school funding, abortion, and school prayer. For some of us, those victories are troubling, for many reasons. For one thing, they come with unfortunate side-effects like this one: a hardening of hearts against *all* Christianity, including ours. I believe that the victories will turn out to be only temporary. But, rather ironically, I worry that the harm to Christianity will be much more lasting.

Even I sometimes wonder whether there is something I can call myself besides *Christian*. When I'm tempted to run away entirely, I try to remember to focus on the fundamentals. One of those fundamentals is the Lord's Prayer. The gospels fairly regularly depict Jesus as praying. In nearly every case, he does so privately. In today's gospel reading from Luke, Jesus returns from his private prayer, and a disciple says to him, "Lord, teach *us* to pray [emphasis added]."² Jesus's response is the framework of what will become the Lord's Prayer. Matthew's gospel has a similar story, with a prayer that is slightly longer.³ Let's hear Luke's version again:

Jesus said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”⁴

This Lord’s Prayer, with its five petitions, is prayer minimalism. It’s prayer minimalism pointing to life minimalism. Notice that the request is for *just enough* food: not too little, not too much, just right. And notice that the next request is for the complete relief of debt, either debt owed by us to God, or debt owed one to another. But the way, there is a relationship between these two kinds of debt. Just enough food and no debt—this comes immediately after a request for the arrival of a healed and reconciled world. Just enough food and no debt—for us, for everyone—indeed might be the very essence of a healed and reconciled world. Wrapping up the prayer is a request to avoid circumstances that lead to doubt about the adequacy of all this; this prevents the broken relationships with God and others that arise from such doubt.

By teaching his disciples how to pray, Jesus teaches us how to pray, and maybe he teaches us something more. I hear in these words a lesson about what true freedom really requires. Assured of the essentials, we have the freedom to move through life with joy and truth and love and faith, with the freedom to be agents of the further coming of God’s kingdom.

In my summary take on Jesus’ prayer in Luke, I skipped one petition: “hallowed be your name.” It’s the first petition, and therefore arguably the most important one: I wonder whether it might also the hardest one for us to get our heads around. It uses one of those churchy words—other than in “Halloween,” I can’t think of another time when we use the word *hallow*. The Greek word translated as *hallow* is also translated as *sanctify*. I feel this word more deeply when I contrast the opposites *sanctification* and *desecration*. One resource defines *to hallow* as to “consecrate things to God” or to “dedicate people to God.”⁵

That brings us to what we’re just about to do. Today we’re baptizing River James Cicero. Our church understands baptism as the rite of full initiation into the body of Christ. I think it’s also fair to say that we are dedicating River to God, sanctifying him, hallowing him. We’re setting him *apart*, in order to set him *within*. Notice that, as we practice this rite, baptism with water is followed by chrismation with oil. In both places, I will say River’s name. Ask every parent who has named a child, and ask every person who has discerned a call to change their own name: there is power in the naming. Naming is always both a setting apart and a setting within. It is an act of hallowing, of sanctification. The truth is, River was already hallowed by God. When we hold him up, we remember that. When we hold him up, we remember our own hallowing, and we remember God’s hallowing. That feels like a minimal, or maybe a humble, and certainly a healthy place to be.

I'll say this again more clearly: one remedy to the hardening hearts against Christianity is this: dismiss the fundamentalists, and return to the fundamentals. One fundamental is the Lord's Prayer. Another is baptism. We are a sanctified people who worship a sanctified God. Admittedly, our sanctification is always in the process of becoming. That makes it no less revelatory. We are Christians, yes, but our call is always to *follow Jesus*. To determine if we are doing that, we need only to test ourselves.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Sides With Coach Over Prayers at the 50-Yard Line," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2022, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/27/us/politics/supreme-court-coach-prayers.html#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Supreme%20Court%20ruled,three%20liberal%20members%20in%20dissent> (accessed July 24, 2022).

² Luke 11:1 NRSV.

³ Matthew 6:9-13.

⁴ Luke 11:2-4 NRSV.

⁵ "ἁγιαζῶ (hagiazō)," Strong's G37, from the lexicon of the online Blue Letter Bible, available at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g37/kjv/tr/0-1/> (accessed July 24, 2022).