

PURPOSEFUL PRAYER/PRAYERFUL PURPOSE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Cathy Russell

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Frankincense comes from the resin of the very scraggly but hardy Boswellia tree, which grows in Africa and Asia. The bark of the tree is cut open releasing the resin which hardens into lumps called tears. These tears form the basis of the frankincense burned in houses of worship and homes around the world

You would rarely if ever see or smell frankincense in a United Church, since Reformed Churches largely abandoned incense along the way. But our Christian brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic and in some cases Anglican traditions, still burn incense as an accompaniment to prayer, a practice with roots in ancient Israel and other Near Eastern cultures. You'll remember that frankincense was one of the gifts brought by the Zoroastrian Magi to the Jewish boy Jesus and his mother.

Burning plants as part of spiritual ritual is also practiced by First Nations communities in the smudge ceremony- a ritual of purification. Tobacco, sage, sweetgrass or cedar, are burned by an authorized person. Sage, tobacco or cedar are burned in an abalone shell, sweetgrass in a hand held braid. The person conducting the smudge draws the smoke to their heart, over their head, up and down their arms. They then go to each person in the room wafting the smoke over them with an eagle feather. The recipient, after having removed any hats or glasses they might be wearing, uses their hands to pull the smoke over them, almost like you would if you were splashing your face with water. In fact, the

smoke serves much the same purpose as water would. It purifies the recipient- protecting and cleansing them from bad influences- making way for a good heart within the person and for harmony within the gathering.

The smudge is a powerful experience and the effects of the smudge last even after the ceremony itself has ended. In the same way you take the smell of an outdoor campfire with you even when you leave the fireside, you continue to smell the scent of the burned medicine in the room and on your person. Along with the smell of the medicine, the purpose of the medicine should linger in the gathering and in each person as well. The purposes of purification, of driving away the bad and inviting the good, the purpose of giving thanks, creating a good heart and a harmonious community remain after the smoke has gone. Each time you breathe in, you are reminded of the opening smudge and its purposes. Not only has the medicine permeated your nose and clothes, but its purifying and strengthening properties have permeated your mind and your heart as well.

Once the gathering has been smudged- the meeting, the pow-wow, healing circle, whatever it is can start in a good way. Having experienced the purposeful prayer, the prayerful purpose can now begin.

I'm not proposing that we adopt the burning of frankincense or of First Nations Medicines in our sanctuary or before Board Meetings. But I do think that these ceremonies have some wisdom to offer about how our prayers should linger in us and permeate us after they have been offered. Church meetings whether it's here in our congregation, at another church, or at Presbytery, Conference or General Council inevitably begin and end with prayer. And most often those prayers are offered in a good way- asking for God's guidance and wisdom, stating confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit, giving thanks for the life giving love of Christ.

But sometimes, those prayers, offered, so earnestly and reverently, don't seem to linger very long in the room. Sometimes there seems to be a disconnect between the prayers we offer and the purposes we engage, as though they were somehow two totally different and unrelated things. We ask for God's Wisdom, but we give the budget the last say. We express our confidence in the gifts of the Spirit, but we find that we have trouble really trusting one another. We give thanks for the life-giving love of Christ, but we aren't convinced that we should push ourselves to share it beyond our own doors. With or without the aid of burning incense or plants, our prayers should permeate our purposes-how we talk to one another, how we engage our community, how we plan for our future. Just as our prayers should be purposeful, our purposes should be prayerful.

In our gospel reading this morning, we hear Jesus at prayer. The four gospels mention Jesus at prayer many times. This particular occasion however, comes from John's account and takes place just prior to his betrayal by Judas Iscariot and his arrest by the authorities both secular and religious. And in this prayer we get a deep sense of how Jesus both prayed with purpose and purposed with prayer.

Jesus has this wonderful sense of intimacy with God, and the disciples in John's gospel. He refers to this intimacy regularly, going so far as to say that seeing him is the same as seeing God. The purpose of Jesus' prayer is to include the disciples in this intimacy and indeed, the believers who will come after them. *"that they may all be one.. As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* Jesus prays with and for a purpose- the same great purpose for which he has come all along- a blessed closeness between God and God's people as a life-giving witness to the world. As lengthy as this prayer is, it can be distilled to this purpose- *that all may be one as you and I are one.*

Jesus lives out this prayer in his earthly life and ministry- all his purposes are permeated by this prayer. The miracles he performs, the sermons he gives, the conversations he has, the suffering he endures, the resurrection he experiences. Jesus' very life death and resurrection are steeped in this prayer that each believer might be brought through him- his words and actions, into an intimate relationship with God that will transform their lives and through them, the world, forever. *That all may be one as you and I are one.*

At this point, I might typically make an argument that this should be our prayer as well. But in fact I don't have to do that since it so happens that this prayer *is* the motto of the United Church of Canada-*ut omnes unum sint*- that all may be One. Jesus' prayer *is* our prayer, which means that Jesus prayerful purpose is our prayerful purpose- the purpose of St. Matthew's and all United Church of Canada Congregations. *That all may be One.* There it is our prayerful purpose. This is a prayerful purpose that needs to be reclaimed, to be celebrated, to be embraced and lived out. *That all may be one* – just as God and Jesus are one. This is a prayerful purpose that calls us to be first and foremost about joining with Christ to share with the world God's power to transform us from the inside out. This is a prayerful purpose that needs to permeate our worship, and our work- all the ministry we have to offer- the worship, the meetings, the planning, the budgeting, the outreach.

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There are many occasions in our ministry when we are unsure of what to do, or afraid to try something in case it doesn't work out. Well maybe if we prayed with Jesus more, in that spirit of unity and intimacy- maybe if we really let those prayers steep inside us and permeate our being, our fears would be a lot less. *That all might be one*- not just the ones who agree with us, not just the ones who have the same background or social standing, not just the ones of the same political

persuasion, not just the ones with no bad habits, not just the ones of our own generation. Jesus prays that purpose today- that all might be One-in him, in God- for us and the world. And we are privileged to purpose his prayer. May the prayer of Christ permeate our purposes and transform our lives and our world. Let the prayerful purpose begin anew. Thanks be to God, Amen.