

THE POWER OF PRAYER -- I WHY WE NEED TO PRAY

(03/03/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 6:5-15

“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.” (Mt. 6:6)

This morning, on communion Sunday, we are belatedly beginning our Lenten series of reflections on the power of prayer. I hope our reflections over the next few weeks, and probably after Easter as well, 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.

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 just an empty ritual? Did you say a prayer when you woke up in the morning? If you were Roman Catholic, did you pray the Rosary and ask Mary to protect you through the night? I used to listen to Cardinal Cushing, in his raspy voice, intone the Rosary or lead the parishioners of his diocese in saying the Rosary every night:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

If you didn't grow up saying the Rosary, did you get down on your knees and say the prayers that many of us who grew up Protestant learned as children: the Lord's Prayer and “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep?”

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

This was the way that Darlene and I learned this prayer and said it when we were children. Then, of course, we would do the “God-blesses.” By the time Darlene and I had children, however, more enlightened minds had changed the ending of “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” to the following:

*Guide me safely through the night,
Wake me with the morning light.*

So, this was the prayer that Corey, Jay, and Kristen said every night. If you said this prayer, did you ever think about what it meant? Did it dawn on you that the wording of this prayer implied that your soul was in peril while you were asleep, that you might die before you awoke, that you needed to be “guided safely through the night?”

A few years ago, I discovered that the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther suggested that immediately upon awakening we should say,

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Then kneeling or standing we should say the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the following morning prayer:

I give thanks unto thee, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ thy dear Son, that thou hast protected me through the night from all danger and harm; and I beseech thee to preserve and keep me this day also, from all sin and evil; that in all my thoughts, words, and deeds, I may serve and please thee. Into thy hands I commend my body and soul, and all that is mine. Let thy holy angel have charge concerning me, that the wicked one have no power over me. Amen.

Every evening, just before we go to bed, Luther suggested that we pray the evening prayer:

I give thanks unto thee, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ thy dear Son, that thou hast this day so graciously protected me, and I beseech thee to forgive me all my sins, and the wrong which I have done, and by thy great mercy defend me from all the perils and dangers of the night. Into thy hands I commend my body and soul, and all that is mine. Let thy holy angel have charge concerning me, that the wicked one have no power over me. Amen.

Luther says, “And then lie down in peace, and sleep.”

I find it interesting that Luther takes seriously the “dangers and harms” of the night. What are the “perils” from which we need, from which our soul needs to be protected? Do we believe that when we dream, our soul leaves our body and travels to faraway places? Some of the theologians of the early church believed this! Even though statistically there is a much greater chance of not only sinning but also dying during the day, we traditionally reminded our children that their guardian angel will watch over them as they sleep. I, for one, needed my guardian angel to keep me on the straight and narrow during the day!

In addition to thinking about our prayer life when we were children, we also need to think about our prayer life now. If we no longer say prayers when we go to bed at night, when did we stop and why? Do we say a prayer, even a very short, very simple prayer when we arise in the morning? I doubt if any of us here this morning religiously follows Luther’s directive to

recite the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and Luther's Morning Prayer, but you never know! I might be surprised!

As we heard this morning, Jesus warns against the use of empty phrases in prayer, of just saying the words of a prayer as if we were checking off a requirement, not praying from the heart. However, just because we use a formal prayer at certain times of the day, it does not mean this prayer is empty or devoid of meaning. The Lord's Prayer can be a powerful prayer every time we pray it, as can the Rosary or the Jesus Prayer if used as a centering prayer.

As you know, I like to find parallels of Jesus' teaching in other religions. Just this past week I was reading a book entitled *Notebooks of a Wandering Monk*, the diary of the Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard. I found myself drawn to this book and author when I learned that Matthieu translates all of the Dalai Lama's writings into French—so he must not only be fluent in French; he must know what it is that the Dalai Lama is trying to say. Sure enough, the guy is really deep! And what an amazing journey he has had!

With regard to the value of repetitive prayer, Matthieu describes the path that leads to *bodhicitta*, enlightenment mind, the vow to attain enlightenment not for yourself, but for the benefit of all sentient beings. As part of his training in this path, Matthieu did 100,000 prostrations while reciting what is called “the taking refuge quatrain” composed by his teacher, Kangyur Rinpoche. Yes, that's correct—he did this one hundred thousand times!

If you were following this path, you would then recite the quatrain of relative *bodhicitta* 100,000 times, then a long-page text and another quatrain 100,000 times, and then again for a fourth time. So now we're up to 400,000 recitations. There are several other mantras that one must recite 100,000 times, and one which you must recite 1,000,000 times. That's right—a million times! When you say a prayer this often, if you are really praying it from your heart, it must get deeply embedded in your brain and also your body, probably down to the cellular level.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that swift and easy progress toward enlightenment, toward *bodhicitta*, is suspect. As Milarepa, the renowned twelfth-century hermit said, “In the beginning nothing comes; in the middle nothing stays; at the end, nothing goes.”

The point is that repetitive prayer can be deeply meaningful—if it is truly prayer! The point is also that we shouldn't expect a disciplined prayer life, one that bears fruit, to be a swift and easy undertaking.

When I engage in a prayer of intercession, when I pray for someone whom I know to be in great need, I try to hold the person for whom I am praying in my mind's eye, in my imagination. I try to picture the person. If I don't know the person, I find it helpful to know the

person's name, at least his/her first name, and also some information about the burdens he/she/they are carrying. This is why we will include a little information about the people on our prayer list, which, by the way, will soon reappear as a separate page of our Sunday bulletin.

When we ask those present at worship if they would like to bring before us someone whom they know to be in special need, we know the person's name, their affliction or struggle, and their relationship with the person who has brought their plight to our attention. However, we realize that when something goes online, the dissemination of this information is no longer under our control. Most of us would not want our problem or condition to be attainable by insurance companies, employers, etc. So, when we include prayer concerns in our monthly newsletter or our Sunday bulletin, we only list the person's first name. However, in this sanctuary on a Sunday morning, we hope you feel comfortable sharing the person's name and some helpful information to help us visualize and focus our prayers on the person for whom you are requesting prayer.

With regard to our personal prayer, do we set aside a specific time of the day to pray? Luther encourages us to pray at the beginning and end of every day. Ignatius of Loyola advises us to conduct an "examination of consciousness" around the middle of every day and again at bedtime. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection counsels us to pray all day long--at home, at work, and in the car. (Brother Lawrence didn't actually mention praying in the car because he lived in the mid-seventeenth century—but that's not the point.) Some of the members of our church set aside a certain time every day to pray for the people who are on our prayer list. I confess that I am not one of these people; I am far less disciplined in my prayer. I pray whenever I think of it—which is not as often as I should.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus tells us we should pray in secret. He tells us to go into our secret room, our private room, and shut the door. I don't think Jesus was talking about a specific room in our house. He was calling us to go inward, to shut out the distractions of the outside world, to quiet our mind. I believe this is an important way to begin our prayer whether we are alone, here in church, or in the presence of others. Jesus tells us to put ourselves in the right frame of mind before we articulate our concerns and the concerns of those for whom we pray. We should first become still, open, and receptive; then we should raise our prayers to God. Whether we pray for others or ourselves, the spirit we bring to our prayer can strengthen its healing power.

Jesus tells us that God knows what we need before we ask. If we think about it, this certainly makes sense. It would be absurd for me to say to God, "God, I would like to take a few minutes to tell you what I need and also to tell you about some of my brothers and sisters who are in need." I can picture God saying, "That's great, Paul. I am certainly looking forward to learning what you need. I am curious, however, whether *your* understanding of what you need

matches *mine*. And thank you for taking the time to update me on those of my children who are not doing well. As soon as you bring me online, I can get to work on them as well as you.”

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—and also to do more around the house. God may like my wife just the way she is! (And I suspect he does!) I may tell God that I need my church to change, that I need certain people in my church to change to make my ministry more effective. God may like our church just as it is, may love the members of our church just as they are. (And I suspect he does!) I'm glad God has a sense of humor because there have been many times that I have told God not only how I *want* things to be but also 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 attempting to impose our will on God, on other people, and on life.

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 other people need. In our prayer, we should not try to tell God what to do, to bend God's will to ours. We should rather try to align ourselves with God. We should try to see ourselves and others from God's perspective. We should pray that we might be able to take on the mind of God. In our prayer we are not bringing new information to God. We are opening ourselves to God so God can bring new information to us!

Henri Nouwen, the Roman Catholic theologian and spiritual guide to whom we will be turning as a guide for this series of reflections, has written the following of prayer:

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 only 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.

Or as Saint Anthony, one of the great desert fathers and founders of the monastic movement has said with regard to true prayer,

The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer recognizes himself or the fact that he is praying.

We will be coming back to Saint Anthony and Henri Nouwan in many, if not most of our reflections throughout Lent.

Let us, as Henri Nouwen suggests, in our prayer, open ourselves to God, that we might 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 life leads us where we would rather not go.*

And let us take everything we learn about prayer and bring it with us as we gather around this table with our Lord to experience his presence and to share with him the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

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