

Praying and Really Meaning It
February 6, 2008

Lent begins today with Ash Wednesday: the ashes of this holy day symbolize our mortality: we begin the journey towards Christ's death and resurrection with the realization that we are all mortal: ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Lent is a period of forty days plus six Sundays where we are invited to reflect upon our faith and ways we are called to sacrifice in order to grow closer to God. One of the primary ways we can be in relationship with our God is through prayer. So it is appropriate at the start of Lent to consider our prayer life, as we hear Jesus' instructions concerning prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Listen now for God's Word.

Matthew 6:5-15:

Jesus said, "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask.

Pray then in this way, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God!**

Almost every single type of faith community has some form of prayer. Indigenous tribes dance for rain and pray for their crops and health. Muslims have the discipline to stop whatever they are doing five times a day to pray. Buddhists focus their attention towards meditating and reaching nirvana. According to Gallup polls, more Americans will pray this week than will exercise, drive a car, or go to work. Nine in ten of us pray regularly, while three out of four pray every day.

In his excellent book entitled Prayer, Philip Yancey interviews ordinary people about prayer. Typically the conversation went like this: "Is prayer important to you? Oh yes. How often do you pray? Every day. Approximately how long? Five minutes, well, maybe seven. Do you find prayer satisfying? Not really. Do you sense the presence of God when you pray? Occasionally, not often. Many of those Yancey talked to experienced prayer more as a burden than a pleasure. People generally regarded prayer as very important, and felt guilty about their failure, blaming themselves."¹ Can anyone relate to Yancey's findings?

¹ Philip Yancey, Prayer, p. 13-14.

I suspect that everyone who is here tonight prays. And there may be some of us who are quite proficient in our prayer lives, but I suspect there are many of us who struggle with prayer. In the church, we often discuss the importance of prayer, but we seldom talk about how to pray or the pitfalls of prayer.

Some people may read this passage and think Jesus is telling us not to pray in public. No, far from that! Jesus was reacting against the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders who had turned prayer into a public spectacle. It was important for them to be seen praying in public so that others noticed how religious they were. Their motivation for prayer was to show off how they were good citizens, not to connect with Almighty God.

So before Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord's Prayer, he goes over one of the basic ideas about prayer: it should be sincere and come from the heart. We have to be honest with God. I think we feel a pressure to say the right things to God in prayer, when the Lord just wants to be in relationship with us.

I think sometimes as adults, we over-think things. Some of the most beautiful prayers I have heard since I've been in Martinsville have been from the children and youth of this church, who honestly and directly share with God what is on their hearts and minds. I think we adults can learn from the simplicity and the sincerity of these prayers by our own young people.

When I was in college, I went through several intellectual struggles in my faith; then over a year's time, three people I cared about died, including a twenty-year-old friend and classmate. I was angry with God that these deaths had happened, but I found I could not move on because I thought it was wrong for me, who obviously knew so much less than God, to express any anger toward the Lord. So I kept things bottled up and everything got worse, until I explored my feelings with the college chaplain. He asked, "Why can't you just tell God how you feel?" A great burden was lifted when I realized that I did not have to hide my true feelings from God. As I read the psalms, I was comforted to find within the very pages of the Bible people who poetically expressed my own questions and concerns. Rather than sorting through my anger alone and feeling guilty that I had lacked faith in God, I was instead able to rely upon God, who provided opportunities for me to work through my anger in healthy ways that ended up bolstering my faith.

First and foremost, Jesus encourages us today to be honest with God in prayer. Second, we are all called to find out what works for us in prayer. There is not one right way to pray. We should ask ourselves, what are the most effective ways we can connect with God? Some people create their own space that is their "prayer closet:" it does not have to be a literal closet: it is simply the spot they go to pray. Others listen to soft music as they pray. I have found that I am more focused when I am either writing my prayers in a journal or if I am walking and praying at the same time. Some of you may have heard of a prayer labyrinth, which is a space created for people to be able to pray as they walk.

I want to focus on one word in the Lord's Prayer that is revelatory. Jesus invites us to look at God in a completely new way when he calls God "Father." In the Old

Testament, God's was seen as holy, distant, and someone to be feared. Greek legends in that day also stated that the gods were capricious and cruel.

Before humanity possessed fire, legend states that Prometheus was a god and life without fire was cheerless and difficult for mortals. In pity, Prometheus took fire from heaven and gave it as a gift to humanity. Zeus, the king of the gods, was very angry that men should receive this gift. So Zeus took Prometheus and chained him to a rock in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, where he was tortured by heat and thirst by day and the cold of night. Zeus also prepared a vulture to tear out Prometheus' liver, which always grew back, only to be torn out again. That is what happened when a god tried to help people. People in the ancient world saw gods as jealous, vengeful, and grudging, who did not care about helping mere mortals.²

Jesus certainly affirms that God is holy, but Jesus, who knew our Lord more intimately than anyone ever has and ever will, had good news: that God longs to love us like a Father. The word "Abba" that Jesus uses in the Lord's Prayer is actually better translated as daddy.

So when we are learning how to pray, I envision God is like a father who is watching his daughter take her first steps or his son who is learning how to ride a bike. When his child makes a mistake as she is trying to walk, a father is not upset with his daughter, but he is there to catch her when she falls. He is ready to cheer her on when she succeeds.

Remembering God as Father encourages me to be vulnerable with God in prayer, realizing that God is supportive of me as a loving father or mother would be.

Don Postema says, "I used to write in my daily calendar '7-7:30 AM: Prayer.' But many times I passed that up. It was one more thing to pass by that day. Now I write '7-7:30 AM: God.' Somehow that's a little harder to neglect. My reluctance to pray increases when I regard it as a necessary discipline, and it decreases when I see it as a time to keep company with God."³

If I have an appointment to meet a friend for coffee, I wouldn't think of not showing up. If I were late, out of consideration for other person, I would call them. We place a high priority on our relationships and are willing to work to strengthen a good friendship. But if I was planning to vacuum, clean the bathroom, or rake leaves, I would not give it a second thought if something else came up and I could not accomplish that task. I think the key to making prayer more vibrant is to have an attitude adjustment: to see it less as a chore and more as relationship building. An appointment with God is an appointment worth keeping.

So why pray? Jesus tells us it is not to show off how religious we are; it is not supposed to be a chore. There are potential pitfalls to our prayer life, but I am grateful that God longs to connect with us. Prayer is an opportunity for our Holy God to love us tenderly like a Father. Prayer is a time to experience God's peace and to develop a healthy, life-giving relationship with our Creator and our Savior. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² This story comes from William Barclay's Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, p. 200.

³ Philip Yancey, Prayer, p. 163.