

The North Star



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The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany

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THE NORTH STAR

All of us are theologians. A theologian is a person who engages in theology. And according to Merriam-Webster, theology is the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; especially the study of God and of God's relation to the world. You are a theologian. We are theologians.

For the 2018-2019 academic year, we have invited some theologians to reflect on a specific part of our practice and experience as we relate to God and God's world. The general and broad invitation is to reflect on prayer. As you may recall, a number of us wrote about incarnation last fall and resurrection this spring. As the staff gathered this past spring, we thought prayer to be a simple and beautiful topic for reflection for this year.

This fall we will discuss prayer as personal piety, and in the winter/spring of 2019 we will reflect on prayer as corporate witness.

Every two weeks, you will receive a new journal post from a member of the staff, clergy and/or auxiliary clergy in and around Epiphany. We hope these reflections will stir your journey with God, and give you pause in your daily life and work in this world to pray.

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PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

The Rev. Dr. Sharon Hiers

Our topic for this fall is “Prayer as Personal Piety” and each of us can take that small topic any direction we prefer.

Growing up Lutheran, I was marinated in Martin Luther’s teaching of solo Scriptura or scripture alone. There was no three legged stool, but only the word of God, the Holy Bible that lead us in our relationship with God and the scriptures alone were sufficient. Thus, I learned about prayer through scripture. And Luther loved Matthew 6:6 which reads: But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Perfect, I often thought. I do not have to pray in public, but can go into the safety of my room and pray to God and not worry who hears me. Becoming a priest may be the ultimate tease from God in response to my smug comfort of secret prayer.

Yet, prayer changes things. Specifically for me, prayer grounds me back to God in a way that matters far less about the words I say, and far more about showing up to receive a word from God. It brings me back to the word abiding that we also hear a lot about in scripture. John 15:9-11 reminds us of this: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

That’s what I believe prayer as personal piety really invites me/us into doing with God. Abiding in God’s love. It is far more the act of abiding than it is the type of praying we do when we open ourselves up to our piety around prayer.

Many of us know the seven types of prayers (Book of Common Prayer 856-857) which we likely use when we pray: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. And certainly I will confess that I pray more prayers of penitence and intercession with a smattering of thanksgivings, than any of the others. But I certainly do not sit down and make a plan for how I’m going to pray. Instead, I often just stop. Sit. Abide with God. Listen. Yes, and I say my prayers too. But what changes me most is simply being aware that God has been waiting all along for me to stop and respond to God’s tug on my life to slow down, to love like Jesus - both myself and others, and to respond to the work that God is already up to in this world.

Abide, my brothers and sisters. Abide with God. Feel God’s yearning for us to stop and be still and know.

The Rev. Dr. Sharon Hiers is our Senior Associate Rector. She has a long relationship with Epiphany as her church home before she returned three years ago to her current role. She likes prayer, people, incense, kayaking, beach time, and Jesus. A few passions include work with the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, nurturing our relationship with our companion diocese in Cape Coast, Ghana, and being present to others as they seek God or a deeper knowledge of God.



PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

Shereetha Jackson

When I was kid, I wanted to be a great warrior—to be a hero and fight for others. Like any hero in training, I practiced daily to prepare for my grand adventure to save the world. I armed myself with a mighty staff and used the trees in my backyard as my unsuspecting adversaries. This is where “Action Jackson” was born or at least my version—at the time I didn’t know *Action Jackson* was a film from 1988. (I thought I was being original.) Nevertheless, even at a young age I understood the significance of devotion.

Many days of my childhood were spent with friends from next door as they joined in—without hesitation—on imagination fueled outdoor battle royals. Our gatherings were far from liturgical but, we were committed to something greater than ourselves. We were a team of warriors that put everything we had into each daring encounter...at least, until the street lights turned on.

Still unbeknownst to us, our heroic endeavors would change. Sixth grade happened, then before we knew it we were in high school. Geometry and hormones were upon us and our childhood imaginings continued to retreat while we journeyed towards young adulthood. Yet, presently, in the throes of full on adult-ing and the continued search for spiritual clarity/fulfillment, I find that I am returning to the ways of my younger, uninhibited self by just simply showing up—wholly and consistently.

The more time I spend with the youth at Epiphany, the more I see each of them retreating from their younger selves. They’re transforming into fantastic young men and women. Fortunately, it isn’t lost on me that many of them are anxious to leave behind their childhood selves, even though this component is an imperative part of who they’ll become.

During their junior and senior high years, they’ll wrestle with and overcome hardships that at times, as adults, we can’t fully fathom. However, as a church, we continue to hold a sacred space for them through youth group and Sunday School formation. As a youth community, we fellowship and we play often—sometimes after the street lights turn on. Be that as it may, I don’t take for granted the trickling silence that falls over a group of talkative teenagers after the words “The Lord be with you” are spoken. This is part of our devotion; what unites us wherever we are, even if it’s on Pilgrimage in downtown Chicago or standing together in the middle of Jones Hall.

Each time we gather our commitment to prayer keeps us grounded, it keeps us connected. I hope each youth that passes through our program holds onto this no matter what stage of life they’re in.

Shereetha Jackson is our Youth Ministry Coordinator. Though she never officially gained the title of Action Jackson, her dream of being a warrior has manifested in other ways; such as, through her volunteer work for the Furniture Bank of Metro Atlanta & as a board member for the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, where she uses both platforms to combat systems of oppression. When she’s not taking on such a large endeavor, Shereetha can be found spending time with her dog Bo & posting fabulous photos of the Epiphany youth on their Instagram page @epiphanyyouthatl.





PRAYER AS PERSONAL PIETY

The Rev. Barbara Ryder

Prayer has changed for me and changed me—maybe all my life, but certainly in the last year and a half. When I was so very ill, I found myself too sick and too scared to pray. Priest, or no priest, I couldn't even think of the words of the 23rd Psalm, my daily strengthening prayer. I could only lie in that hospital bed and heal and be healed. However, I absolutely knew, with certainty that others were praying for me, and that calmed me and greatly affected my healing. A great crowd...

Now, dealing with my grief over the death of my faithful beloved, I find myself again surrounded by caring family and friends who fill me with hope when the loss feels staggering, and help me in many ways to smile and laugh again. Prayer is a phone call, a note, a hug, an invitation that lets me know I am loved and not alone. And I find myself feeling very close to God and others at this time as I remember the Communion of Saints which was just increased by another dear soul. And I am in conversation with all of them in a very different way.

I've often tried to establish a time and place for my prayer life, only to find it breaks apart in no time. So I change—putting my prayer helps and lists in a place I see them first thing in the morning, knowing it's a work in progress and changing those prayer helps and lists as seems necessary.

There's a place in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Page 137) called Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families. There are four one page devotions: In the Morning, At Noon, In the Early Evening, and At the Close of the Day. If I stop and read those prayers during the day, it changes me and changes my day. I think it is important to keep all of these resources in mind and not beat myself up when the day goes by without accomplishing my goals.

And that is because I realize all prayer is not spoken prayer, or lists. I send a good many cards and messages to family and friends—for birthdays, anniversaries, those ill, facing obstacles or hurting. Those are prayers in whatever form they take. Believe me, I know from those previous experiences when I have been the recipient of those cards and messages.

An "attitude of gratitude" is my most important way of praying, gratitude for my blessings (not always easy or even possible) helps the clouds to break.

The Rev. Barbara Ryder has been a member of Epiphany since 2006, presiding at the Wednesday, healing service, filling in at Sunday services when needed and enjoying being in the congregation and reveling in her daughters' participation (Linda & Julie). She also enjoys reading, baseball, the beach (her favorite is whichever one she's on), and time with family. Barbara has a nursing background and was ordained a priest in 1998 when she was 60. And that took a LOT of prayer!