

HOW TO “PRAY WITHOUT CEASING”

(02/16/2020)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
Matthew 28:1-9; John 15:12-15

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Sometime in the next few years I would like us to engage in a study group on Islam, about which, I am ashamed to say, I know little. My relative ignorance of one of the major world religions, one of the three monotheistic religions, runs counter to my belief that the more we know about each other, and the more we will be able to learn from each other, the more we will be able to find a common ground on which we can build a deeper relationship. If we can do this, we might be able to build a better world—together!

I think of this as a consciousness-raising experience for me--something that would help me to identify and confront some of my stereotypes and prejudices against Islam. I know that my understanding of Islam has been shaped by the western media and by viewing it from a political perspective. It is difficult to shake the image of what ISIS has done to innocent civilians in Syria, Iraq, and Africa without having it affect the way we think about the religious beliefs that find expression in this evil. The basic teachings of Islam have not always found expression in the lives of individual Muslims and certain Muslim sects. In this, if we are honest, we hear the echo of Christianity.

Islam, like Christianity, is described as a “religion of the book.” Our book is the Bible; theirs is the Koran. The Koran is different from the Bible in that it is believed to have been directly dictated to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel. It is not a compilation of stories: stories about Israel, about Israel’s religious leaders and prophets, the life of Jesus, and the travels of the early apostles, as our Bible is; it is more theological. Muslims believe it was not only divinely inspired, as we believe is true of our Bible; they believe it contains the actual spoken words of God in Arabic. In some ways it seems closer to the writings of the apostle Paul--and I think I know why.

I think we could call Mohammed’s encounter with the angel Gabriel during this transmission a religious experience. It changed his life. It gave rise to a religious movement, Islam, that has spread throughout the world and that claims approximately 1.8 billion followers

(almost twice the number of Christians). Approximately 85% of Muslims are Sunni; 15% are Shia. The nation with the most Muslims is not Iran, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia—it is Indonesia.

In any event, Mohammed is reported to have had a second religious experience later in his life. In this mystical experience, Mohammed reports that he traveled upward through each of the seven heavens until at last he came into the presence of God. As he passed through each of the lower heavens, he noted the presence of various prophets of other faiths. In the sixth heaven, he had the opportunity to stop and chat with Moses.

After Mohammed completed his journey and entered into the presence of Allah, he returned to earth by moving downward through the heavens. As he passed through the sixth, he stopped to chat once again with Moses. Moses asked Mohammed what God had said to him. Mohammed said that God wanted his people to pray to him fifty times a day.

Moses was aghast! He told Mohammed that people will never be able to do this. He told Mohammed to go back and ask God to be more reasonable. So, Mohammed returned to heaven and asked God to cut these humans a little slack. When he returned to Moses, Mohammed reported that God had reluctantly agreed to reduce the number of times people should pray each day from fifty to forty.

Moses remained adamant! He said that human beings would never be able to live up to that standard, and because they would constantly fail to live up to the prescribed ideal, they would become discouraged. He prevailed upon Mohammed to go back once again and ask God to be more realistic, or at least a little more compassionate.

When Mohammed returned to Moses the third time, Mohammed told him that God had reluctantly agreed to settle for five times a day, one-tenth of what was originally considered to be ideal. This is why Muslims pray five times a day: upon awakening, at noon, in the middle of the afternoon, in the early evening, and when they go to bed. According to the legend, Moses was still skeptical that this was going to work. Moses apparently knew a lot about human nature through his having had to deal with God's people during their long sojourn in the wilderness. He doubted that most believers, even devout believers, would pray five times a day.

When I first heard this story, I thought about the importance of the number seven, for Mohammed reportedly traversed seven heavens or the seven layers of heaven. Seven has always been regarded as a special or magical number. I always assumed that it was special because seven was Mickey Mantle's number. I can see some of you smirking—but just think about what

makes a number a special number. When you think of the number 2, what comes to mind? That's right--Derek Jeter. How about the number 3? No, not the Trinity—that was Babe Ruth's number. And the number 4? Not Jung's quaternity; it was the number of Lee Cumming's favorite ballplayer—Lou Gherig. Number 5—Joe DiMaggio. And so on. Wait a minute—I just realized that I'm re-preaching an old sermon that I used when I pastored a church in the Bronx; I forgot that this is Red Sox Nation! However, getting back to my point, I have reluctantly come to concede that the number 7 may have more to do with the number of planets that were visible to the ancients: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sun and the moon. So, seven became an archetypal number, one of the numbers indicating wholeness.

The apostle Paul, like Mohammed, had a mystical experience later in his life. As we heard this morning, Paul had an experience of being “caught up in the third heaven.” Since many mystics indicate that there are seven levels of consciousness, it is possible that Paul did not go as far or as deep as Mohammed. It is also possible that Mohammed, aware of Paul's experience because he lived five hundred years later than Paul, decided to one-up the apostle by indicating that he went “all the way.” He even went one level further than Moses, who apparently stopped in or was consigned to the sixth.

In his description of his mystical experience, Paul says he doesn't know whether he was in the body or out of the body. This experience was different from his experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In that encounter, Paul became a follower of Christ instead of a persecutor. This experience of being caught up the heavens was a separate religious experience.

I have always wondered where Paul got the theological insights that he conveys in his letters. Remember, Paul never met Jesus. We know that Peter, James, and some of the other apostles served as mentors to Paul shortly after his conversion. But much of Paul's teaching is different from the teachings of the apostles, unique to him.

I think Paul received a lot of his insight into the nature of God and Christ through his mystical experience, just as Mohammed did with his. I find Paul's experience and his teaching, shaped and informed as it was by the risen Christ, to be more authentic *for me as a Christian* than Mohammed's. However, I still draw more inspiration from the life and teaching of Jesus than from Paul. I feel I need to cultivate my own experience of God through prayer. I want to ground my faith in my own experience, just as Jesus, Paul, and Mohammed did in theirs.

As we heard this morning, in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul tells us to “pray without ceasing.” If we were to pray without ceasing, we would constantly be consciously in the presence of God. We would be present to God, to our Source, throughout the day. This is difficult to do. In fact, it is impossible to do. This is probably why God set the required number of times lower even than Paul’s ideal; instead of all day long, God set it at fifty. At the urging of Moses and Mohammed, however, God cut us more and more slack, reducing the number to forty and finally to five. This is where Muslims stop. They pray to God five times a day.

Let me ask you a question: “How many times a day do you pray?” You don’t need to answer out loud. Just think about it.

I find the importance that Muslims place on prayer a little humbling. Many of us would say that we pray only once a week, on Sunday mornings in church. Some pray even less: once or twice a month or once or twice a year, as often as they attend worship. A Muslim would say that by not attempting to discern God’s will and by refusing to submit to God’s will, we are disrespecting and marginalizing God. We are placing ourselves, our own little ego, in the center of our life. The Muslims may have a point.

This morning, however, I am not going to try to make us all feel guilty for not praying as often as observant Muslims do. I would rather try to help us think of prayer in a slightly different way, in a way that could enable us not only to pray more, but even to follow Paul’s directive to “pray without ceasing.”

We could begin by making a distinction between formal prayer and informal prayer. We engage in formal prayer when we say The Lord’s Prayer, when we join in a unison reading of the Prayer of Invocation or the Prayer of Dedication. I am not sure what Muslims pray during their five formal prayer periods, but I suspect that they are formal, ritualized prayers. Formal ritualized prayers can be very powerful, very meaningful. But they are not the only way to pray.

On communion Sundays, we employ a more informal type of prayer. We sit in silence and picture Jesus sitting next to us, remembering that Jesus is actually sitting next to us, that he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Then we talk with Jesus. We bring before him our cares and concerns: that which is distorted and in need of straightening; that which is weak and in need of strengthening; that which is wounded and in need of healing. Then we try to listen to what Jesus is saying to us.

As we do this, we are actually conversing with Jesus as a friend. This calls to mind the passage in the Gospel of John that we heard this morning. Jesus, who is approaching his last days on earth in human form, tells his disciples,

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.

“I have called you friends.” This is one of the most profound and deeply meaningful teachings of Jesus. It shapes not only our relationship with Jesus, but also our relationship with God.

In the seventeenth century, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a Carmelite monk, developed a spiritual discipline that he called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Though he was not an educated man, Brother Lawrence became a spiritual giant solely through the practice of this spiritual discipline. The practice is quite simple. It is something all of us can do. Brother Lawrence encouraged us to be in constant conversation with God or Jesus. He maintained that this is really the only spiritual discipline and the only type of prayer that we need to practice.

Brother Lawrence would tell us that the heart of our Christian faith is not what we *believe about* God and Jesus. He would tell us that faith is more of a *relationship* than a belief system. Our faith journey as Christians is the process of deepening our relationship with God through Jesus. It begins with our awareness of God's presence within us. Our conversation with this presence shapes and deepens our soul. As we open our heart and our mind to God, as we talk with God and listen, we allow God to create us. Then, through us, God creates a new world.

Now let's go back to the question I asked you earlier: “How many times a day do you pray?” I suspect that many of you, in response to my question, pictured a kind of formal prayer, a prayer that uses religious language. However, when we look carefully, I think we may be more in line with what Brother Lawrence regarded as prayer than we think. We don't even have to put our thoughts and feelings into words. If we are just conscious of God's presence, of Jesus' presence in the everyday moments of our life, that is prayer.

Our scripture lessons this morning speak to the difference between a Jesus who is our friend and a Jesus who is an object of worship. In the passage near the end of Matthew, Mary has just been encountered by the angel at the tomb. The angel tells Mary that Jesus is not in the tomb; he has been raised from the dead. He tells her to tell the disciples that Jesus is going

ahead to Galilee, where they will see him. Mary and the other women leave the tomb in fear and joy and run to tell the disciples what they have experienced. Then we read,

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

"They took hold of his feet and worshipped him." While I understand the impulse to worship our risen Lord, I am concerned that making Jesus an object of worship creates a distance. I find no evidence that Jesus wanted people to worship him. He continually pointed past himself to God and to the kingdom of God. The kind of distance that accompanies worship shapes our understanding of prayer. It leads us to believe that prayer needs to be formal, that it can only take place in certain "sanctified" places at a special time of the week, that it involves the use of certain religious words, or that it should be accompanied by gestures like kneeling or raising our hands. I think this way of thinking undermines the true meaning of the Resurrection and the affirmation that our Lord lives—in the world and also within us!

We need to expand our understanding of prayer if we are to follow Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing." There is no possible way we can do this if we are thinking of prayer as formal prayer in the context of worship. This kind of prayer is important, and it can be helpful. However, we can think of prayer as more than this.

I don't do Facebook. I confess that I take a certain pride in this; I feel superior to those who have drunk the Cool-Aid and are slaves to social media. It is not unlike the sense of pride I have in my stubborn refusal to watch *The Bachelor* (though I think Peter should have kept Mykenna and let Victoria go). However, I confess that I am not above using postings on Facebook when they illustrate a point that I am trying to make in my sermon. This is true of the following description of prayer that my wife recently shared with me. It is entitled, "Do You Pray?" The anonymous contributor writes,

What is a prayer?

Prayer doesn't just happen when we kneel or put our hands together and focus and expect things from God.

Thinking positive and wishing good for others is a prayer.

When you hug a friend--that's a prayer.

When you cook something to nourish family and friends—that's a prayer.

When we send off our near and dear ones and say, "Drive safely" or "Be safe"—that's a prayer.

When you are helping someone in need by giving your time and energy—you are

praying.
When you forgive someone in your heart—that is prayer.
Prayer is a vibration. A feeling. A thought. Prayer is the voice of love, friendship,
genuine relationship. Prayer is an expression of your silent being.
Keep praying always.

Let me ask the question again: “How often do you pray?” Think about it. And what would it mean, what would we look like if we were to truly “pray without ceasing?”

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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