Praying for Others
1 Thessalonians 5: 15-24; Mt. 26:6-13;

Our first reading shows us how to replace the negative things around us with a positive spiritual presence that is invoked through prayer. St. Paul is writing to one of his churches. I read from First Thessalonians, chapter 5. " See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another. **16** Rejoice always, **17** pray without ceasing, **18** give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. **19** Live in the Spirit. hold fast to what is good; stand against evil. May the God of peace bless you. For God is faithful and God will bless you.

6 While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, **7** a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.
8 When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. **9** "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor."
10 Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. **11** The poor you will always have with you,[a] but you will not always have me.

You read the headlines, and we are facing some big issues. It is a little overwhelming. I want to remind you, on this last day of summer, to look forward to facing some big stuff in the fall and to pray. It is one of the most profound things we do for each other, bearing each other's burdens.

In our story, an anonymous woman comes and anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfumed oil, a symbolic preparation for burial, just before he enters Jerusalem, where he will die for trying to do the right thing. She is

giving him a spiritual blessing to bear him up as he does the most difficult thing of his life. That is what we do for each other.

I'm always moved by the fact that we have a prayer concern or two each week for people in boundary situations. And we would do anything, even take that suffering on ourselves if we could.

When I was about 25, a friend signed me up to run a 10K race for charity. They were very popular at the time, and I didn't waddle back then.

When you got to the race, there were all these signs: 'remember your goal,' run for your goal,' and the like. I think the event was raising money for breast cancer research.

We are walking up to the starting line, and I ask the guy next to me who he is running for because he has a ribbon on his T-shirt.

He said, "My sister Moira"

I said, "So what is your goal?"

He said, "To break my personal best time today."

I said, "So how is your sister doing?"

He looked back at me and said, “She died,” surprised, like we often are, at the surge of emotion from deep within him.

Woah! I was quiet for a moment. We kept walking up to the starting line.

But I had just been reading an article about how the word ‘Angel’ in the New Testament didn’t just mean ‘otherworldly creature with wings and a halo’ like Romans always depicted them. It just meant ‘one who brings a Word of God’. An Angel is a messenger from God.

The point of the article was that we’ve too narrowly defined what an Angel is and where to look for them. Most of the time, the author suggested, they come in ordinary sources, clothed, without wings, and living their lives right around us. We are all potentially Angels for each other, which is the spiritual point.

And it occurred to me that I don’t know this guy. I’ll never see him again. So why not try to be a messenger for God for him?

So, I say to him, “You know those moments when you felt your sister's presence in your life just after she died. It is like a dream, but it is not just a dream; it felt real, like really real.

“Yeah,” he nodded.

“And you can’t really even talk about it exactly because other people wouldn’t understand?”

He looked at me and said, “Yeah”

I said, “Today is one of those days. She is beaming you a blessing and filling you with the Spirit.”

And then I remembered my football coach from High School. Before a big play, he would grab your helmet and pull you face-to-face. So I grabbed this guy to get his attention.

He looked at me, half-startled and half-expectant.

I said what the coach used to say to me, “You got this”. And I clapped him on the back.

He moved through the crowd to the very front of the line where the ‘runners’ were. I was back with the ‘joggers who just wish they were runners’.

Bam, the starter gun fired. That guy took off like a force. That was the last I saw of him. But what a great vision, seeing him disappear into the front of the pack.

I thought of Eric Lidell, the Olympic miler from Scotland, and a Christian who said, “When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.” I was hoping that guy was channeling his sister's pleasure at what he was doing for her cause.

It is a spiritual discipline that you only engage in when you have ‘big things’ to pray about, big things, immovable things. “My child has recurring thoughts that they are worthless”. Some of these big prayer concerns break your heart. “I cannot make my husband love me.”

All of them are bigger than any one of us. “My son is being consumed by opioid addiction, and it is erasing the best parts of him.” A lot of the time, they are long-term prayers. “My brother’s wife died suddenly, and he has to raise four children by himself.”

Cancer. The alienation from years of alcoholism. Frustrating situations, not easily changed.

Sometimes they are big social issues like Climate Change or the Church rejecting its own gay children. So problematic. But you have to change the hearts of many people, many, many people, and this is going to take time and commitment.

These are things that you can't just wave a wand and fix it. We have to shift gears and settle in for the long haul. It is a different kind of prayer. This is a long-term discipline. This is part of our day, part of our life, part of who we are.

And we know that difficulty is out there waiting for us as well. We know that we will not get through this life without our share of loss, grief, frustration, and illness. Ultimately, we know we will have to face our own death, not that we want to.

So we pray. We commit to one habit.

Every time we do that, every time we successfully alter one simple habit, we know we get stronger. Psychologists say we develop 'self-

regulation'. We become a little more in control of the part of our lives we can control. We feel more like we are steering our destiny rather than just being steered. We, Christians, would say we are led by the Spirit- upward towards something more noble and fulfilling, outward to bless people around us, and to develop real community.

We remember the simple power of the "Eucharist," the thanksgiving meal where, in our humanity, we acknowledge our brokenness, gather as forgiven sinners and needy people willing to support others in need, and share our concerns in prayer. We invoke our humanity. For a moment, we name our vulnerability quietly to ourselves, shoulder to shoulder with our spiritual community.

We gather to partake of spiritual food that we will need for this journey. This spiritual journey is long. It is difficult. We will need God. We will need each other to make it. We know that. That is why we are here.

Today, I invite you to join me around the table. Today, we may be able to form a big circle and stand hand in hand in support of one another. As

you get up and join each other in support, bring the one big thing that you would like to pray for this weekend. Call it to mind right now.

Perhaps it is a person who is going through something that is seemingly immovable; call them to mind. Join your spirit with ours.

I'm going to ask Mark to play a piece to take us into a time of meditation, and then I'll invite us all to the table. Surround those you love, those you care for, with your light. Name their hurts. Share your hopes for them with God and ask for strength and healing. Join me in an active meditation.

Surround us with Your courage as we go from this place. And grant that we might reflect the wonder and joy that you have for us in this life as we go. Amen.