

Sermon & Prayers for September 19, 2021
17th Sunday after Pentecost
Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA
Bishop Bill Gafkjen

Prayer of the Day

O God, our teacher and guide, you draw us to yourself and welcome us as beloved children. Help us to lay aside all envy and selfish ambition, that we may walk in your ways of wisdom and understanding as servants of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

³⁰[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

When airspace over New York City and other US destinations was closed on September 11, 2001, 38 wide-body airplanes carrying some 7,000 passengers and crew members were diverted to an old, seldom used former military airstrip near the town of Gander in Newfoundland Canada. This influx of strangers from around the world nearly doubled the population of Gander for five days in the aftermath of that terrible day now twenty years ago.

One of the passengers that landed in Gander was a woman named Amy Polacko. In a recent article in the Washington Post, Amy shared her story of that life-changing experience.ⁱ With the words of Jesus still lingering in our ears, let’s listen to some snippets from Amy’s story:

School buses shuttled us to makeshift shelters but, because of the terrorist attacks and uncertainty about who was on our flights, we couldn’t get our luggage. Canadian Mounties and bomb-sniffing dogs inspected every single piece...

The Ganderites, as we learned our hosts were called, hung their heads out of respect, cried with us, and hugged those who clearly needed it. They gently guided us into classrooms turned dorms, where homespun quilts decorated mattresses on the floor. It smelled like a high school locker room, but we were just as grateful as if it had been a five-star hotel. They supplied us with soap, razors, toothbrushes and toothpaste. Bone-tired, we collapsed into sleep.

In the morning, they greeted us with coffee, bacon and toutons — a local specialty that is like a pancake doughnut. Then, the homemade casserole train began. Can you imagine feeding thousands of unannounced houseguests? That’s what they did. All day long. Egg bakes, Newfoundland cod au gratin, even moose stew. The region is known for its hot dish delights...

Cell service was spotty, so a kind young couple took us to their home to use the landline... We tried to give our hosts money for [our first phone calls], and many others to follow, but they refused. They let us shower, outfitted us with their own clothes and talked with us for hours about our grief and lives back home.

They could have looked at us suspiciously. They could have thought that some 7,000 of us showing up in their town was an inconvenience. They could have balked at spending their own money to make endless casseroles and cover mounting phone bills. They could have said, "This isn't my problem." But they didn't.

"This is just who we are," I remember one lumberjack-looking guy explaining, as we thanked him over dinner in the school cafeteria. I have to wonder: Would Americans let strangers — especially foreigners — into their homes to shower?

On day three, we ventured to Walmart for clothes and underwear. Everything was practically gone, but I spotted one bright, flowery shirt dangling on a rack — not my usual style, but we were desperate. I grabbed one sleeve and another passenger grabbed the other. Back home, this might not have ended well. But here? We went back and forth insisting the other take it. I realized the locals were rubbing off on us...

Those five days made me look at my own American egoism and selfishness. I retell my son the story every year without fail. As a single mom, I've tried to raise him to be accepting, empathetic and kind. For years, I emailed with the couple who helped us, but then life happened, and I can't find our messages anymore.

But I will never forget how they comforted me when [a] friend called to say DNA tests from [the] toothbrush [of an old college boyfriend of mine] confirmed he had perished in One World Trade Center...

To all those who helped us and opened their homes and hearts to us, thank you is not enough. Two decades later, I'd like them to know one thing: I have always tried to be a little more like you.

Jesus took a child – a vulnerable one, one too easily overlooked or excluded, one of little account in other's eyes, a frightened one, a lost one, a hurting one – placed her among his followers and took her in his arms. And Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Who has Jesus placed near you? Who might be a vulnerable one or ones – frightened, lost, wandering, wondering, hurting, overlooked, excluded, alone – whom Jesus embraces but you have not?

How might you walk in the way of the cross on your forehead and in the power of the Spirit in whom you are sealed, to truly welcome them, to walk alongside them, to weep with them, to feed and encourage them, love and embrace them, because, after all, "this is just who we are."

For we walk in this promise: whoever welcomes such a one, welcomes Jesus, and whoever welcomes Jesus, welcomes God.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercessionⁱⁱ

Made children and heirs of God's promise, we pray for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

God of community, we pray for the church around the world. Unite us in our love for you. Help us overcome our divisions, that we may live and work together faithfully for your sake. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of creation, we pray for this hurting earth. Awaken in us a new desire to care for this world and empower us to support agencies, organizations, and individual efforts to heal our environment. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of cooperation, we pray for nations of the world embroiled in conflict. Inspire leaders to listen to each other and work towards peaceful solutions to disagreements. Protect the vulnerable, especially children, who cannot find safety in their home or country. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of comfort, we pray for all who live with mental or physical illness. Help them find appropriate care. Bring healing and wholeness when the path forward seems bleak. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of compassion, we pray for the young people of our congregation and other congregations across the Indiana-Kentucky Synod. Renew in us your call to welcome the children in our midst. As they grow, strengthen their faith and our commitment to them. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of consolation, we give you thanks for our loved ones who have died and pray for all who grieve today, in particular those we name now, silently and aloud. Shine your grace on all your saints. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Receive these prayers, O God, and those in our hearts known only to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

ⁱ "I was stranded in Newfoundland on Sept. 11. Here's my 'Come From Away' story." Amy Polacko, *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/09/07/sept11-newfoundland-gander-canada/> Accessed September 13, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Prayers adapted from SundaysandSeasons.com.