

Sermon & Prayers for October 3, 2021
19th Sunday after Pentecost
Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA
Bishop Bill Gafkjen

Prayer of the Day

Sovereign God, you have created us to live in loving community with one another. Form us for life that is faithful and steadfast, and teach us to trust like little children, that we may reflect the image of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Psalm 8

O LORD, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
 Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
 to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
 mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
 and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
 you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
 and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, beloved children of God, from God our Creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Only once or twice in my life have I been far enough from the lights of civilization to see the night sky in all its beautiful and majestic splendor.

The first was when I was in high school. Our congregation's youth group spent a week canoeing our way through parts of the Boundary Waters, a series of waterways on the border between Canada and northern Minnesota. Late at night, many, many miles from any human-generated

light, the sky looked crowded with stars and planets. We beheld the majesty of the Milky Way, the stunning almost unbelievable splendor of the Northern Lights, and what seemed like hosts of meteors skidding across the sky. Almost 50 years later, if I close my eyes and let my mind rest, I can still see and be moved by the glimpses I got of God's heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars that God has set in their courses.

Of course, the ancient poet who wrote Psalm 8 – which I heard and read for the first time on that canoe trip – did not have city lights to contend with in gazing into the heavens night after night. That poet's own stargazing moved him or her to wonder about the creator whose glory exceeds the heavens who is nevertheless mindful of each and every human being.

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, what are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them, human beings that you should care for them?

God, the creator and ruler of the universe, is mindful of us, every one of us human beings, along with all creation.

Methodist Pastor Mark Ralls has suggested that “Mindfulness is love that resists distraction. It is a staunch refusal to fall into absentmindedness. It is focused, sustained attention toward the beloved.”ⁱ

God is mindful of humanity.

God is mindful of you...of me...and of every person around us and around the globe.

We see what this mindfulness, this focused, sustained attention toward the beloved looks like in Jesus.

When religious leaders were concerned about who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out...

When Jesus's own followers argued over who was greatest and tried to keep people who were not part of the insiders' club from doing God's work...

Jesus took children – those who are little, lost, left out, even unseen in human-generated light – and, refusing to be distracted and as an embodiment of God's mindfulness, Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Even on the cross – on the day we now call good, the day when we are told that during the brightest part of the day darkness came over the whole land – as the incarnation of the persistent unquenchable mindful love of God, Jesus focused on the thief beside him and loved him: “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

As Julian of Norwich put it, human beings are “clothed” in divine love: “Our Lord . . . is our clothing, for God is that love which wraps and enfolds us, embraces and guides us, surrounds us.”ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, as we live day by day in the human-generated “city lights” of the nit and grit of daily challenges amid extended twists and turns in the coronavirus wilderness, in a world that seems to move ever more deeply into divisiveness and derision, the steady, persistent, sustained mindfulness and love of God for us and others can be difficult to see.

We keep turning away from the beauty of God’s mindfulness for us.

We think we don’t need this love. We think we don’t deserve it.

Sometimes we become unfocused, absentminded, and just forget about it.

And we fail to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus and we forget about sharing the self-giving love of God with others who hold God’s attention.

That’s when it’s time to trace the mark of the cross on our foreheads and launch a canoe into the baptismal boundary waters, restorative waterways on the border between death and life, despair and hope, bondage to sin and forgiveness, forgetfulness and mindfulness.

Along the boundary waters, away from the bright lights that obscure God’s faithfulness, we traverse the stream of worship with others, we swim in the refreshing waters of scripture, we paddle in living pools of prayer, we gaze into the majestic night sky and see and point out the shimmering mindfulness of God to other.

Floating on the baptismal boundary waters, the splendor of God’s consistent, persistent attention to and love for us, for others, for the world becomes clear again.

Again and again, we return to the baptismal boundary waters to ask the poet’s question that has now become ours:

What are we that you, O God, are mindful of us, that you should care for us?

Sitting together along the bank, gazing at the night sky, free for a moment of the blinding light of both human conceit and self-deprecation, we listen for the simple, life-changing reply:

I created you. I love you. You are mine. Forever.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Amen

Prayers of Intercessionⁱⁱⁱ

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

A brief silence.

Holy One, you have raised up faithful leaders throughout history. Empower those discerning a call to ministry and all seminarians, especially those whom we know, that they continue to be formed for the sake of the gospel. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

You have established a diverse and beautiful creation. Revive declining species and preserve endangered lands. Cultivate in us a sense of wonder for the world you created. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

You desire for us not to be alone and to live in community with one another. Strengthen relationships between nations and peoples, that we celebrate and support one human family.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

You share in our experiences and struggles. Bless all who live with any mental or physical disability. Inspire creative communities, spaces, and environments that are accessible and hospitable. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

You are mindful of us and care for us and for all people and creation, O God. Teach us to have the mind of Christ in our relationships with others. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

You promise eternal life to all your children. Thank you for the people of faith who have gone before us. Strengthen our trust we have in you. 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 Mark Ralls, "Mindful: Psalm 8", <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2007-05/mindful-0?>.

ⁱⁱ Cited by Ralls.

ⁱⁱⁱ Prayers, including the Prayer of the Day, adapted from SundaysandSeasons.com.