

They may have escaped your notice. If so, that's too bad. Because they're little spiritual gems. And most of them are more than 1,000 years old. You may have heard them. But you might not have thought too much about them.

I'm talking about the prayer we pray toward the beginning of each of our services. This prayer called the Collect of the Day. Each Sunday during the year, and each feast day during the Christian year has it's own particular prayer, its own unique Collect of the Day.

You may be thinking, "What's a Collect?" A collect is a specific type of prayer. The noun, collect, is spelled the same as the verb, collect. In a way, a collect is a prayer which gathers up or collects our intentions and prayers and the theme for the week into one short prayer.

And a collect has a fairly consistent structure. It's not quite as rigid as the structure for a sonnet or a haiku. But the basic structure is this:

First, there is an address to God, often describing one or more of God's attributes or praising God for one or more of his attributes.

Second, there is a petition, asking for something, and often also naming a desired consequence or outcome if that petition is granted.

And third, there is a conclusion with a statement of mediation, stating through whom we are offering the prayer, usually through Jesus Christ. And sometimes an additional statement of praise is added.

So take a collect we pray every week at the beginning of the service. The technical name of this prayer is the Collect for Purity. It should sound familiar:

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*¹

Did you notice all the parts?

First, the address to God often describing or praising one or more of God's attributes:
Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid...

Second is that petition, asking for something, and in this case also describing the desired outcome, the result we're hoping for:

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name...

¹ BCP p355

Third is that statement of mediation, the statement of through whom we're offering the prayer. In this case, the third part is very simple:
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In some collects, more praise, more of a doxology is added. A common ending is
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Now, you might be thinking, OK Jim, that's some mildly interesting trivia about the structure of some of our prayers. But so what?

Well, here's what's awesome about this structure, this pattern in our collects.

We often get stuck in a rut with our prayers of just asking for things. There's nothing wrong with going to God in prayer and asking things on behalf of ourselves or other people. But our prayer life is going to be impoverished if we're just asking for things.

I've preached before about different kinds of prayers. I remember them with the acronym ACTS. A-C-T-S.

That stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Supplication is asking for things, and that's part of prayer. And confession is important, asking for forgiveness when we mess up.

But what we often forget in our prayer life is adoration and thanksgiving. Worshipping and praising God for who God is. And offering thanks to God for all the good things God has done for us.

What's awesome about the pattern of prayer in the collects is that it wraps our requests and supplications into a larger structure of praise and/or thanksgiving.

We can still ask God for things, and we should. Jesus tells us to do it. But prayers in the collect form help us to put those petitions into a larger matrix of praise and thanksgiving. And that can enrich and deepen our own prayer life, our own spirituality.

After all, this pattern of prayer didn't just fall off the turnip truck yesterday. Collects are an ancient pattern of Christian prayer.

That Collect for Purity that we start the service with...
Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known... etc.

That classic collect is 1,000 years old. For a millennium, Christians having been praying this prayer asking for God's assistance so that they could more perfectly love and praise God. And when we pray it, we are joining our voices with countless generations of Christians who have gone before us.

And when we pray a different Collect of the Day each week, most of those prayers are even older than that classic Collect for Purity.

I pulled the reference books off of the shelf and did a quick tally. Of the prayers we pray for the Collect of the Day during a normal year at St. Paul's...

22% were drafted in the 20th century.

23% were drafted between the year 1500 and 1900, with most of those dating back to the 1500's.

1% were drafted between the year 1000 and 1500. That was not a very fertile time of collect composition.

But, a whopping 54% of the prayers we pray for the Collect of the Day were composed before the year 1000. And most of those date back to the 500s and 600s.

Case in point are our Collects of the Day from last Sunday, this Sunday, and next Sunday. I would invite you to grab a prayer book from the rack in front of you and turn to page 234. Page 234.

These pages have our prayers for the fall. This week's prayer is Proper 21. It dates back to the 600s. And last week and next week's prayers, Propers 20 and 22 date back to the 500s.

That's an awesome thing. Praying classic prayers that have been around for 1,400 or 1,500 years.

And I want to turn briefly, to these 3 classic prayers. And I'll do them in reverse order.

Next Sunday's Collect of the Day, Proper 22 says,

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

What a wonderful prayer. It reminds us, whether we pray a lot or a little, God always is readier to hear our prayers than we are to offer them. And God gives us more than we either desire or deserve.

And it reminds that God's overflowing love and mercy and gifts come to us, not because of what we do, but because of who God is. That's an important thing to remind yourself of next Sunday when that prayer comes around.

And actually, it's something to remind yourself of all that week. The Collect of the Day on Sunday is also intended to be a prayer to be used during the whole week that begins on that Sunday. So you might mark it in your prayer book, or take it home in your bulletin, and use that prayer all that week in your own daily prayers.

The Collect of the Day for this Sunday, Proper 21 is also a treasure. And I would commend it to you for all of this week. It says,

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

I love this prayer. First, is the wonderful description of God showing his power chiefly by exhibiting mercy and pity. Mercy and pity are not the usual ways we think of power being used. And yet it's at the heart of God's nature. It's a strong reminder that God's ways are different from our ways.

And then we ask that we may more and more seek God's ways. God help us, grant us the fulness of your grace, that we who are running the race, running to obtain your promises, may be partakers of your heavenly treasure. In other words, help us to seek your kingdom, your ways, and not the ways of this world.

And there is a similar theme in last week's collect, Proper 20. It's one of my favorites. It dates back to a period of change, a period when barbarians were still invading, when things were being turned upside down in the world. It says,

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Wow. What a prayer. Help us Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things. How much of your mental energy, how much of my mental energy is tied up with worry, with being anxious about earthly things?

And then the magic statement. Even now, while we are in the midst of the transitory, while "we are placed among things that are passing away," we ask God to help us "to hold fast to those things that shall endure." This earth, this physical universe is subject to change and decay and entropy. And yes, we are citizens of this world.

But we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. And as Citizens of that Kingdom, we owe a higher allegiance to God than to any earthly thing.

This is almost always going to be a huge spiritual struggle for all of us. Because it's VERY easy to get preoccupied with the things of this world. It was a struggle for Christians in

the 6th century. It's a struggle for Christians in the 21st century. I know it's often a struggle for me.

"Even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away," how do I "hold fast to those that shall endure"? Because it's easy to get sucked into the world's way of thinking, and it's often a difficult thing to conform my mind to the mind of Christ.

In years past, I've shared my whole personal stewardship story with you. I'm not going to revisit it today, though I may share it again sometime in future years. But today I want to mention briefly my most recent struggle.

As many of you know, we've been through some tough budget cycles at St. Paul's. And because of that I've taken several voluntary reductions in my compensation. Those reductions have totaled around \$32,000 over the years. I offered up these compensation cuts to help balance the budget. And that's a good thing. I want St. Paul's to be fiscally healthy.

And a while back, I was talking about all of this with a mentor who is a national expert in stewardship issues. And he suggested that I needed to think of these voluntary reductions as part of my financial offering to St. Paul's. Yes, they were sacrificial. And yes, they certainly totaled much more than a 10% tithe would have. And so I stopped making a pledge to St. Paul's. I figured these reductions were my offering. I still gave some money to help the needy through the Rector's discretionary fund and through some other charities. But I stopped making a direct pledge to St. Paul's.

But all of this has had an unintended spiritual consequence. Because it put me in a mindset of "giving up" what I used to have, rather than "giving of" what I have now. It framed things in my mind in terms of what I had lost rather than what I still have.

And frankly what I was doing was robbing myself of was a sense of the joy of giving. And so this year I was the first to fill out a pledge for St. Paul's on the day we printed the cards up. Because I am thankful to God for this place. And I'm thankful to God for all the blessings in my life. God gives to me. And I want to give in response.

And this year, your vestry is joining me in filling out pledge cards early. Next Sunday, in fact, the Rector and Vestry will be turning in our 2019 pledge cards before we mail pledge cards out to any of the rest of you. And this coming Friday, we're kicking off our pledge drive, not with testimonials about money or giving. Instead, we're going to give thanks. We're going to have an evening of celebration together.

I hope you join us this Friday evening as we celebrate our life together in this St. Paul's family.

We are placed among earthly things. But those are passing away. Here, at St. Paul's, God is giving us a taste, a foretaste of heavenly things. Those are the things that will truly endure.