

“Praying the Lord’s Prayer”
The Very Rev. Tracey Lind
The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman
Wellfleet, MA
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It is so good to be back with you. I’ve held you in my prayers since we bid farewell last Labor Day. It’s also good to be on the Cape, away from the intensity of Cleveland.

It’s been quite a year in Cleveland, Ohio. As John Hyduk wrote in a recent *New York Times* essay: “Is this Heaven? No, it’s Cleveland.”

Following a half-century dry spell for Cleveland’s professional sports teams and a reputation as the mistake on the lake or the city with a burning river, things are turning around in my hometown. The Cavaliers won the NBA championship and broke “the curse.” It was amazing to join over a million folks downtown to celebrate our victory with King James and his teammates. The Indians are having a winning season and still have a chance of going to the World Series. The Browns...well, miracles are possible.

Although many of our urban neighborhoods are struggling from poverty, blight and neglect, downtown is being revitalized, our housing market is beginning to stabilize, and our population is once again growing. In a city plagued by far too much gun violence (113 people have been killed and 367 injured in the last 12 months) and tense community police relations (remember Tamir Rice and Michael Brelo) the Cleveland Police District is living into a consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice. And this past month, our heavily democratic city laid down the red carpet to welcome the Republican National Convention. The irony was not lost on us.

For the past few weeks, Cleveland has been performing on a world stage, and frankly I would say, we have earned an Oscar. Though I won’t comment on what happened on the convention floor, I can tell you that, on the streets, what many feared would become a riot turned into a combination street party and civil demonstration and discourse on American politics, civil liberties and social justice. Although they weren’t able to get very close to the convention venue, from my perspective, the protesters had plenty of freedom of speech, right to assembly and media attention – all of which they exercised.

While the security presence was huge and a little over the top, with police departments and state highway patrol units from around the country, along with the Coast Guard, the National Guard, the FBI, and the Secret Service on foot, bike, horseback, helicopter and rooftop, they were respectful, restrained, thoughtful and generous. I watched police officers playing guitars and drums in pick-up bands, competing in ping pong tournaments, handing out bottles of water to protesters and taking photo ops with delegates, dissidents, and local residents. I hope this might be a turning point in Cleveland police community relations.

While there were numerous debates between various factions – Code Pink vs. Westboro Baptist Church; and Occupy vs. Bikers for Trump – it felt more like carnival than a fight. Nonetheless, there was public expression of the serious issues at stake – among them racism, Islamophobia, women’s reproductive choice, poverty, immigration, climate change.

There were so many contradictions during the week: some humorous, some disturbing, and some downright frightening. Underlying it all is a hugely divided nation.

As I was riding my bike home from church on Sunday, the day before the convention began, I came through our newly redesigned Public Square and was chatting with local police on their new bicycles. A heavily armed man, wearing a veteran’s baseball cap and a camouflage vest walked up to us and announced himself to the police, saying: “I’m supposed to let you know that I’m here.” They looked at him with incredulous disbelief, and I in my clergy collar and bicycle helmet, innocently exclaimed: “Wow, you have a lot of guns!” He replied, “Yes ma’am, I do.” I asked him to tell me what he was carrying, and he happily explained what was in his arsenal – an assault rifle, two semi-automatic handguns, and enough ammunition to level the crowd. I responded with a sincere question that I had always wanted to ask of such a person: “Why are you doing this? Why are you carrying all of these weapons in downtown Cleveland with all of these people around?” He looked me straight in the eye and responded: “Because the United States Constitution gives me the right to do so.” I was hoping to have a thoughtful conversation, but another person walked up and began to provoke him into an argument. The press, with gas masks and helmets attached to their backpacks, desperate for a little excitement, immediately swarmed around us like seagulls on the beach. I left with a greater sense of angst about the state of our nation and concern for the week to come.

However, later that afternoon, I joined thousands of Clevelanders on the Hope Memorial Bridge to stand in silence for thirty minutes, holding hands and praying for God’s peace and love to encircle our city. Organized by a local Roman Catholic nun, I was initially skeptical, fearing that it would be a hokey, Kumbayah event. However, it turned out to be an incredibly powerful experience of silence in the midst of noise, peace in the midst of conflict, unity in the midst of division, and love in the midst of hate. I honestly believe that Circle the City with Love shifted the cosmic and spiritual energy for what could have been a very violent week in Cleveland.

For most of the convention week, I hung around downtown. I joined volunteers in welcoming visitors to Trinity Cathedral – including our own Governor John Kasich, who came in to pray. I gave directions to lost convention delegates and visiting media. I also attended demonstrations, press conferences and protest marches, as a witness to the peace of God that passes all understanding. You see, in the silence on the bridge that Sunday afternoon, I received instructions from on high for the rest of the week: be present, be visible, be quiet, hold hands with those who reach out to you, and pray for peace and safety. And that is what I did.

Moving about downtown Cleveland, I had an exhausting but renewing week of intentionally prayerful discipleship. Over the course of events, I was reminded that prayer is an action by which we place ourselves, and our world, consciously and voluntarily in the presence God.

My prayers are pretty simple. They usually start with “Thank you God,” and then I move on to words like: please, help, heal, give, sustain, strengthen, and protect. My prayers frequently include the line: “I’m sorry.” Sometimes, I offer up really profound phrases like; “I’m confused or lost, and I need guidance;” or “I’m tired, frustrated, angry or hurt, and I need comfort.” And sometimes, I bargain with God: “If I do this...will you please do that?” believing as in the old Hebraic tradition, that it is part of a relationship with God includes argument, pleading, debate and even get anger and disappointment.

Truth be told, many of my prayers are mundane versions of asking, seeking, and knocking. But that’s all right, because these three words – ask, seek and knock – are really the essence of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. This simple little prayer – only 33 words in Luke’s version – represents the heart of Jesus’ teaching.

I say The Lord’s Prayer not once, but several times a day. I say it a waking up in the morning and falling asleep at night. I say it while driving, swimming, walking, biking and watering my garden. The Lord’s Prayer is what I most frequently pray with other people. And saying it has changed my life and my heart.

Jodi Picoult, in her 2008 novel entitled, *Change of Heart*, reflected on the Lord’s Prayer. She wrote:

Before I realized what I was doing, my own mouth had started to form the words, a muscle memory. And to my surprise, instead of it feeling false or forced, it made me relieved, as if I had just passed the baton to someone else...It felt like putting on flannel pajamas on a snowy night; like turning on your blinker for the exit that you know will take you home. (p. 256)

As I stood on a bridge in silence with thousands of my neighbors, as I walked along with hundreds of chanting protesters, as I sat with activists at press conferences and rallies, as I prepared to speak with members of the media about the impact of the RNC on Cleveland, and as I watched the convention speeches on television, I prayed the Lord’s Prayer. It was the best I could do. And every time I prayed it, I went deeper into the mystery that is God.

During the Republican National Convention, as I prayed the words that Jesus taught, I found myself asking that God would do the seemingly impossible – make the ordinary holy, make the reign of divine justice and peace a reality, lift up the voices of the oppressed, provide whatever was needed in the moment, forgive those who need to be forgiven (including myself), and save us all from the time of trial. The more I prayed, the more confident I became that God’s will can be done on earth as in heaven, if we all bend our ears, hearts and minds to God’s way.

This morning, I want to encourage you to pray without ceasing. And when you’re not sure how or what to pray, I suggest you try the Lord’s Prayer. In the end, it’s as good as it gets.