

THE POWER OF PRAYER -- VI PRAYING FROM THE HEART

(06/16/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 11:1-13

“He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’” (Luke 11:1)

In our scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus’ disciples ask him to teach them to pray--just like John the Baptist taught his disciples.

The disciples’ question implies that John taught his disciples to pray. I wonder what John taught his disciples. We don’t know; there is not enough information. I’m just curious: would his teaching about prayer have been similar to Jesus’ teaching? Would it have been different? Was John praying to the same God to which Jesus prayed? Was John’s God different? Was it the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Or was it the revelation of a different dimension of this great mystery we call God? In any event, knowing John, as we do, we can assume that his teaching about prayer probably had something to do with sin and repentance.

The disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They are beginning to understand how important prayer is to their spiritual journey. They see how important prayer is to Jesus, how it guides his path, how it sustains him in difficult times. They have noticed how he calls God *Abba*, which is a very familiar way of addressing one’s father or mother. This is different from what they learned as children in the synagogue, where people addressed God in more formal ways. They have noticed how Jesus’ prayer can heal the sick even at a distance, how it can bring people back from the dead. They not only want to learn how to pray; they also want to learn how to pray as Jesus does.

The disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Note that Jesus doesn’t do what they ask. He doesn’t teach them how to pray. Instead, he teaches them a prayer. It is a good prayer. In fact, it’s a great prayer! We call it *The Lord’s Prayer*. It’s certainly not a bad prayer to pray if you are looking for a prayer to pray. However, it does not answer the disciples’ question. It does not teach the disciples *how* to pray.

I don’t know why Jesus doesn’t do what the disciples ask. I would be a lot more interested in his answer to their question than I am in the prayer he taught them. There is a difference between teaching someone how to pray and teaching the person a prayer. When you teach someone a prayer, the person can memorize the prayer and say it daily without knowing how to pray, without knowing what prayer is all about.

I have a hunch that this is what happened to many of us as children: we learned certain prayers like *The Lord’s Prayer*, *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, or memorized certain prayers we

call “grace” at meals without learning how to pray. Those of us who have grown up Roman Catholic may have memorized the Rosary, and perhaps even said it daily--without really knowing how to pray. When this happens, our conversation with God is confined to the prayers we happen to have learned. But prayer is a lot more than this!

I wish Jesus had done what his disciples asked. I think he cheated them (and us) by his answer. I wish Jesus had taught his disciples how to pray because he knew how to pray. He *really* knew how to pray! His prayer was deep and meaningful and powerful! At the Mount of Olives, as recorded in the 23rd chapter of Luke we read:

Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

Luke tells us that Jesus prayed “more earnestly.” How could he pray more earnestly? In his prayer, his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. This is pretty deep prayer! This is a long way from my prayer! So why doesn't Jesus teach his disciples how to pray? Why does he just give them a prayer to memorize? They, and we, need more than that, or our own prayer life, and consequently our faith, our relationship with God, will become too narrow, formal, and formulaic.

I wonder if Jesus doesn't teach his disciples how to pray because he can't. Maybe you can't teach someone how to pray. You can teach someone to think or say a prayer of confession, a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of supplication, and a prayer of intercession every time they pray. You can teach someone to think or say certain prayers, like The Lord's Prayer or the Rosary, but it is difficult to teach someone how to pray.

This is just beginning to dawn on me now, as I am preaching the sixth in a series of sermons about prayer, that prayer is not something that can be easily taught. I am still learning about prayer, and I am continually trying to deepen my own prayer life. We can look at several ways of understanding prayer, which is what we have been trying to do in this sermon series, but perhaps we cannot teach another person how to pray.

Maybe prayer can't be taught because true prayer arises from the depths of our heart. It arises from the depths of our personal relationship with God. The deeper our relationship with God, the less narrow and egocentric our prayer will be. The more deeply we are in communion with God, the more joyous, the more loving, the more powerful our prayer will be. In answer to the disciples' inquiry, Jesus might have simply told them to deepen their relationship with God. Then their conversation with God and the way they look at life will become a prayer.

Jesus probably would have said this with tongue in cheek because the reverse is also the case; one of the most important ways that we can deepen our relationship with God is through prayer. So, prayer will help us deepen our relationship with God, and the deeper our relationship with God becomes, the more powerful and transformative our prayer will become. In this case it is an amazing and wonderful vicious circle!

Jesus does not teach his disciples how to pray, but he does give them an example in the way he lives his life, in his own spiritual disciplines. His disciples see that he prays, and they see how he prays. We, like the disciples, can learn something about prayer from observing the Master, from seeing what prayer meant to him and how he prayed.

Look at Jesus' prayers. They are personal. They are spontaneous. They are not formal. They are not structured. In his prayer, Jesus talks with God. His prayers come from the heart.

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." "Father, forgive them for they do not understand what they are doing." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." What would it mean for us not to pray these particular prayers but to *pray like this*, to have these be our honest prayers?

Prayer, true prayer, the kind of prayer that Jesus prayed, arises not from the head but from the heart. Prayers are not exercises in theology; they are honest conversations with God. This can't be taught! It must be done, again and again and again in our stumbling ways, until our prayer deepens and until our prayer becomes an important part of a deepening faith.

I remember my father telling me about a time when he overheard Ty Cobb trying to teach a rookie how to drag bunt. Cobb was frustrated because *he* could do it, he was a master at drag bunting, but he couldn't teach it. Finally, he told the rookie to just do it a couple of thousand times until he got the rhythm, until he got the flow of just when in the cycle to drop his bat, just when in the cycle to start to run, which is different depending on whether you are batting right-handed or left-handed. Cobb said, "Just do it again and again and again, and maybe it will come to you. Then again, maybe it won't. I don't know."

Maybe this was what Jesus told his disciples. Just do it again and again and again, and hopefully it will come to you. He probably also told them, probably promised them that if they *didn't* do it, they would greatly increase the chances that it will never come!

I would like to share two examples of what I would call praying from the heart, examples that have been meaningful to me, that have touched me deeply. The first comes from the movie

Shadowlands. It is the story of C. S. Lewis, the author and lay theologian at Oxford University, and of the gradual dawning and deepening of his love for Joy, the woman he took as his wife.

When Joy comes down with cancer, Lewis is given a little sermonette by his bishop on why and how he should believe in the power of prayer. Lewis responds that he isn't praying because he has a *theory* about prayer; he isn't praying because he *believes* in the power of prayer; he prays because he *has to!* He prays because he has to! It just comes out of him! This is what I would call true prayer, prayer from the heart. It cannot be taught; it must be done.

The second example is taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I really like this poem! Some day, when I have the time, I am going to memorize it. You know the story. A sailor kills a beautiful, a magnificent albatross just for sport. As a punishment he is cursed; he is forced to wear the dead bird around his neck. This is the origin of the saying "an albatross around one's neck." As a further punishment, as long as he wears the bird around his neck, his ship is becalmed. One by one, his fellow sailors die of thirst. He, also, is dying of thirst, but the curse does not allow him to die, to find that blessed release for which he longs.

In Part IV, the wedding guest, to whom the now ancient mariner is telling his story, begins the following exchange. As you listen to this powerful soliloquy about prayer, think of whether you have ever had the sort of experience that the ancient mariner is describing. The wedding guest says,

*"I fear thee, ancient Mariner!
I fear thy skinny hand!
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,
As is the ribbed sea-sand.*

*I fear thee and thy glittering eye,
And thy skinny hand, so brown." --
Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest!
This body dropt not down.*

*Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.*

*The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on, and so did I.*

I looked upon the rotting sea,

*And drew my eyes away;
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay.*

*I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.*

*I closed my lids, and kept them closed,
And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet.*

*The cold sweat melted from their limbs,
Nor rot nor reek did they:
The look with which they looked on me
Had never passed away.*

*An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die.*

*The moving Moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside --*

*Her beams bemoaned the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,
The charmed water burnt away
A still and awful red.*

*Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water-snakes:
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.*

*Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:*

*Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.*

*O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.*

*The self-same moment I could pray:
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.*

All of a sudden, the man who killed for sport sees the beauty of one of the least of God's little creatures. All of a sudden, from the depths of his heart, a prayer arises! He blesses the little water snakes! He isn't even aware that it is a prayer. As he says, it arises from him unaware. But it is a prayer, a prayer from the heart! And at that moment, the albatross, the burden he had been carrying and forcing others to carry, falls from his neck.

This is how Jesus prayed! I don't know how Jesus could teach this to his disciples and to us. All I know is that we have to do it again and again and again. We have to make it a part of us. When we see the world the way the mariner saw it *in that moment*, we are seeing God! We are one with God! It may happen when you hear the distinctive song of a cardinal or the drumming of a woodpecker. It may happen when you look at the buds on the trees or the first snowflakes of winter. It may happen as you hold the bread and the cup in your hand or when you sing the words of one of our hymns. When this happens, let that prayer of happiness, of joy, of love arise to your mind and to your lips. These little moments of joy, of love--and there should be many of them in life--are prayers! They come from the heart!

"Lord, teach us to pray." Maybe what we need to ask for is the grace to see life and ourselves in a certain way. If we do this, then a prayer will arise from our heart. Maybe what we need to do is deepen our relationship with God. If we do this, as Henri Nouwen tells us, our life becomes a prayer. If this is what it means to learn how to pray, then *everything Jesus did and taught* was an answer to this very important question by his disciples.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later in the week.