

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PRAYER-V
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

(04/03/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 6:1-15

“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.” (Matthew 6:6)

“The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer knows who he is or the fact that he is praying.” (St. Anthony)

During our worship services throughout this Lenten season, we are focusing on the power of prayer. I hope our reflections will lead us to a deeper understanding of the meaning and power of prayer, will lead us to believe more fully in the power of intercessory prayer, and will lead us to pray more constantly and more meaningfully in our daily life.

I know this is an unusual way to begin our reflection on a communion Sunday, but I would like to share an insight from the spiritual path of Zen Buddhism. The Canadian Rinzai Zen Master Maurine Stuart (1922-1990), one of the first Zen masters in America, in her book *Subtle Sound*, has written:

The word “meditation” comes from the Latin meditare, which is the passive form of the verb, meaning “being moved to the center.” It is not the active form, which is “moving to the center.” We are being moved to the center. This center is our own essence. Sitting after sitting, letting everything go, we become more aware of our own personal center. We become more rooted in it. This simple act of sitting absolutely still, letting everything drop off, has far-reaching effects.

Sitting still is not what some of us may have imagined spiritual practice to be. We may think that it involves something more impressive. But those of us who do it, those of us who are present at this moment, know that this is it. Sitting absolutely still, body and mind are not separate. Our state of mind at any given moment becomes clearer in this condition of being present, completely present. And there is great healing power in this.

I am going to read the first part of this quote again. This time when you hear the word “meditation,” think prayer. When you hear “the center” or “our own personal center,” think God or the Holy Spirit. When Ms. Stuart says, “sitting absolutely still,” think of letting go of your attachments, your everyday concerns, to be with God in prayer.

If you do this, you may be able to see why I believe that much of what we call the differences in the various world religions may be little more than our use of different words, different concepts, different language, different conceptual frameworks. I also believe this is true of the relationship between Jungian psychology and the spiritual path we know as the Christian faith. What Jung called the Self (with a capital “S”) is what we call God or the Divine, and what

Jung calls “the relationship of the ego to the Self” or “the ego-Self axis” is what we call our personal relationship with God. Anyway, listen again to what Ms. Stuart says to us.

The word “meditation” comes from the Latin meditare, which is the passive form of the verb, meaning “being moved to the center.” It is not the active form, which is “moving to the center.” We are being moved to the center. This center is our own essence. Sitting after sitting, letting everything go, we become more aware of our own personal center. We become more rooted in it. This simple act of sitting absolutely still, letting everything drop off, has far-reaching effects . . . and there is great healing power in this.

I never studied Latin (or Greek or Hebrew) in theological school; I was too busy studying psychology, which I thought would be more useful. But I think this is a deep insight into what we call prayer. Ms. Stuart is telling us that prayer is not something we *do*; it is something that is *done to us*. It is not that in prayer *we return to God*; it is that in prayer, *we are drawn or pulled back to God*, to our true center. There is a power within us that is always trying to bring us back to our true personal center, to orient our lives with God’s will. We just need to sit very still and let this centering power do its work.

This way of thinking is congruent with a major theme in Christian theology. Karl Barth and other neo-reformation theologians, with whom I am generally at odds, tell us that God has taken the initiative in our relationship, that God has reached out to us before we can ever even think of reaching out to God. I guess you could think of it like the force field that we know as gravity. We don’t have to take the initiative to experience gravity; it is already there. Whether we believe it is there or not, whether we want it to be there or not, if we fall off a ladder, we will discover that it is already there, that it is always there, and that it affects us more than we realize.

Prayer is something we can do, but it is more than this; it is something that is done to us. When we quiet ourselves and engage in the process of letting go of our attachments, something happens to us. We feel ourselves pulled toward our true center, which is the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ, or the image of God within us. It is in this sense that prayer is a spiritual gift.

This insight is congruent with the understanding of prayer that we have been exploring throughout this Lenten season. We have considered the teaching that when we pray, we are not building a bridge to a God from whom we have become separated through our sin; we are opening our conscious mind and heart to the God who is already within us. When we quiet our minds and open ourselves to God, we become more aware of that transcendent center within us—the image of God that is implanted in our soul. Our experience of this presence can heal and transform our life. Then, through us, it can heal and transform the world.

Some of our hymns articulate this theology. For example, in 1892, Lucy Larcom wrote the words to today’s closing hymn, *Draw Thou My Soul, O Christ, Closer to Thine*. Ms. Larcom suggests that rather than thinking of prayer as our effort to draw closer to Christ, we might think of prayer as Christ drawing our souls closer to him. When this happens, the light of Christ shines through us. She says,

Draw Thou my soul, O Christ,

*Closer to Thine;
Breathe into every wish
Thy will divine:
Raised my low self above,
Won by Thy deathless love,
Ever, O Christ, through mine
Let Thy life shine.*

*Lead forth my soul, O Christ,
One with Thine own,
Joyful to follow Thee
Through paths unknown:
In Thee my strength renew;
Give me Thy work to do:
Through me Thy truth be shown,
Thy love made known.*

*Not for myself alone
May my prayer be;
Lift Thou Thy world, O Christ,
Closer to Thee:
Cleanse it from guilt and wrong;
Teach it salvation's song,
Till earth, as heaven, fulfill
God's holy will.*

As you recall, our opening hymn, *I Sought the Lord, and Afterward I Knew*, the words of which were written by George W. Chadwick in 1893, expresses this same theme. Drawing from an earlier anonymous hymn, Mr. Chadwick writes,

*I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Saviour true,
No, I was found of Thee.*

*Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;
'Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold
As Thou, dear Lord, on me.*

*I find, I walk, I love, but O the whole
Of love is but my answer, Lord, to Thee!
For Thou wert long before-hand with my soul;*

Always Thou lovedst me.

Now you know why I love our old hymnal! I don't think we could find a more powerful articulation of faith, a more powerful prayer than that which finds expression in these two hymns!

In one of my earlier reflections, I quoted Henri Nouwen, the Roman Catholic theologian and spiritual guide. Nouwen reminds us that there are many ways to pray. He tells us that the deeper purpose of the practice of prayer is to make our lives more of a prayer. He says,

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.

This is a beautiful statement of our goal or objective in learning to pray and in developing the discipline or practice of praying more often and more deeply--to make our lives more of a prayer! If prayer is truly integrated into our lives, as it was with Jesus, our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions become a prayer because they arise in the context of our relationship with God.

When our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions become a prayer, we become transparent to God even as Jesus was transparent to God. Our will becomes God's will. We respond to our sisters and brothers as God would have us respond to them. Another way of putting this is that we take on the mind and the heart of Jesus. When our lives become a prayer, we become more aware of God's presence and more receptive to God's guidance.

Think back to your earliest experiences of prayer, to the prayers you said as a child. Did your family say grace before meals? If so, was it meaningful or did they embarrass you by making the whole family stand up, hold hands, and pray when you were eating out at a restaurant? Did you say a prayer when you woke up in the morning? If you were Roman Catholic, did you say the Rosary before you went to bed at night? Did you pray "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep?"

When you were a child in Sunday school, did you memorize certain prayers? Did these prayers become mechanistic and meaningless, or did they become powerful and centering through their repetition?

Think about your prayer life now. If you no longer say prayers when you go to bed at night, when did you stop and why? Do you say a prayer when you arise in the morning? Jesus warns against the use of empty phrases in prayer. But just because we use a formal or structured prayer at certain times of the day, it does not mean this prayer is empty! The Lord's Prayer can

be a powerful prayer every time we pray it, as can the Rosary, the Jesus Prayer, or our asking God to bless certain people.

Martin Luther encourages us to pray at the beginning and end of every day. Ignatius Loyola advises us to conduct an “examination of conscience” at the middle of the day and at bedtime. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection counsels us to pray all day long. The apostle Paul tells us to “pray without ceasing.” These spiritual giants encourage us to think about when we pray and how.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus tells us we should pray in secret. He tells us to go into our room and literally or symbolically shut the door, shut out the distractions of the outside world, “still our soul,” and go inward.

I believe this is an important way to begin our prayer, whether we are at home alone or here at church in the presence of others. Jesus tells us to put ourselves in the right frame of mind before we raise our concerns and the concerns of those for whom we pray. We should become still, open, and receptive; then we should offer our prayers to God. Jesus tells us that the spirit we bring to our prayer strengthens the transformative power of that prayer.

Jesus tells us not to heap up empty phrases in our prayer. Martin Luther railed against the belief that by repeating certain phrases or prayers we or our loved ones automatically receive thousands of years off our stay in purgatory. Prayer is not a mechanical indulgence. It is an honest and open communication within a relationship, our relationship with God. It is an opening of ourselves to God so God can gently pull us back toward our true center.

Jesus raises an interesting point in this passage of scripture. He tells us that our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask him. I don’t need to tell God what I need; God knows what I need. In fact, God knows what I need better than I do! I may tell God that I need my wife to change so we can get along better. God may have other ideas. God may want *me* to change, may want *me* to be more patient and loving in our relationship. God may like my wife just the way she is! In fact, I think this is the case.

I’m glad God has a sense of humor because there have been many times throughout my life when I have told God not only how I *want* things to be but how they *should* be. There is a fine line between praying for others, even praying that others will make healthy changes in their lives and telling God how life or other people should be. That comes very close to “playing God.”

Even though God knows what we need before we ask, we still need to pray. We need to pray because we need to become more conscious. We need to become more conscious of what we need. We need to become more conscious of what our brothers and sisters need, especially those carrying heavy burdens. In our prayer, we try to enter into God's presence, or, as we have noted, we open ourselves to the centering power of God's presence. When this happens to us in prayer, we become more able to see ourselves and other people from God's perspective. We have the experience of taking on the mind and the heart of Jesus.

It is as Henri Nouwen has said: "In all these moments, we gradually make our lives more of a prayer." It is as St. Anthony of Padua has said, "The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer recognizes himself or the fact that he is praying." I don't think we could have two better statements of what it means to have prayer fully integrated into our lives. I don't think we could have two better statements of how Jesus prayed.

Let us, in our prayer, open ourselves to God, that God might help us gradually make our lives more of a prayer. If we do so, then we will be able to experience God's presence and guidance even when, as Nouwen suggests, life leads us where we would rather not go, when life leads us through what the psalmist called "the valley of deep darkness," the valley that Jesus walked during the last days of his life.

Let us open ourselves to the presence of the risen Christ both within and among us as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

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April 3, 2022*