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Hope

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We are a praying people. When I worship with you, I have the privilege of hearing your prayers. You pray for peace a continent away. You pray for healing in people you love. Our Pastor Nominating Committees pray for discernment and a good match, as they seek their next pastors. Our pastors pray for both rest and energy in this unrelenting pandemic and discord.

Prayers are a sign of our hope that goes beyond what we can control. Prayers acknowledge our limits, even when they include our willingness to be active participant in bringing about what is prayed. The challenge is to pray in a way that lifts to Jesus what is on our hearts, without trying to dictate the outcome. Praying for the lottery balls to tumble out of the cage in the exact order shown on my ticket is not a prayer that I'd recommend. Praying that God might give us our daily bread expresses our need, and places hope at the center of our prayer. It leaves the fulfillment of that prayer in God's loving and faithful hands.

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian, wrote a meditation on Hope in his book, *You Are the Beloved*. These words (emphasis added by me) stand out:

“When we live with hope, we do not get tangled up with concerns for how our wishes will be fulfilled. So, too, our prayers are not directed toward the gift but toward the One who gives it. Ultimately, it is not a question of having a wish come true but of expressing an unlimited faith in the giver of all good things. Hope is based on the premise that the other gives only what is good. Hope includes an openness by which you wait for the promise to come through, even though you never know when, where, or how this might happen.”

It's good, I think, to reflect periodically on our hopes. What longing sits in our hearts and is expressed over and over in our prayers? Through reflection we can distill those hopes to their pure essence. Then, following the approach expressed by Nouwen, we can examine how tightly we're holding on to the desired outcome. As he described it, are we “tangled up with concerns for how our wishes will be fulfilled”?

To use my extreme example, I can become so focused on the lottery balls that I give up hope that my prayer will ever be answered ... ignoring the daily bread that fills my plate. Instead, we might intentionally shift the focus of our wishes from what we want to the goodness of the giver. As we become open to when, where, and how God might answer our prayers, we improve our ability to observe the unexpected and subtle fulfillment of those wishes. In the same way we pray for our daily bread, we release our prayer to God's authority in these words: “Thy will be done.”

No greater example is given us in Scripture than Jesus' death and resurrection. His followers' hopes and wishes for a restoration of Israel's kingdom came at a time, place, and manner no one expected. Without openness, Jesus' disciples could have ignored the miracle, waiting for a secular ruler who would never come. In our Lenten journey, may we offer our prayers as an expression of the hope that God's will shall be done, even when it is beyond our current understanding.