

## *We Are Prayers in Christ*

Scripture and Sermon for Earth Stewardship Sunday, April 25, 2010

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### **Pastoral Prayer**

(Adapted from Francis Macnab, based on Psalm

23. [http://www.rexaehuntprogressive.com/liturgy\\_collection/year\\_c\\_liturgy\\_collection/year\\_c\\_liturgies\\_-\\_lenteast/easter\\_4c2007.html](http://www.rexaehuntprogressive.com/liturgy_collection/year_c_liturgy_collection/year_c_liturgies_-_lenteast/easter_4c2007.html).)

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all life,  
we affirm your presence as we lift the joys and concerns of our hearts.  
Like the psalmist of old, we trust you to be our Good Shepherd,  
caring for us as the sheep of your pasture.  
Generous Giver of all things:  
in your presence our inner spirits are fully satisfied.  
We know we share in the abundance of life.  
We can lie down without fear.  
We can sit beside the stillness of the river.  
We find our souls are strengthened.  
We know there are right paths.  
Our God will guide us to them.  
We know we must face the shadows of life and meet our deaths.  
We will do so with courage.  
We know there is an unseen presence with us  
that gives us comfort and strength.  
Generous Giver  
along with all the uncertainties and threats of life,  
you provide us with good gifts.  
When we have enough, you pour into our lives something more.  
Indeed: our cups overflow.  
May we find and give goodness and kindness every day of our lives.  
Let our lives be a constant expression of our desire  
to reflect your good presence  
wherever we are, wherever we go.  
Wherever. Forever! Amen.

### **Scripture: Acts 9:36-43**

<sup>36</sup>Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup>At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup>Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup>So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup>Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes,

*and seeing Peter, she sat up. <sup>41</sup>He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup>This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup>Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.*

### **Sermon: *We Are Prayers in Christ***

When Christians pray, things happen. Last week I was asked to offer the closing prayer for a fellow minister who celebrated his twentieth year of leading a ministry of prayer. Bill Rosser is a grocer and a farmer and a rancher, but he is also an ordained minister who leads a Thursday night chapel prayer service. On Thursday night, I laid hands upon his shoulders and prayed for Bill Rosser, who has prayed countless times for me and many others. Each Thursday night for twenty years, Brother Bill, as he is called by the Thursday night chapel group, has listed the names of people mentioned for prayer in a spiral notebook. Then he leads a dozen or so faithful prayer warriors in bold and confident prayer for those who have been named. The following Thursday night, he always requests an update from the persons who had offered the names for prayer the week before. You see, Brother Bill expects something to happen. He expects that God will heal the sick, employ the unemployed, house the homeless, recover the addicted, restore relationships, and so on. Week after week after week for twenty years he has led the chapel group in prayer this way. Each time that something happens to indicate the activity of God in the life of a person on the prayer list, Bill celebrates with a hearty “Praise God!” and acknowledges the result in the spiral notebook. When the outcome is not what the group has hoped for, he continues to pray and to say, “Praise God!” for the activity of God occurring in ways that might not be visible to the human eye. I’ve had other prayer mentors, but when Brother Bill Rosser prays for you, you know you’ve been prayed for!

I imagine Simon Peter, the fisherman turned preacher, to have been something like my friend and ministry colleague, Bill Rosser. When I picture the Apostle Peter praying at the bedside of the disciple named Tabitha, or Dorcas, I see Bill Rosser’s rough strong hands lifted up to heaven and his weathered face beaming with expectant faith. When I listen for Peter’s voice in scripture, I hear Bill Rosser’s booming voice that cracks just a little like a country gospel singer’s when he gets excited or laughs or holds back tears. Like Brother Bill, Peter has had his faith sorely tried and then restored. He has failed and then found redemption. He has had disappointments turned into demonstrations of God’s awesome power. This is what it means to be a prayer, one who prays, in Christ.

In our world today, we have great need for prayer. On this day observed by Christians of various denominations as Earth Stewardship Sunday, we take a single hour to consider the evidence that every natural system and social institution on the planet is on the brink of collapse. Whole species are vanishing right in front of our eyes. The Independent Lens documentary film “Dirt: The Movie” explores how “Industrial farming, mining, and urban development have endangered the soil and resulted in cataclysmic droughts, starvation, floods, and climate change.” The film reports alarming cases of farmers in India having committed suicide by drinking pesticides in their despair over crop failure attributed to global warming. Forests are turning to deserts and rivers of water to ribbons of clay. People are living on heaps of garbage and dying from toxic waste in food, soil, air, and water. But on the whole, most of us go about our business as usual.

Either we refuse to recognize how we could possibly contribute to problems that seem so far away and disconnected from us, and thus turn away in apathy or repulsion from such unpleasant news; or we understand our culpability, but are paralyzingly overwhelmed by the enormous scope of change needed to tip the scales away from collapse and toward sustainability.

On Thursday, April 22, the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day, President Obama reaffirmed his intention to issue a proclamation in observance of the May 6, 2010 National Day of Prayer, and for the Justice Dept. to appeal a District Court Judge's ruling of the National Day of Prayer, established 58 years ago, as unconstitutional. I cannot help but wonder if the date of this announcement is a coincidence, or if some personal reflection on the current state of the planet may have had some bearing on the President's decision to make such an announcement on Earth Day. I wonder if the President receives the Weekly Seeds email from his own denomination, the United Church of Christ, and if so, if he read the Prayer for the Week written by Rev. Kate Huey: *God of comfort and compassion, through Jesus, your Son, you lead us to the water of life and the table of your bounty. May we who have received the tender love of our Good Shepherd be strengthened by your grace to care for your flock.*

*Amen.* (<http://www.i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/454/Life-giving-Acts-Apr-19-25.aspx>)

I appreciate living in a nation that protects religious freedom by a prohibition against the establishment of any religious test for those who would aspire to public office. Yet, I would hope always to have political leaders who understand their powers to be derived from a Higher Authority to which they and their constituents are mutually subordinate and accountable, whatever form their religious beliefs may take. And I sincerely hope that the leaders of all the nations of the earth will pray for wisdom and grace in their areas of service.

As Christians, every day for us is a day of prayer, for scripture instructs us to pray without ceasing. We are called to be witnesses of Christ, followers of Christ, and prayers in Christ. We are to live in Christ so completely that our very lives become prayers. We pray in the name of the risen Christ and we expect to see the risen Christ appear in our lives and in the world around us.

Likewise, every day should be a day of prayer and stewardship for the earth. We pray for healing and new life for persons, and so we should pray for our planet as well. Earth is our Tabitha, providing resources for all peoples, as Tabitha made clothes for others in her community. Tabitha means *little girl*, and although we typically think of Earth as our Mother, there is also a sense in which Earth is also our precious little girl in need of our protection and care. Unlike the Tabitha of scripture, our little girl is not yet dead, but she is dying. Yet, if Peter could pray and bring back to life one already dead, how much more hope might there be for us. We must come without delay to pray for our precious little girl, our beloved Mother/Sister/Daughter Earth. We must get on our knees and beseech God for her very life. We must speak to her and for her with words of boldness and authority, saying, "Tabitha, our precious little planet, get up! We are sorry we have hurt you. We are sorry we have overworked you. We love you and appreciate all that you have given us. Stand up. We will stand with you. We will hold your hand. We will not let you be abused to the brink of death ever again."

At Tabitha's death, Peter, the representative of Christ and the leader of the Church, came as he was bidden. He came to act as pastor and shepherd to the widows in mourning for one of their

own community. He listened to their stories of this faithful sister in the Lord and then sent them out of the room. He knelt beside the dead woman's bed, perhaps not knowing quite how to pray, but sensing the presence of the risen Christ. He prayed for her, spoke to her with authority, perhaps giving her his hand and helping her up. He called for others and showed her to be alive, causing many to believe in the Lord. Then he remained in the area, encouraging these believers in their faith.

We can look to Peter's care for Tabitha and her community as a model of ministry for Earth stewardship. As Tabitha acted faithfully in making clothes for her community, Earth is faithful to the Creator in providing for us. We can be faithful to the Creator in caring for the Earth and for the communities of life she supports. Like Peter at Tabitha's deathbed, we can humble ourselves to kneel and pray at what could be Earth's death watch. We can speak words of life and encouragement to Earth, as Peter spoke to Tabitha, and we can offer a hand in her recovery. As Peter stayed in Joppa to nurture the faith of growing numbers of believers who witnessed the answer to his prayer, we can continue in prayer for others who are just coming to awareness of their call to Earth stewardship and of the resurrecting power of prayer. In the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

### **Benediction**

(Adapted from Dennis Ormseth. Based on Revelation 7:9-17. <http://www.webofcreation.org/Worship/liturgy/easterC.htm>)

*Praise be to Jesus, Lamb of God, Shepherd of the faithful, who alone leads us to the water of life. May Jesus lead us also in the way of justice and mercy for the waters of the earth, that we may keep them pure for the daily well-being of all creatures.*