

# SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | SERMON

St. Paul & the Redeemer | The Rev. Catherine Healy | May 29, 2022 | Acts 16:16-34 | John 17:20-26

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This week, I've been trying to remember my year in the fourth grade. I recall memorizing the state capitals, which went well for me, and trying to master long division, which emphatically did not. I remember riding the bus to the Robert Crown Center for our annual single day of sex ed—I had a million questions, all of which I was too embarrassed to ask. And I remember a lot of complicated social dynamics among the girls over who was allowed to carry the coveted Hello Kitty pencil case. (Having one made you cool, but it was a mistake to carry one if you lacked a certain baseline level of coolness; you would be teased for trying too hard.)

We definitely weren't doing active-shooter drills in my classroom. I would remember that.

Those worries of mine felt very large at the time. In retrospect, they seem like just-right-sized worries for a ten-year-old. After this week's massacre in Uvalde, Texas, I couldn't stop thinking about the worries that kids are facing now. An appropriately scaled problem for a fourth-grader is: *Will I be teased for carrying this pencil case?* Not: *Will I die in the line of duty today?*

As we learn the horrifying details of this crime and how it unfolded, we've had the predictable outpouring of "thoughts and prayers" from

lawmakers who oppose every meaningful effort to stanch the flow of our children's blood. I know I'm not the only person who finds that this phrase, which was once so innocent, now sets my teeth on edge. As Christian believers, we believe that prayer *does* something. It *means* something. Look at today's story of Paul and Silas<sup>1</sup>: Their prayers are strong enough to break every chain and shake open every prison door.

Our thoughts and prayers are some of the most powerful tools we have, and we see their power when we turn them into action. We cheapen them when we use them as a stock phrase. And the purpose of prayer is transformation—of ourselves, and ultimately, of the world. I think this is why the promise of "thoughts and prayers" rings so hollow after a preventable act of violence. Don't tell me that you're thinking and praying if your actions tell me that you just want everything to stay the same.

It's striking to me that our nation is having this conversation, again, so close to Memorial Day. In my experience, the people most repelled by violence are the ones who have been closest to it—including and especially combat veterans, who know what it's like to be shot at, and who understand the gravity of taking a human life. Those of us who have only known the world as

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<sup>1</sup> You can find Paul and Silas in the foyer by SPR's east (parking lot) doors, where they are immortalized in small stained-glass windows that face each other.

civilians can never truly understand, but we can honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice, understanding that putting your life on the line to protect others is an act of heroism. It's not something everybody is brave enough to do.

We also understand that joining the military means you deliberately sign up to put your life on the line. This should not be true of, say, the fourth grade.

On Memorial Day, we honor our fallen soldiers. Where's the bank holiday for our fallen teachers? Our fallen kids?

I won't use this time to go into the details of the Uvalde shooting, except to say that as a parent, I didn't think my worst nightmares could get any worse. Nor am I going to lay out any great ideas for more sensible gun control in this country. I have a feeling we're all on a similar page there—not because we all have the same political views, but because the vast, vast majority of people living in the U.S. support some basic gun reforms, including three-quarters of the members of the NRA.<sup>2</sup> Between a school shooter and a classroom full of young children, only the most extreme fringes of our society take the side of the school shooter.

What I want to do instead is talk about prayer: What we're called to do with it as Christians, and what it can do for us.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus spends the moments just before his arrest addressing his disciples.<sup>3</sup> He tells them to love one another, promises that the

Holy Spirit is coming—and then he prays for them. Out loud, where they can hear.

He knows that they're about to be reminded of the brutal injustice of the world, and that they will be tempted to give up. And so he prays, asking for God's blessing and showing them that in their love for him they are united with God and one another, that they are not alone and helpless, but instead share in the glory of a God who is more powerful than they can ever know. He tells them to pray, too, so that they won't forget.

His prayer affirms what is already true, and in so doing it motivates them to action. They will still face extraordinarily hard things, but through the prayer of Jesus, they will be empowered to go out in every direction and work for the healing of the world.

Prayer is not a shortcut to make God do the work that God has given to us. It's not a tool for changing policy; it's a tool for changing *us*. Especially in these ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, we are called to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to be the presence of God in the world.

Next week, when we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, we'll represent the Holy Spirit as a rising flame. That fire is already burning within all of us, and through the prayer of Jesus, we are promised that it will never go out. Our task is to keep the faith, keep working for healing and change, and to do everything we can to fan the flame.

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Agbafé, [The Vast Majority of Americans Support Universal Background Checks. Why Doesn't Congress?](#) *Harvard Political Review*.

<sup>3</sup> John 14-17 is known as the "Farewell Discourse."