

## Presbyterian Prayer Garden

*She said "I just wanted to walk in the Presbyterian prayer garden. Is that alright? Does anyone mind?"*

*I had never heard of the Presbyterian prayer garden. I didn't know we had one. I looked out at the back field beyond the parking lot, then over toward the dumpsters and at the fire pit and that old shed and said, "What garden?"*

As I was leaving the office last Friday evening I encountered a mentally ill woman in the parking lot. Now I should tell you that it had been a long day at the end of a long week and I hadn't finished the sermon yet. And I really like to have a completed manuscript before I leave on Friday but something more important had come up, a friend needed some time. Besides I still had Saturday. I also had one more hospital call to make before I went home. So as I was leaving, the last thing I wanted was to have to deal with one more problem before I left. But I learned long ago that it's foolish to expect ministry to fit into office hours. I really don't mind helping others in the name of Christ but sometimes I think God is testing me.

I didn't see anyone in the parking lot as I walked out but when I came around to the driver side of my car I saw a pair of shoes and canvas bag next to my door. I looked around and still didn't see anyone so I assumed that some anonymous "Good Samaritan" left the things there for the clothes closet. It's not unusual for anonymous people to drop bags of food and clothing off at our doors for the clothes closet. No one had ever left anything next to my car before, but there next to my door, were a pair of lavender tennis shoes and a green canvas bag. I picked up the bag and realized immediately that it wasn't a donation but someone's personal stuff, maybe a homeless person's bag. There were a couple of journals sticking out of the top of the bag and I could see a dirty coffee cup.

I looked around and again and still didn't see anyone. So I began examining the bag to see if I could determine whose it might be. Then from out of nowhere an unseen voice from behind me said, "I'm sorry sir. There must be a mistake - that's mine." I was startled. I hadn't sensed anyone coming up behind me until she spoke. I turned and saw a lady in sock feet, was standing right upon me. I mean she was in my personal space. She was sort of dressed like a street person. Her clothes were ill matched and wrinkled but they were clean and so was she. She had a sort of unblinking glazed expression on her face and I realized that she was either on heavy medication or had some illness.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I thought someone had lost these things and I was trying to determine whose they were." Then I asked her, "Why were they next to my car? ...Who are you? ... What are you doing here? ... Can I help you?"

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"The Presbyterian prayer garden." She answered looking at me like I was a complete idiot. Then she sort of turned the tables on me and began cross-examining me as to why I was there, "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Well, I am the minister." I said, "I work here. I'm getting ready to go home after I stop by the hospital and see a lady who is sick."

"Is she very sick?" the woman asked.

"Yes, she is." I answered.

"Then you should go." she said.

"Well yes." I said. "I'm going to, but is there anything I can do for you first?"

“No” she answered. And quite frankly I was relieved.

“Do you live around here?” I asked.

“Yes” she said and then slipped on her shoes and walked away.

I told Lynda about the strange encounter when I got home. After expressing concern for my safety, Lynda asked, “What prayer garden?” “I don’t know. The one she saw.” I answered.

Well that was Friday evening. Early Sunday morning when I came in I noticed the well tended bushes and flowers along the side walks here; and I noticed those little plaques with kittens and inspirational verses that I think Sue Dorsch has been putting out. I noticed that wooden cross with the flowers around it outside the sanctuary; and the stone cross out front. And for a moment I saw this place through the insightful lady’s eyes. I saw the Presbyterian prayer garden here.

Actually, I saw one of the Presbyterian prayer gardens here. I saw the one that surrounds this place and is composed of the well tended flower gardens and trimmed bushes and carefully mowed lawns. I saw the prayer garden that so many of you anonymously tend and maintain for the rest of us.

Later Sunday morning during worship I saw the other Presbyterian prayer garden here, the one that surrounds this place, fills it, gives it beauty and peace; and is anonymously tended by so many of you. Sitting up here by myself and looking out at your faces during the offertory I realized that the church itself is a prayer garden, that you the people of the church are a prayer garden. I realized that in a chaotic world your prayers (our prayers) provide quite places of peace and respite; places of hope and beauty; even glimpses of heaven in the midst of the troubles and madness that surrounds us like a dark storm in this world.

I was talking to Pastor Amy about that earlier this week and one of the experiences that she and I both appreciate is the knowledge that so many good people pray for us each day. I think that is one of the greatest blessings of serving a church. Sometimes when I am

discouraged I think about the people who are praying for me and my heart and spirit are somehow lifted and strengthened.

In my very first parish there was a sweet old lady named Addie who had once been very active in the church; she had taught Sunday school, she helped tend the flower gardens, and clean the sanctuary. She always took food to shut-ins and families that had deaths. She made the best blueberry pie. In fact it was so good I almost looked forward to funerals.

She became quite ill and first lost one leg and then the other to diabetes. I went to visit her one day and she wasn't exactly complaining but she was expressing her disappointment that she couldn't do anything around the church anymore. I didn't know what to tell her. But I heard myself saying to her "You can pray for me and the church." And I thought, "That's right." I wish I had thought of that on my own, but those words came from that place deep inside of all us from where I suspect the Spirit sometimes whispers words of comfort.

She smiled and said that she would pray for me every day. Through the years I have realized that the prayers of Mrs. Addie and the prayers of so many other dear souls like her have helped me and been better even than her blueberry pies. They have sustained me. Since that day I have asked many other dear souls to pray for me and the church. I am truly grateful that so many good people have carried me in their prayers.

Last week I thought of all those we pray for in the prayer garden that is St. Giles Presbyterian Church. I thought of that long list of family and friends and acquaintances that we publish in our bulletin each week. I remembered that every name on it represents someone who is loved and someone who loves them. I thought of the concerns you share with Amy and me before and sometimes during worship I thought of the list of the war dead we publish in our bulletin each month and their families we pray for. Officially Presbyterians don't pray for the dead because we believe they are safe in the hands of a forgiving and loving God. But I think God hears our prayers for the dead and I am sure God welcomes our prayers for their families. Several years ago I received a note from a family in Texas who had lost a son thanking us for remembering their son's sacrifice and praying for them. Our prayers for others are easy anonymous blessings we give them.

But our prayers don't just benefit others they make us better as well. Wonderful things grow in our souls as we cultivate our prayer life and we become better people.

- As we pray for ourselves faith, peace, and trust in God grow in our souls,
- as we pray for family and friends, closeness and community grows,
- as we pray for strangers compassion for the world grows,
- as we pray for our troops calls for peace grow in our hearts and world,
- as we pray for the homeless concern for "the least" of our neighbors grows,
- as we pray for exploited, starving and dying people universal empathy grows,
- as we pray for our enemies forgiveness and reconciliation grows.

And as those things grow in us,

- the garden of God's love expands in our hearts,
- our church, our community and our world
- pushing out the weeds,
- bringing life and beauty
- to the barren places.

On the night he was betrayed Jesus went to the garden and desperately prayed three times. When had finished he was strong enough to face what lie ahead and love us to the end.

All glory to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.