

May 7, 2020

Dear Apostles Friends,

Today is the National Day of Prayer. Unlike National Tuna Salad Sandwich Day and National Wear Your Socks Outside Your Pants Day, the National Day of Prayer is a real thing, established as United States law in 1952. Its origins go back to before there was such a thing as the United States. On July 20, 1775 the Continental Congress proclaimed a day of prayer, asking colonials to pray for King George and a “resumption of our just rights and privileges” as English subjects so that war with the mother country could be avoided. Some might say God answered that prayer, but not in the way the Continental Congress intended.

Presidents Washington and Adams each declared days of “prayer, humiliation, and fasting.” The custom was abandoned by Jefferson who, not surprisingly, thought prayer was something best left to each individual. And so it went for more than a century. National days of prayer were proclaimed or not, depending on what was happening in the country, the national mood, and the whims of the president then in office.

Having just endured World War II, then mired in a new war in Korea, America was a weary nation in 1952. A young Southern Baptist preacher named Billy Graham believed the national spirit could only be restored by turning to God. He championed the establishment of a National Day of Prayer which culminated in the bill signed by President Truman in 1952. The bill required the president to proclaim a National Day of Prayer every year on the day of his choosing. The law was amended in 1988 to designate the first Thursday in May as the annual National Day of Prayer.

There is no official National Day of Prayer organization and no official way to mark this event. Such a designation would probably violate the Constitutional separation of church and state. Individual faith communities are free to commemorate the day as they choose. This year, of course, almost all National Day of Prayer celebrations will be virtual. Our national United Church of Christ plans to conduct a 24-hour interfaith day of prayer on Facebook and Instagram. The event will feature prayers for health and wellness during the current COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of the UCC virtual event is “A Just World For Us All.”

Researching the history of the National Day of Prayer got me thinking about the different forms prayer can take and different practices that work as prayers in various faith traditions. One great example is the lighting of candles. Lighting a candle for a specific intention or petition has been a part of Christian tradition since the early church, and it is still a popular way to pray in many faith communities. Some interpretations hold that the smoke rising from the candle is the prayer itself going up to heaven. Other interpretations say that the candle represents the light of Christ, with us even during our darkest times.

Sometimes a candle is lit at an altar or shrine that is dedicated to Mary or another of the saints. The lighted candle represents a continuation of the prayer, even after the person who lit the candle has left the altar or shrine. It also represents the hope that Mary and the saints will carry the prayer on the person's behalf to Jesus.

Music, particularly singing, has often been described as a form of prayer. Music is linked to memory and emotion in the brain. It can speak a language that we intrinsically understand but lack the words to express. Some Native Americans consider dancing as a form of prayer for the same reasons. The sound of a single bell ringing or a single drum beating can be soul centering, can communicate an understanding of and hope for an intention that we lack the facility to describe. We don't have to vocalize it. God knows.

The idea of work as prayer is usually credited to Saint Benedict and is associated with a monastic form of life. A monk's life is work and prayer. In Saint Benedict's view, work was prayer and prayer was work. Saint Josemaria of Spain expanded on this idea much later when he articulated a description of work as prayer for everyone, not just monks. Doing each task well, and doing it for the glory and love of God, was a prayer, he taught.

Has anyone ever lit a candle for you? I've seldom felt more loved than when a friend said, "I lit a candle for you today." I experienced such a feeling of peace - like being carried on someone's shoulders, like being lifted with the smoke. Our dearest friends had a painting of Saint Vincent of Saragossa commissioned and blessed for us. He watches over our kitchen and dining room - the heart of our house. To commemorate the National Day of Prayer Laurie and I lit a candle and prayed for you today.



*Dear God, we light this candle for our faith family at Church of the Apostles. Please keep them safe and well during this pandemic. Strengthen and sustain them with gifts of resolve and good humor. Warm their hearts as this candle warms our home and never let them be separated from you. We ask especially for healing for your servant Sondra and for all our members experiencing ailments of mind or body. Let this candle represent these intentions and the silent prayers we hold deep in our hearts - prayers that you understand even though we lack the words to express them. Amen.*

*Saint Vincent, your life is an example of holy faith and love. Just as the smoke from this candle rises heavenward, we ask you to pray for us and to carry our petitions with you and lay them before our risen Savior. Amen.*