

PENTECOST: ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT OF HOPE

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 4, 2005

Proper 18

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalms 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

The Power of Prayer, the Presence of God

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus promises his disciples "...when any two of you on earth agree about something you are praying for, my Father in heaven will do it for you. Whenever two or three of you come together in my name I am there with you" (Matthew 18:19b, 20, *CEV*). What a powerful promise! How very much like Jesus to assure his disciples that his presence is constantly with them (see Matthew 28:20b).

In the Matthew 18 pericope, Jesus invites his people into communal prayer and promises that such a gathering moves the heart of God to a response. Such corporate prayer moves believers away from self and ushers them to unite and agree as a community as they petition a holy God. What binds them together, however, is not merely their mutual human concerns, but rather their engagement of God's divine presence and their spiritual dependence on the "name" of Jesus to do for them that which he has promised.

Next week we mark the fourth anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. These events unified us as a people, as communities of faith, and as a human family as we bonded together offering prayers and seeking answers. It brought to the fore our collective sense of patriotism, our resolve to show our resilience in the face of suffering and loss, and for many, our latent wellspring of spirituality.

There *is* power in prayer. And as we gather together this week all over this great country to invoke the presence of God, we are reminded by the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, that we need to be imbued with love for our neighbors. "Love others as much as you love yourself" (13:9b, *CEV*). We need to be more than tolerant of those "others" who do not share our faith or our faces. "Love others" ... a simple statement, but a complex command. "No one who loves others will harm them..." (13:10a).

This seems to put such issues as justice and reconciliation at counterpoint. And that is why we so desperately need to pray. We need to pray for wisdom and guidance as we journey through the healing process. It may be difficult to sort out how we feel and why we feel the way we do. But "when we love others, we know that we belong to the truth,

and we feel at ease in the presence of God. But even if we don't feel at ease, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:19,20, *CEV*).

It is comforting to know that God *really* knows everything...he is an omniscient God. He's an omnipotent God who drives away our fears with the power of his love. He's also an omnipresent God who is there with us wherever and whenever we gather and call upon his name (Matthew 18:19,20).

We come before God humbled, grateful, fearful, wounded and in need of healing, a tangled ball of emotions knowing that God's "power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20b,21, *CEV*).

As we stand in God's presence, the apostle Paul reminds us: "Don't let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good" (Romans 12:21, *CEV*).

This week's Reflection was prepared by Dorette Saunders who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Editor in the Education Unit of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Hong Kong – with thanks to God for the publication of the *Little Children's Bible Story Book* and more titles in the Words of Wisdom series, and with prayers for God's blessing to guide the work on the Revised Chinese Union Version Bible, and with prayers for the development of Scriptures in alternative formats and for Bible work in Macau; Singapore – with prayers for the new "Friends of the Bible" program and the recruitment of 2,000 members, and with prayers for God's blessing on the re-launch of the *Faith Comes By Hearing* Program and that God will open new doors for Bible work in Brunei; Malaysia – with thanks to God that the government ban on the Iban Bible was lifted and for the launch and dedication of the Tagal Murut Bible, and with prayers that the Lord will speak mightily to the Tagal Murut people through this publication.

Activity Corner: "Prayers of Remembrance"

Supplies needed: Bible; 3 x 5 index cards (or half-sheets of writing paper); pens or pencils; crayons (for young children); bowl or basket.

When members of your household gather each day for family devotions, distribute index cards (or writing paper) and invite everyone to write a prayer petition of remembrance. Petitions could include prayers for your community, our nation, for those serving in the armed forces, for world peace, for nations experiencing conflict and/or civil strife, for those grieving the death of loved ones, for your family and friends, or individual concerns. A source for daily petitions could be local/national/international news events. Young children may wish to draw a picture to express their prayer petition.

Gather all the petitions into a bowl or basket. As you gather for prayer, read Psalm 136:1-3. Then pray each petition using a litany format: following each petition, invite everyone to respond together with the response from Psalm 136 (based on the translation

you use); i.e., GOD'S LOVE NEVER FAILS (*CEV*); GOD'S LOVE IS ETERNAL (*GNT*); GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER (*NRSV*); GOD'S MERCY ENDURETH FOREVER (*KJV*). Conclude your devotion time each day with the reading of Psalm 46. At the end of the reading, invite everyone to respond together: GOD IS EVER PRESENT AND HELPS US IN TIMES OF TROUBLE.