

18. PRAYER: INTIMACY WITH GOD

FOCUS: The idea of prayer as the primary method of interaction with God is best thought of as a way of life rather than an activity reserved for specific times, places, and formulas.

RELATING TO “THE MORE”

"When Bad Things Happen to Good People" author Rabbi Harold Kushner thinks he knows God's favorite book of the Bible. It's the Psalms. In the rest of the Bible, God is said to speak to us—"through seers, sages, and prophets, through the history of the Israelite people. But in the Psalms, we speak to God. We tell God of our love, our needs, our gratitude." But more than that – it shows enough confidence in the relationship to shake our fist in anger. The Psalms show the nature of covenant relationships to be conversation, familiarity – and the confidence to express anger, lament, and dissatisfaction with the way things are. What we think of as prayer – along with other concepts of intimacy with the Divine – are testimony to humanity's striving toward relating to that unknowable yet inescapable sense of “the more.”

THE PROBLEM WITH PRAYER

“When St. Paul said that we are to pray without ceasing, he surely did not mean we ought to say prayers without ceasing. When people envision the kingdom of heaven as a place where people are praying all the time, I just as soon not go if that is the reality that you have got to deal with.”

– Jack Spong, from *Living the Questions*

Prayer is in dire need of a makeover. Tired clichés and rote childhood memories are the extent of many people's prayer repertoire. Prayers that have been taught to children in good faith can verge on the downright creepy when considering their potential for theological and psychological distress:

*“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.”*

Many people approach prayer in a way that makes God into a cosmic vending machine: insert prayer into slot, make your selection, and if you're good, voila! The outcome you had in mind. The proof texts quoted regarding prayer would seem to support such an understanding:

*Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive. (Matthew 21:22)
Ask, and it will be given you. (Luke 11:9)*

In Matthew 7, Jesus seems to say that whatever we ask will be given to us. In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about persistence in prayer: pray, pray, pray and

God will eventually give in. Matthew 18:19 has Jesus saying that, “If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

The problem lies in taking all of these verses out of context. Far from being willy-nilly guarantees of whatever you want, they are instead about making the Reign of God real on earth through acts of healing, reconciliation, and justice. When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, the “Lord’s Prayer” they are taught is an appeal to be sustained in doing whatever work is necessary in bringing about the kingdom.

PRAYER ABUSE

Truth be told, most people are “foxhole pray-ers,” crying out in the midst of disaster: “Lord, if only you’d get me out of _____, I promise to do _____!” And if we’re not making deals with God, we’re treating the Divine like some sort of Santa Claus for adults: “I want, I want, I want...” Oftentimes, prayer is confused with magic – passionately stringing together the proper words into incantations in hope of conjuring up the power to realize our desires.

The type of prayers where we ask for things on behalf of others is called “intercessory” prayer. Prayers for one’s self – heal my cancer, end my loneliness, solve my problems – are called “petitionary” prayers. Although they’re the type of prayers people pray all the time, they’re dangerous. As many people still perceive the Divine to be in the reward and punishment business, when the prayers aren’t answered, people beat themselves up with guilt because they’re obviously not good enough or faithful enough for God to answer in the affirmative. Such an attitude is easy to understand when one reads James 5:16: “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” If my prayer is not effective, I must not be righteous enough. Taken to its logical outcome, this type of prayer assumes the existence of a malleable deity obliged to change the direction of the whole world just to please the desires of a supposedly righteous person or two.

In the film “Bruce Almighty,” Jim Carrey’s character, Bruce, is imbued with the power of God. After several miserable attempts to respond to every individual prayer being lifted up to God, he finally succumbs and answers, “Yes,” to everything. In the pandemonium that ensues, it becomes clear that a good deal of what people pray for is not healthy, reasonable, or legal.

As 1985’s hurricane Gloria bore down on the East coast of the United States, televangelist Pat Robertson prayed for God to change the storm’s course to avoid hitting his Virginia headquarters. When the hurricane did indeed veer to the North, Robertson claimed that the phenomenon was proof of God’s love for and approval of his ministry. Too bad for the folks on Long Island whose homes were destroyed and lives devastated.

“IF ONLY I PRAY HARD ENOUGH, GOD WILL DO WHAT I WANT”

Faithful people continue to lift up the scripture passages that seem to suggest, “Just pray enough and God will provide.” Yet personal experience and common sense tell us that such claims are simply not so. In the American Civil War, both World Wars, and countless other conflicts, opposing forces prayed to the same God for victory. Meanwhile, concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel asks, “How can I still pray to God after the holocaust?”

Imagine the victims of a horrible plane crash arriving at the pearly gates only to be informed by God, “Sorry, I would have loved to intervene but there weren’t enough of you praying for it.” Or the alternative: God reaching down to catch the plane and lightly setting it down upon the earth. (“Whew, good thing you all prayed!”) Neither scenario makes sense.

On the other hand, there’s a whole new branch of neuroscience devoted to uncovering the connections between one’s mind and body. Called “psychoneuroimmunology,” it explores the effect that one’s emotional and spiritual well-being have on your immune system. Double-blind studies have indicated that people who pray and are prayed for recover more quickly than those not prayed for.

So, pray for healing – not because you will always get well, but so that you can connect with the still mysterious and natural power of healing. Pray for safe travel – not because God will necessarily catch your plane, but so that you can be prepared for whatever happens. Pray for the end to a drought, for a job, for a “fill in the blank” – not because prayer is going to control the weather, a future employer, or anything else, but so you can avoid the temptation to despair of God’s goodness in time of difficulty.

Isn’t that defeatist? Darkly existentialist? No, it’s acknowledging the reality that life is what it is. “There is a time for everything under heaven” gives a rhythm to being human. Personal experience confirms that the rain falls on both the good and the bad. And for many, prayer helps in raising an awareness of the divine who shares in both the joys and sorrows of life.

There is something that we don’t yet understand about how love connects us, how life is bound together, how we are far more interdependent than we think. God is the very relationship that binds us together and somehow we open ourselves to that and that can be an effective way of losing God’s power in the world. I believe God’s power, which is love and life, is always beneficial, always enhancing, and even therapeutic.

– Jack Spong, from *Living the Questions*

TOW TRUCK THEOLOGY

Episcopal priest Fr. Robert Farrar Capon was once asked about the efficacy of prayer. He responded that many people simply have the wrong idea about prayer. God is not in the business of prioritizing who will be protected or saved based on whoever is more worthy than someone else. Imagine the situation: You get to work to pull a double shift, but a blizzard is coming. There'll be no customers, so the boss sends you home. Traffic is already tied up on the Interstate, so you decide to take a back road short cut. The storm comes on faster than you expect, the conditions deteriorate rapidly and you skid off into a ditch and are knocked unconscious. When you come to, the snow is piled up around your car and you can't open the doors. You have no cell phone. Your family is not expecting you for hours, they have no idea about your shortcut, and you begin to realize that things are not looking good.

"Tow Truck theology" says that at this point, you say a prayer for God to rescue you. As you're a pretty good person, God responds by tickling the ear of a gas station attendant on the Interstate. He gets a funny feeling that he should put some hot chicken soup in a thermos, grab the keys to the tow truck and drive down a deserted back road in a blizzard for reasons that are unclear. Miraculously, he manages to make out your car buried in the snow, digs in, pulls you out, warms you up with chicken soup and has you home in time for dinner. Although this may be the way many people understand prayer, it's not the way it works.

The faith we claim as Christians is not an insurance policy against tragedy and loss. Capon continues to explain that the Divine has a covenant of presence with us. God will be with us, no matter what. As hard as it is to fathom, when we find ourselves stuck in that blizzard with very little likelihood that a tow truck is miraculously on its way, God is with us, and stays with us – until we die.

It is a common temptation among faithful Christians of all stripes to believe – deep down – that if we're good, God will protect us and rescue us from life's difficulties. But being in relationship with God does not create some sort of divine forcefield protecting us from harm. Being in relationship with God strengthens us for living life, come what may. In difficult times when our most heartfelt petitions seem to go unanswered and we feel abandoned by the Divine, people often wonder what they've done to deserve such a fate. Even Jesus is said to have cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" The experience of faithful people over the ages suggests that God is not, in fact, in charge of dispatching tow trucks. Instead, the Spirit that gives us life longs to be recognized as an intimate companion on our life's journey. We are in covenant with the Spirit that remains with us whatever happens along life's journey.

IT'S A MATTER OF SEEING

Seldom, if ever, do two people have the same experience and perceive it in exactly the same way. On the journey of life, we accumulate filters through which we see the world. By changing the filter on the lens of a camera, the photographer doesn't change the scene but the interpretation of the scene. So it is with the spiritual life – it's a matter of seeing.

Simply paying attention is the foundation of all spiritual practices. The poet and doctor William Carlos Williams used to carry a notepad around with him in which he listed "Things I noticed today that I've missed until today." Buddhist monk and author, Thich Nat Han, advocates pursuing "mindfulness," a practice that includes paying attention to even the most mundane of activities. Instead of rushing through life to get to something else, try concentrating intently on every aspect of brushing your teeth, climbing stairs, or washing dishes. Each activity has the potential to center a person "in the moment" and overcome the tendency to let the self-chatter of the mind drown out an awareness of the "now." In Frederick and Mary Ann Brussats' guidebook, *Spiritual Literacy*, people are encouraged to recognize the presence of the sacred in everyday experiences. Even the two sacraments of the Protestant tradition, both deeply rooted in Jewish practice, are about taking the simplest stuff of life – bread, water, grapes – and seeing in them a blessing. In their simplicity they serve as bearers of what Marcus Borg calls, "the more."

Spiritual director and author, William Martin (*A Path and a Practice: Using Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching as a Guide to an Awakened Spiritual Life*), tells the story of how we came to be so distracted:

Once upon a time, the heavenly host gathered in the celestial boardroom and Yahweh (Chair of the Board), asked what they thought of the whole "heaven and earth" project. The heavenly host sang out, "Holy, Holy, Holy, God. Heaven and Earth are full of your Glory!" Hasatan, however, was heard to mutter, "Kiss-ups."

As Yahweh made a fuss over how grand the creation of male and female were, Hasatan could not help but call attention to their tendency to disobey. Yahweh admitted that to be true and promptly began praising their capacity for compassion. Aggravated, Hasatan called attention to subparagraph 288 of the Cosmic Charter stating that disobedience must be punished. Yahweh agreed but pointed out that it also stated that compassion must be blessed.

Yahweh was so overwhelmed with the potential of male and female, the Creator poured out a spontaneous blessing on them that was unique among all the other inhabitants of heaven and earth. They alone would possess a distinctive capacity for memory that enabled them to recall and learn from the past. They would also be gifted with an unrivaled imagination that enabled them to envision the future and create wondrous things.

Following the pronouncement of the blessings, Yahweh began to dismiss the board. Hasatan protested loudly, “I object to your having blessed the male and female when the regulations clearly state that you must punish them as well as bless them!” Yahweh replied, “I did.”

Although blessed with the gifts to remember the past and imagine the future, the same capacities also torment us. We wallow in despair, dwelling on the wounds of the past or cowering in anxiety over potential disasters concocted by our fertile imaginations. In so doing, we essentially spend the majority of our conscious time “in” the past or “in” the future – not present to the reality of the here and now.

It’s been said that there really are only two questions that really matter. The first is: “Where am I?” the second is: “What time is it?” The only correct answers to these questions are “Here” and “Now.” The only time and place one can encounter the Divine is here and now – not in the past or in the future.

THE FUTURE OF PRAYER?

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” – Romans 12

Perhaps the future of prayer rests in our ability to liberate it from simply being an exercise in begging, asking, or informing God of anything. In an apocryphal story, Mother Teresa is asked by a reporter: “When you pray, what do you say?” She replies, “Nothing; I listen.” “What do you hear?” asks the reporter. “Nothing. God listens.” Seeing the puzzled look on the reporter’s face, she assures him, “If I have to explain it to you, you won’t understand.” Deeper than a “conversation” with the Divine, perhaps prayer is best understood as simply being *open* to the Divine.

Being open to the Divine takes work and is not simply a matter of being trained in “five easy steps to intimacy with God.” Those who seem to have the most profound relationships with the Spirit tend to practice what most people would call meditation. Disciplines like Tai Chi, Yoga, and Buddhist meditation practices have proven to be helpful for those seeking a deeper connection with the Divine.

Paul claims that the purpose of prayer is not to let God know what we need or want (Romans 8:26). The purpose of prayer is to intentionally be in God’s presence, to live lavishly in a relationship that Philosopher-Theologian Martin Buber called an “I-Thou” relationship. “I-Thou” relationships do not objectify other people (or the Divine) into “I-it” connections to be used for one’s own selfish purposes. An “I-Thou” attitude acknowledges that where we are most clearly going to meet God is in the dynamic of relationships with other people. Maybe it’s in a relationship that has been strained or broken. In even a brief shimmer of possible reconciliation, the awareness of the mystery of grace can be intoxicating. What is that other than the Holy?

To transform God's image from some sort of list-checking, gift-giving Santa Claus for adults is a tall order – and part of the change will come in redefining the purpose and practice of prayer. Prayer is not magic. Praying harder is not going to get you what you want or even what you think would be good for the world. Much of prayer's real power is in changing us. When we are changed, we may be able to see things in a new way or find the strength to live faithfully with what we cannot change.

When Paul tells the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), he's not advocating that they constantly pray for more stuff. Nor are they to pray to change the “mind” and the behavior of a controlling “theistic” deity. Instead, they and we are to seek an attitude toward life in which prayer is seamlessly integrated into our very being, where we can give thanks no matter what happens.

Like any pursuit of intimacy, prayer is intensely personal. In all its many forms, prayer defies analysis and superficial systems for implementation and success. Sometimes reduced to rummaging around for whatever gets us through the day, prayer is a life-long courtship – testimony to humanity's striving toward a relationship with that unknowable yet inescapable sense of “the more.”

*Pray as if everything depended on God,
Live as if everything depended on you.*

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

How did Spong's experience with Cornelia start to change his understanding of prayer?

How does Process Thought “make sense” of petitionary or intercessory prayer?

How might the idea of prayer as “letting God loose in the world” be helpful? Unhelpful?

DVD Chapter 3:

What place do words have when trying to “authentically listen” or achieve the silence of “deep knowing?”

Describe how patience and humor enhance Hauerwas’ understanding of prayer.

Spong relates a story regarding prayer for his wife. What stands out for you in this story?

How does the idea of prayer being legitimately different for people and changing over time resonate with your experience?

SPIRITPRACTICE:

Singing (with John Bell)

“What we sing shapes our faith: do we sing about God’s creation, the equality of men and women, about God’s love for justice, about our concern for other people, or do we just sing about me? Ultimately, what we sing repeatedly shapes our belief, our discipleship, and our faith.”

“Know that God is good” (Mungu ni mwema) from Psalm 100 is available from Wild Goose publications in the song book: *One Is the Body: Songs of Unity & Diversity* by John L. Bell (see www.ionabooks.com/bookshop) ISBN#: 1901557359.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

“Yah-weh” breathing exercise

The common name for God in much of Hebrew scripture is represented in English as “Yahweh,” derived from the four Hebrew letters, YHWH. It has been suggested that this name may have primal origins in the sound of one’s breathing. When breathing in, the natural sound of the breath is similar to “Yah.” When breathing out it sounds like “weh.” Rabbi Arthur Waskow suggests:

“Try pronouncing those letters (YHWH) with no vowels between, not “Yahweh,” just “Yyyyyhhhhwwwwhhhh,” so that it becomes just a rough-breathing. God as the Breath of Life...what we breathe in is what the trees breathe out, what the trees breathe in is what we breathe out. The Name that exists in all languages, all species.”

— www.shalomctr.org

Sit quietly in a comfortable position. With eyes closed quietly listen to your breathing and the sound that is made by breathing through your mouth. In a practical expression of centering and prayer, the ancient name of God and the idea of the Divine becomes integrated with your breath and life.

“So in prayer we address God not as King (Melech ha-Olam), but as “Breath of Life, Ruach ha-Olam.”

— www.shalomctr.org

I learned a tremendous amount about prayer when our house was full of children and company, even though I was only mildly aware at the time. Two of those prayer practices occurred while cooking or doing laundry.

When I prepared pasta or rice for a family meal or family plus invited guests, I used my hand for the measuring device. Over time, I came to know approximately how many scoops each person might eat; then, perhaps with a heart hopeful for Elijah's visit or just knowing that company was frequently a possibility, I added two or three more handfuls. I prayed for each person, known and unknown, as I measured his or her portion and added it to the pot.

Laundry resurfaced almost as often as the need to cook. For a time, my attitude was not one of gratitude, but somehow that changed. I began to pray for each member of the family as I folded or hung his or her undies or shirts. I prayed for the people who would use or might use the towels as those rectangular pieces of terrycloth were folded one more time.

I am not certain exactly what effect my prayers had upon the persons for whom I prayed, but I know that over time, those prayers made me more grateful for family, company and home. I know that those times of prayer made me more mindful of people in my life and formed my heart to be more loving. In time, I learned that it was not the pasta or towels that were the crucial vehicles, but it was praying with the daily routines and chores of my life that mattered. They were steps along the continued journey of praying with my life and opening to a deeper relationship with God.

Invitations for prayer this month:

1) Consider activities in your life where conversation or computation is not necessary. It may be in your home, or at a copy machine, or on your morning walk. Give thanks to God for the loved ones and guests in your life. Ask that your heart be formed into a more loving and patient sanctuary for each of them.

During these prayer times, you might try addressing God with a name different than you normally use for the Holy One.

2) Search a current newspaper or news magazine and find two articles about issues that are troubling to you. Choose one article about a local issue and one about a global issue.

Cut out the two articles and secure them in an area where you will see them often or near where you can carve out time for prayer.

Each day for the next month, when praying with this news, pray only these two questions:

God of love, what would you have me learn?

Merciful God, how can I offer your compassion?

You might close each time of prayer with singing “Spirit of the Living God” by Daniel Iverson.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

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– Cynthia Langston Kirk