

In this place, around the world, and down through time, people have been gathering and speaking these magnificent words:

*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*

These are the ancient words of the “Collect for Purity.” Dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was intended for priests in their private preparations for Mass.<sup>1</sup> In 1552 it became part of the liturgy—as one commentary says, it was “too good to be kept in the sacristy.”<sup>2</sup>

And it is. It’s a simple three-part prayer: part one describes an attribute of God, the second part asks for help, and the third part says how we hope to carry on in the world. It’s very simple.

But it’s also huge.

With just a few words, this prayer makes a big claim about God. This is a God who knows all our thoughts and emotions, all our secret desires and longings. Not just those we want God to know about, but all.

This is a radical, enveloping intimacy. It’s like the mother who knows every expression on her child’s face and the meaning of every cry. But it’s even more than that. The only way I can begin to glimpse what it is to be fully known in this way is to think of times when true, abiding friends reveal something to me that I didn’t know about myself.

I think of my friends, Ann and Tricia, whom I had known since junior high school. We shared celebrations and sorrows, confidences, and accomplishments. We went through college and young adulthood together, and then, as often happens, we drifted apart. Years later, after losing touch with Ann and Tricia except for occasional Christmas and birthday cards, they both showed up here at St. Andrew’s for my mother’s funeral to celebrate Mom’s life and be with me. As abiding friends, without my having to ask—without my knowing that I needed them—they knew, and they came to be with me. My heart cracked open with love and gratitude at the sight of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Hatchett, M.J. *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.episcopalcafe.com/alcuin\\_and\\_the\\_collect\\_for\\_purity](https://www.episcopalcafe.com/alcuin_and_the_collect_for_purity)

Being thoroughly known.

It's something we long for, and yet sometimes we do get surprised. In Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees, of which today's Gospel is a part, the Pharisees are getting more and more unnerved by Jesus, perhaps because they are beginning to see how his stories exposed them. In the parable of the landowner and the vineyard, the Pharisees are revealed to themselves, not as the pious and studied people they think they are, but rather as violent to the point of premeditated murder. I wonder if the intent behind the shock-value of this parable was Jesus' desire to jolt them into self-recognition such that they couldn't help but turn in another direction.<sup>3</sup>

The Gospels tell us many stories in which intimacy with God *does* turn people in a new direction. Jesus understood the woman at the well (Jesus knew all about her relationships), and Martha (Jesus knew all about having too much to do), and Zacchaeus (Jesus knew all about the longing for to be heard), and maybe especially Peter (Jesus knew how hard love is in the face of self-preservation). Jesus also knew that the kind of intimacy he offered flowed and overflowed until it reached out to others. Peter's experience of full forgiveness led him to begin the missionary work outlined in the book of Acts. Paul's experience of intimacy led him to the Gentiles. The intimacy of God cannot help but overflow our boundaries and pour into the world, thus "magnifying" – making visible – God at work in the world.

And that, I think, is the hope of the Collect for Purity. By recognizing God's total and intimate knowledge of us, we can choose to turn away from the false path of hiddenness and secrecy and instead respond by opening ourselves – with all that we are and all that we have – to God and to one another.

Today we begin our Annual Pledge Campaign, rooted this year in the theme "To You All Hearts Are Open."

In August, our vestry began study of the Collect for Purity, from which this phrase is taken. One among us described how he used to have a harsh opinion of panhandlers. After hearing one of Abbott's sermons here at St. Andrew's, however, he found his heart broken open in compassion, and he has chosen to respond to panhandlers in a new way.

In this amazing place we call home, we practice opening our hearts, minds, and hands. We center ourselves in God's love through worship, and with that foundation, we learn how to dig into the hard questions of life in our contemporary culture. We have a priest who doesn't shy away from difficult questions of the day, as evidenced in her sermons and in her presence in

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<sup>3</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories By Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), discusses the shock-value of some of the parables for the listeners especially on page 4.

Charlottesville. Our Adult Forum is asking the hard questions of how to live Micah's words—do justice, love kindness, walk humbly—in this troubled world. Our Catechesis program helps our children open to the abiding and unconditional love of God in Jesus, the Good Shepherd. In our laundry ministry, work with St. Andrew's School, Grace On the Hill program, and individual ministries as St. Andrew's in the world, we learn how to open our hands that we might be conduits of that intimate and overflowing love of God to our neighbors and our environment.

In this amazing place, we open ourselves to grappling with the practical matters of our life together, specifically how we support and manage our church. We still struggle with the limitations of a mortgage and budget deficit, but we remain committed to appropriate compensation for clergy and staff, and fully funding ministries like the laundry ministry and the GOTH program. And we keep focus on the goal of making our buildings accessible and sound.

Now your clergy and vestry are leading us into the third year of our three-year strategic plan for financial stability. Our finance committee is continuing work to reduce the mortgage, after having taken a \$50,000 chunk out of it last year. Plans are underway for another lump sum payment in 2017. We continue work on alternate income streams such as grants like the one that funded the branding project that will help make us make ourselves known in Richmond as a place of welcome and belonging. We are about to roll out the non-member wedding project, and Abbott is hard at work figuring out if we can get better contracts with cell companies that want to use our bell tower.

The third prong of our strategic financial plan for concerns pledges. A pledge is the amount each of us commits to give the church in the coming year. Last year, pledge income was 71% of our budget, with investments, special offerings, and other small line items making up the balance of income. We do not receive funding for the operational budget from the Diocese. We are not a church that continually asks for money. We do a yearly pledge campaign, and then the clergy and vestry do the work of discernment to determine the best and long-term way forward for mission and ministry. Those few special requests we have made, like the mortgage buy-down project, go to the vestry for approval before they are presented to you so that we have a consistent and balanced plan. Our yearly pledges are the largest and most critical factor in supporting our life and ministry together. So I hope you see that every pledge—your pledge—matters.

The Congregational Assessment Survey we did in 2016 revealed that our pledges then were 1.3% of average household income. For perspective on that number, the Diocesan average is 3.6%. Last fall, we asked everyone to consider their pledge using the concept of proportional giving. Proportional giving simply means looking at your income, doing the math, seeing what proportion you are giving, and prayerfully considering what you want to give to the church. Apparently, a lot of folks took the spiritual practice of proportional giving quite seriously, as we

went from 1.3% to 2.8%! Wow, folks! That was a wonderful jump in one year, and a huge step forward in our three-year plan!

Of course, we aren't done yet! This pledge campaign will support the third of our three-year strategic plan. In a larger sense, each of us is on a life-long journey with God with all that we are and all that we have. And so, I ask you to continue the practice of proportional giving. If this is a new term for you, Bishop Shannon Johnston has an excellent video on it. (It was filmed here at St. Andrew's, by the way). We have a link to it on our website.

The vestry and clergy have done this work and we have *all already* pledged for 2018.

I invite everyone to take a pledge packet before leaving church today. Try reading slowly through the Collect for Purity printed there and reflect on the kind of intimacy it names. When have you felt opened? When have you overflowed with God's perfect love? Then, remembering that God already knows your heart's desires, consider this spiritual practice of pledging. It is a way we can concretely link our lives to something larger than we can ever be individually—God's all-knowing and overflowing love at work in the world through the mission and ministry of St. Andrew's Church.

After Paul's thunderous experience of being known to his very core on the Road to Damascus, he overflows with God's love and will for the well-being of all. He wrote to the Corinthians, "Our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections...open wide your hearts also!" (2 Cor. 6:11-12).

Amen!