

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PRAYER – I
The First Sunday in Lent

(03/06/2022)

Scripture Lesson: James 5:13-16:
2 Corinthians 5:17

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. . . The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5:13-16)

“So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

What a nice feeling to be worshipping together once again in this sanctuary! The last time we were here was Christmas Eve when, under the shadow of COVID, and out of an abundance of care, concern, and caution, we gently hummed or said to ourselves the words to “Silent Night” and “Joy to the World!” We have not met together for worship or anything else since then.

In some ways, that special moment that we shared so long ago seems like only yesterday. I am reminded that Louis Ponce de Leon, returning to his university after five years’ imprisonment by the Inquisition, resumed his lectures with the words: “As we were saying yesterday, . . .”

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Easter. It is also a time to embark upon a spiritual journey, a journey that will hopefully end with the death of our “old self” and our rebirth or resurrection in Christ!

Last week, when we reflected on the event and the meaning of the transfiguration, we noted the central role that prayer held in Jesus’ life. It seems to me that prayer was Jesus’ only spiritual discipline, and it is a spiritual discipline that he gives to us. According to Luke, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John “up on the mountain to pray.” While at the top of the mountain, the disciples have a powerful religious experience! They finally understand who Jesus is!

As we noted last week, Jesus often goes off by himself to pray. This raises the question of why we, when we are faced with a problem or a difficult decision, don’t follow Jesus’ example, why we don’t go off by ourselves to pray.

This Lent I would like us to explore the theme of prayer. As we try to understand what prayer is, and what prayer is not, as we examine the spiritual gift of prayer--how Jesus prayed and what he taught us about prayer, I hope that prayer will become more meaningful to us. The more meaningful it becomes, the more likely we are to integrate it into our daily lives.

A second impetus for trying to deepen our understanding of prayer is the compassion we feel for members or friends of our church family who are on our prayer list, and, especially this

week, the people of Ukraine. I think we would all like to know more about intercessory prayer: how it works, why it sometimes seems to work, and why it so often doesn't seem to bring about the state of affairs for which we pray.

You know me quite well by now. You know that I tend to think about things. It is important for me to understand my religion. Although I have a deep appreciation for mystery, I can't believe something that I don't understand.

I am aware that my more than marginal propensity to try to understand our Christian beliefs, especially my habit of trying to understand them from different perspectives, of trying to see how they intersect with science and psychology, of finding parallels in other religious traditions, is experienced as challenging and stimulating by some, and as irrelevant and irreverent by others. I'm sorry; this is just the way I am!

As I have mentioned before, my parents had two different approaches to religion. My mother's approach was what Jungians would call a feeling approach. Jung says that the feeling function is the value-placing function; it tells us what we like and what we don't like. My mom was not a thinker, but she had a lot of feeling for her religion. It was very important to her. She didn't want to think about her faith; she just believed. And her belief helped her to live the beautiful and loving life that she lived!

Even though my father, like my mother, did not even have a high school education, his typological approach to processing was what Jungians would call a thinking approach. Jung says that the thinking function is the function that makes sense of things; it helps us to understand. My dad's approach to religion involved examining and questioning. It did not assume that there is one right set of answers that we either have or don't have, or that some people have, and other people don't have. My dad's faith was always evolving. I really enjoyed our conversations, especially in the last five or ten years before he died.

I am a lot more like my father than my mother. My mother would tell us that we don't need to understand God; we just need to *believe* in God. As we have discussed in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study and Growth Group, she has a point. The twelfth century spiritual guide entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which was written by an unknown English mystic, tells us that we can never build a bridge to God through knowledge. The only way we can pierce what the writer called "the thick cloud of unknowing" is through *love*!

My father also has a point. My father would ask us how we could love someone whom we don't know. He would tell us that our concept of God, our understanding of God invariably shapes our relationship with God. My father, like me, was particularly interested in the God that was revealed to us in Jesus. He would tell us that the more we understand about Jesus, the more we will understand about God. As I said, my father also has a point.

My mother would tell us that we don't need to understand prayer; we just need to pray. She prayed every day. My father would be interested in how prayer works, in whether it makes sense from a scientific point of view. My father would tell us that if we don't understand prayer, how it works, how it can change us, how it can change the world, *and how it might even be able to change God*, we are not apt to pray on a regular basis.

During this Lenten season, let's think about prayer from both my mother's and my father's perspective. Let's try to understand what prayer is and what prayer isn't. Let's also engage in prayer as a spiritual discipline, a Lenten discipline that can deepen our prayer life. For example, we might follow the apostle Paul's directive in Romans 12:12 to be "more constant in prayer." If we do, we will make prayer a more central part of our faith experience.

There are many types of prayer. Some prayer is formal and standard. In our Sunday morning worship, we utilize standard prayers of invocation; prayers of thanksgiving; prayers of confession; prayers for strength, healing, or guidance; and prayers of intercession, prayers for people whom we know to be in need. These prayers serve to orient us or guide us into a certain way of thinking and feeling in relation to God and our brothers and sisters.

However, prayer doesn't have to be formal; it can also be personal and informal. When we pray to God, we can use everyday language, just like we would if we were talking to another person; we don't have to use fancy religious language. We also utilize this type of prayer during our worship service, e.g., on communion Sundays. This type of prayer can take place any time in the day when we feel like talking things over with God. I have a hunch that this is how Jesus prayed.

The Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen, whose writings I have found inspirational, has written,

There are as many ways to pray as there are moments in life. Sometimes we seek out a quiet spot and want to be alone, sometimes we look for a friend and want to be together. Sometimes we like a book, sometimes we prefer music. Sometimes we want to sing out with hundreds, sometimes whisper with a few. Sometimes we want to say it with words, sometimes with a deep silence.

In all these moments, we gradually make our lives more of a prayer and we open our hands to be led by God even to places we would rather not go.

"We gradually make our lives more of a prayer, and we open our hands to be led by God even to places we would rather not go." I don't think Nouwen means that in prayer God will lead us to dark and terrible places; I think he means that in the deepest kind of prayer, our egocentric little life with its self-centered values will be challenged and perhaps even shattered. This can be the most beautiful kind of death! And the Lenten and Easter seasons are all about death and resurrection.

There are no right and wrong ways to pray. The important thing is to pray, to talk with God. During this Lenten season, we will be looking at different ways to pray in the hope that each of us will be able to find the way that is most meaningful to us.

James, in his letter to the early church, tells us we need to pray more often than we do. He tells us, “Are any of you suffering? You should pray.” He tells us that we should also pray when things are going well. He tells us that when we are sick, we should ask others to pray with us or for us. Regarding the matter of intercessory prayer, the prayers we offer up on behalf of those whom we know to be in special need, James tells us,

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

This passage is a call to engage in the kind of prayer that we experience when we pray for people whose names are included in our prayer list. The Jerusalem Bible’s translation of that passage in James’s letter reads, “If any one of you is in trouble, you should pray.” It also has a slightly different reading on the last verse when it says, “the heartfelt prayer of a good person works very powerfully.” We do not have to get into a debate about what it means to be a “good person” or to be “righteous.” The point is that to be effective our prayer needs to be “heartfelt.” We need to pray with our heart as well as our mind, with our feelings as well as our thoughts, if our prayer is to make a difference.

When we pray for healing in ourselves or other people, we need to remember that there are several kinds of healing. Some of us need healing in our relationships with other people, perhaps with some member or members of our family. Some of us need healing in our minds, in the way we think and feel about ourselves, others, and life. Some of us need healing from traumatic events or relationships that trouble us, that give rise to destructive or self-defeating patterns in our life. And some of us stand in need of physical healing.

James tells us that our “sin” can cause us to become sick in body, mind, and spirit. Sin can cause our relationships with those we love to become distorted and twisted. Remember, sin is not just the damaging or hurtful things we have said or done, the ways we have strayed from the guidelines God has given us to live a deep and meaningful life. The Greek word for sin is *‘hamartia*, which means “missing the mark.” We sin when we are not living out of our true center. We sin when we are not being the unique, authentic person that God wants us to be.

Our suffering is often the symptom of our sin. Because we live within systems, the suffering of those around us, those in our families, can also be the symptom of our sin. James tells us that if we confess our sin and repent, we take an important first step toward healing.

Finally, James witnesses to the power of intercessory prayer. Sometimes, not always but sometimes, our prayer can help to heal another person.

Larry Dossey, a physician and the author of *Healing Words*, a study of the power of prayer, shares an experience from the early days of his residency training at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas.

One of Dossey's patients had terminal cancer in both lungs. Dossey advised the man regarding his treatment options, options that might prolong his life for a short time, but which would limit the quality of that time. The patient opted for no treatment.

On his rounds, Dossey noted that the patient often received visitors from his church and that they sang hymns and prayed together. Dossey thought, "Soon they'll be singing and praying at his funeral."

A year later, a colleague from Parkland called to ask Dossey if he wanted to see his old patient. Dossey couldn't believe what his colleague was saying! He couldn't believe the man was still alive! Dossey went over to Parkland, visited with his former patient, and reviewed his X-rays. He was stunned! The man's lungs were completely clear--there was no sign of the cancer that had been so evident, so malignant, and so pervasive only a year earlier.

"His therapy has been remarkable," the radiologist said, looking at the X-rays. "Therapy?" Dossey replied. "There wasn't any therapy--unless you consider prayer."

Dossey told two of his medical-school professors what had happened. Neither was willing to acknowledge that the man's healing was miraculous. They were either unwilling to talk about it or attributed it to the natural course of the disease. But Dossey was convinced that something very unusual had happened. Even though he had long ago given up the faith of his childhood in favor of a belief in the power of modern medicine, he began to open himself to the possibility of the healing power of prayer.

So, what happened? How was this man healed? What role did his faith have in his healing? How important was his membership in his church? How important was the faith of his friends who prayed for him? Would the healing have taken place if the man had not believed in God or the healing power of prayer? Would it have happened without the prayers of the faithful in his church community?

There are also the troubling questions. Why was this man healed and not others? Why not the person in the next bed? Why not the child down the hall whose parents and their church prayed twenty-four hours a day for healing? How can we understand God's role in what happened? What does prayer teach us about the mind-body relationship? What does prayer teach us about the importance of our faith? And what does it teach us about God?

For the next few weeks, as we think about the healing power of prayer, I would like us to consider several examples of the healing power of intercessory prayer that have been obtained as

the results of scientific experiments. Perhaps we can remember some examples from our own life of a time when we began to think that maybe, just maybe, there was something to this healing power of prayer. I would like us to think about these examples, to hold them in our mind. I would like us to think about the healing power of prayer--both for ourselves and those for whom we pray. Then I would like us to think about why we don't pray more often than we do.

Jesus, James, and Paul invite us, in this Lenten season, to embark upon what has been called the contemplative journey. They invite us to open our hearts to a great gift, to accept and embrace the spiritual discipline of prayer that our relationship with God might be deepened.

In these moments, let us hold in our prayers those who are in need around the world, especially those in the Ukraine, those members or friends of our church community who are carrying heavy burdens, those members of our family who are hurting or troubled, and ourselves that we, too, might be healed and made whole in body, mind, and spirit.

Let us be together in a state of prayer, celebrating the deep connection, the deep communion we have with each other, as we share now in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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