

The First Reading is Psalm 145:1-3

I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

The Second Reading is Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Third Reading is 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ **pray without ceasing**, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The Message – As Essential as Breath

Did your family pray before meals? I remember the prayer around my family table growing up:

“God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. Amen.”

Does anyone else have one they would like to share?

Or how about this prayer from my youth group days:

“Rub a dub, dub. Thanks for the grub, God!”

Of course, youth groups couldn't resist the Johnny Appleseed song, either:

The Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord;
For giving me, the things I need, the sun and rain and an apple seed.
He has been good to me.

What about Sunday school prayers or something in the midst of the day?

God is with me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.
He will help me every day at my home or school or play.
Yes, God is with me. Yes, God is with me. Yes, God is with me.
The Bible tells me so.

Did you say a prayer before you went to sleep? Here was my standard as a child:

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. Amen!

I can't believe this one didn't scare me as child! Although, I didn't seem to have a problem going to sleep, I imagine a number of children had difficulty closing their eyes after this prayer... thinking if they closed their eyes they might die!

In case you are wondering, this prayer has been modified and here is a more up to date version children's bedtime prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
Guide me safely through the night,
Wake me with the morning light. Amen

Not so scary!

Now I imagine most of us assumed the "praying position" as children, as well. You know hands folded, head down with eyes closed! Of course, who among us didn't peek on occasion!

I remember the first time I met with the preschoolers at the church I used to serve in Garden Grove. For chapel time, I had been asked to bring a bible story book to read and then close by praying with the preschoolers. As a newly minted pastor, I knew that there was more than one "praying position," but I didn't even have a chance that first class because the teacher was adamant that prayer happens when hands are clasped, heads are bowed and eyes are closed, for her authoritative voice increased in volume as she gave those instructions to the preschoolers and they earnestly complied.

How in the world are we supposed to pray without ceasing, if this is the only way to pray - hands clasped, head bowed and eyes shut? Could it be that prayer is more than what we were taught as small children? With gratitude I exclaim "absolutely!" We will be exploring prayer for five consecutive Sundays, beginning today and ending with our All Church Worship Service on October 7th at 4:00 P.M. On this World Communion Sunday, after we have prayed with our feet in the Believe Walk, we will commission prayer circles and I hope you will want to become a part of this prayer movement within our church, for as Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." Prayer is essential to who we are as people of faith.

Now I wonder if you noticed what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy wrote to the church at Thessalonica? "¹⁶ Rejoice **always**, ¹⁷ pray **without ceasing**, ¹⁸ give thanks **in all** circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Always, without ceasing, in all – there is not much wiggle room with these words – this is the will of God for us. These words are to shape our lives of faith. We are supposed to rejoice, pray and give thanks always, without ceasing and in all circumstances – that is, in every moment of every day. This sounds similar to what Paul said to the church at Philippi, "Rejoice... **always**, do not worry about **anything**, but **in everything**... with thanksgiving..."

Yet, how are we to do these things without stopping, don't we have to sleep, don't we have to focus on our work or school or task at hand? And given that we are focusing on prayer, how are we to pray without ceasing? For me this leads to the question: What is prayer? Is it words like we were taught as children or the words Jesus taught his disciples? Is it getting up early, like Bishop Lancelot Andrews who allotted five hours per day to prayer or Charles Simeon who rose at 4:00 am to begin his four-hour intentional time of prayer? Is it praying the hours as

monks and nuns do in monasteries. Is it extended times of silence being present to the mystery we call God? Is it action? Is it a frame of reference? Is it simply an awareness?

Philip Yancey writes, "Prayer is universal because it speaks to some basic human need." As Thomas Merton put it, "Prayer is an expression of who we are..." We are moved to give thanks for beauty... a sky painted orange as the sun sets, a mountain meadow seasoned with colorful wildflowers, a blanket of freshly fallen snow the morning after a storm. We are moved to cry out for help in a crisis... when an accident occurs, when a job is lost, when a diagnosis disrupts life. We are moved to supplicate on behalf of others in need... when a pastor shared yesterday at Presbytery that in his city since the start of school four teenagers had committed suicide – his church lost a teenage student last year to suicide, when two boats crashed into each other sending 16 people into the dark waters of the Colorado river a week ago Saturday, just downstream from our river campsite.

Prayer is universal, for all faith traditions and even for those without faith, as we have heard it said that there are no atheists in foxholes. Thomas Merton says this is so because, "We [humans] are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment."

We [humans] are relational beings, we are created to be in relationship with each other, as well as with the divine mystery we call God. Augustine of Hippo realized this truth in his own life, for he wrote, "You [O God] have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you." Prayer stems from the depth of who we are as creatures of the Creator.

So, prayer is more than "God is great. God is good." Yancey writes, "[There is a] difference between saying prayers, which is an activity, and praying, which is a soul attitude, a "lifting up of the mind to God." As a soul attitude, praying is simply being present to the presence of God as Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk, modeled in the 17th century in the mundane confines of his monastery's kitchen. As Brother Lawrence confessed, "It is a great delusion to think that times of prayer ought to be different than other." Prayer for Brother Lawrence was nothing other than a sense of the presence of God, for his soul was unconscious of everything but Divine love. Thirteen centuries earlier, Cassian, a Christian monk and theologian, wrote this about prayer, "We pray best when we are no longer aware of praying."

"We pray best when we are no longer aware of praying." When we are no longer concerned if our words are just right or our prayer posture isn't perfect. When we let go of "shoulds, coulds or woulds," and what others might think, we can then just be present to the presence of God.

Isn't this a bit like breathing? We manage most days just fine without ever thinking about our breathing, unless we are exercising or climbing a couple of flight of stairs. But, for the most part the air going in and out of our lungs goes unnoticed. The air is always present, yet we rarely notice it. Well, I think Cassian is reminding us that God is always present, too. Prayer for Cassian and Brother Lawrence was not about performance; it was about being present.

How are you practicing being present to the presence of God throughout your days? A pastor asked the counselee, "Buzzers or Bells"? The counselee, a school principal, was confused. He had come to see the pastor because he struggled to see God in the midst of his daily work. The complaining parents. The troubled students. The struggling teachers. He struggled to sense God's presence as the days melted one into another. He always felt God's presence on Sundays during worship, but as the week work progressed he struggled to notice

God's presence. His thoughts were interrupted when the pastor asked the same question again: buzzers or bells... at your school. The principal said, "Bells." "Okay," said the pastor, "How many bells each day?" The principal started counting and said, "At least 15 I think." "Well," said the pastor, "Each time you hear the bell, stop for a moment and be present to God. Say thank you or ask for guidance. Lift up a concern or share a joy. Just be present to the presence of God, because remember that God is with you, for you are never alone." A couple of weeks later the principal stopped in to see the pastor. The principal was brimming with enthusiasm, as he shared story after story about how God had been present in the midst of his work days. What changed? He used the bells to help him be present to the presence of God.

Years ago, I first heard a similar idea from a friend whose mother had taught her to use sirens. Every time she hears a siren she turns her focus to God. It didn't matter if it was a police, ambulance or fire siren... they are actually different! But whenever she heard a siren, she would be present to the presence of God.

In my daily walk it is not bells or sirens, it is the natural world around me. When the sun rises over the mountain range. When the mountains change colors as the sun sets in the west. When I behold the magnificent mountains on my morning and evening drive, when birds in flight catch my eye, when bright colored blossoms draw my attention, when butterflies dance in my back yard, when I hear the cascading waters from the pond in my backyard, when I witness a lizard dart for safety, all these natural occurrences draw me into the presence of God, because the abundance of life around me reminds me that I am only part and not the whole of creation. On my river trips, nature is my sanctuary as I take a jet ski out at 6 a.m. into the wildlife refuge and then turn the engine off and float with the current of the river. The diverse life present in the Topock Gorge is amazing and most boaters and jet skiers never experience it, as their engines roar and they speed by. The same is true for the presence of God among us in the midst of life, for too often our lives roar like boat engines and we speed through our days without recognizing that God is with us.

What bell, buzzer or siren might help you practice the presence of God?

You might remember reading in the lead Messenger article that the Greek word translated "without ceasing" doesn't actually mean "nonstop." Not even Brother Lawrence could pray nonstop. The good news is that the Greek word actually means "constantly reoccurring." And this is what bells, buzzers, sirens and nature can help us all do. To pray without ceasing is possible, because prayer is simply, yet profoundly our reoccurring awareness of God as we move throughout our days.

If we have the notion that prayer as spiritual act is unrelated to the rest of our lives, we will struggle with Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing. Yet, if we consider our times of saying prayers, as a "warm-up exercise, not an end in itself, but a means to an end," says Yancey, "[then the act of saying prayers will] increase our awareness of God at all other times." And this is the beginning of being able to pray without ceasing, for prayer is as essential as our breath. Amen.