

Grace Lutheran Church
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14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 29, 2021
“Tuning Our Hearts to God’s” (Mark 7:7, 15)
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

On Thursday evening, I heard a beautiful thing. It was Harold Schaefer tuning his guitar.

Tuning a guitar is not a matter of picking a few notes, cranking the tuning pegs up and down, and fidgeting until it at least doesn’t sound awful. Tuning, as Harold’s quick work reminded me, is a fine art. The secret lies in the physics of sound and in listening for what are called beats.

Sounds, of course, are wavelengths. The pitch of a given sound is determined by how long the total length is – the length of a guitar string, for example. But there’s more to it than that. Each wavelength oscillates at numerous modes according to a brilliant law of nature called the harmonic series.

When you play a string, or a note on a wind instrument, all these modes, the entire harmonic series for that length of string or air column, sound simultaneously. Tuning is a matter of aligning two different notes so that these partials in the harmonic series, which we call overtones, line up – so that they reinforce one another. That is why we tune by octaves and fifths, because these are the second and third partials in the overtone series, the first being the fundamental. When the waves line up perfectly, we hear pure sound. When they don’t align perfectly, the overtones work against each other and we hear what we call beats, which are wave lengths in conflict. [Harold demonstrates.]

Taking a cue from our readings today, I want to talk about prayer as the act of tuning our heart to God’s. We’ve spoken of prayer as an ongoing conversation with God. But in the broadest sense, prayer is how we center ourselves in Christ for our daily work. Our life each day in Christ, our daily orientation, begins, unfolds, and ends in prayer.

Jesus reminds us in the Gospel today that evil resides within the human heart. This is simply the nature of sin in a world where Satan is still on the loose. So we must always be vigilant in our daily orientation. We must always be re-tuning our heart to God’s, just as a guitar or any instrument must be re-tuned each time it’s played.

How are we to do this? Jesus just gave us a clue:

“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

These doctrines are what get in the way. One of the fundamental precepts of American life that has become doctrine is “taking care of number one” – meaning putting your own needs and concerns before others, as in “The only way you’re going to get ahead in this business is if you take care of number one.” Prayer then becomes an extension of this same thinking. “God, here is what I need. Now, take care of these things for me.” We place ourselves squarely in the moment and turn all our worldly cares into a long list of requests.

But of course specific prayers are usually not answered how or when we would like. It’s fine when people credit someone’s healing to the power of prayer. “He had to pull through—there were so many people praying for him!” But I always think, “What about the father of five who died of Covid alone in the hospital room? Weren’t all his family and friends praying for him to recover?” Or we could ask this week, “What of the 13 Marines killed in Afghanistan? Weren’t their families praying for them to get out of that dangerous situation alive?”

True prayer, the kind that tunes our hearts to God’s, is more like contemplation. We align ourselves with the wavelengths of God’s heart when we open ourselves to see and understand the world’s pain and stand in solidarity with the breadth and depth of human suffering. We begin in the present but open our hands toward the future. God’s great work is always one of movement toward the world, entering into it through his Son continually coming to all those who cry out. The goal of true prayer is the reconciliation of all things in God’s love.

So when we pray, we stand in solidarity with those in Afghanistan facing the terror of an uncertain future. When we pray, we stand in solidarity with those on the Gulf Coast who are facing the effects of another catastrophic hurricane. When we pray, we place ourselves in a relationship of cooperation with God. Out of our openness to the future the outlines of our discipleship take shape.

Today’s reading from James says, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” I would go him one better: Be hear-ers, then pray-ers, then do-ers. And very gradually, one string at a time, one heart at a time, we will find that our lives are overtones of God’s fundamental, and the world will slowly come into tune like that magnificent final chord of Mahler’s Third Symphony which seems to go on forever—when peace on earth will no longer be a wish on a Christmas card but a statement of the reality of the cosmos.

Amen.