

Sunday, September 8, 2019

First Reading from Psalm 5:1-7

- ¹ Give ear to my words, O LORD;
give heed to my sighing.
- ² Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
- ³ O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.
- ⁴ For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
- ⁵ The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
- ⁶ You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.
- ⁷ But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house,
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in awe of you.

Introduction to the Series of The Lord's Prayer

"Give ear to my word." How often have we pleaded for God to hear our voices? Often, I imagine! Nearly everyone I know prays. Some pray at meals, some when they awake each morning, some as they close the day. Some pray in a church, a mosque or a synagogue. Some pray as a daily discipline, and others only pray in emergencies. Even those who claim prayer doesn't work often admit to praying when something unhinges their lives such as life-threatening diagnosis or a tragic accident.

Jesus understood the human inclination to pray and that is why he said to his disciples, "When you pray," rather than, "If you pray." Jesus assumed that eventually everyone would find a reason to pray. And so, we will spend the next seven Sundays on the topic of prayer. For our text we will be using the passage from the Gospel of Matthew commonly referred to as the "Lord's Prayer." A variation of this prayer can also be found in the Gospel of Luke.

Today's sermon though is an introduction. We will explore the verses preceding the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew and then in the coming six weeks we will look at the Lord's Prayer phrase by phrase, with Rev. Ron Duvall preaching for the morning service and Pastor Hart preaching for the evening worship next week.

Hear now God's word to us through the Gospel of Matthew read by Ryan Bhatti.

Second Reading from Matthew 6:5-8

⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ 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.

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The Message is entitled, “When You Pray”

“Whenever you pray...”

When you heard the phrase, “Whenever you pray,” what first came to mind? Is prayer a struggle or delight for you? Is prayer a daily practice or something you do when emergencies arise? When you pray, is it hurried or spacious? I agree with Mark Roberts who wrote, “Most Christians I know struggle with prayer.” We struggle because we feel as if there is a right way and a wrong way. We worry about the words we choose. We wonder if there is one formula that works better than others. We worry that one person’s prayers are more effective than another. And Jesus certainly adds to our anxiety when he emphatically says to his disciples, “Whenever you pray do not be like the hypocrites!” I feel everyone’s anxiety rising, because it seems there is a right way and a wrong way according to Jesus. Yet, if we listen closely to Jesus, prayer has less to do with when we pray, or where we pray, or even what we pray, than why we pray.

Now we know why the psalmist prays, even though we don’t know specifics. “Give ear to my words, O LORD; give heed to my sighing. ² Listen to the sound of my cry.” The psalmist prays to be heard and from the prayer itself we know the psalmist has felt heard, “O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice.” The psalmist trusts that God hears. So, the psalmist continues saying, “In the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.” I appreciate the tagline “and watch.” It suggests to me a posture of expectancy. The psalmist watches. The psalmist expectantly waits for God to respond. I don’t know if the psalmist went to a secluded place, closed himself in a prayer closet or if he was in the synagogue. What I do know from his prayer that it was more than just words. It was also a time of watching and waiting.

Our anxiety with prayer is more often than not about our words, yet prayer is far more than just our words. As William McGill writes, “The value of consistent prayer is not that God will hear us, but that we will hear God.”

But, this might also raise your anxiety concerning prayer. What if God does speak? What if God asks me to do something I don’t want to do? As Emilie Griffin cautions us, “Prayer is... a very dangerous business. For all the benefits it offers of growing closer to God, it carries with it one great element of risk: the possibility of change. In prayer we open ourselves to the chance that God will do something with us that we had not intended.”

Personally, I think this is why we seem to focus on the words. Like the hypocrites and Gentiles, we use our words to try to control our prayers. We use our words to clearly delineate what we want. We use our words to maintain control and look polished and put together in front of others and God. We don’t let our guard down, because we want to control the outcome of our prayers or at the very least bend God towards our wants and desires. That is why the motivation for our words when we pray are often self-centered or self-righteous as Jesus warns.

“Don’t pray like this,” says Jesus. The prayer of self-righteousness is motivated by pride and vanity. When we pray this way, we pray with ulterior motives. We masterfully pray trusting that our eloquent words prayed publicly will impress others as well as God. This kind of prayer is all about the one who is praying. The one praying is actually saying: “Look at me. Listen to me. Be impressed with me.” If we are honest with ourselves, this prayer has tripped up all of us. Why

else would we struggle to pray out loud when two or more are gathered together? We struggle to pray out loud because we worry about what others will think about the way we pray. Will I sound intelligent? Will I sound pious enough? Notice the focus... I, me, my, and certainly not God. The prayer motivated by self-righteousness leaves little room for listening for God's movement in our lives.

The prayer motivated by self-centeredness comes all too naturally for us. As Brian Basset's cartoon so aptly conveys. A young boy and his dog are kneeled bedside and these are the young boy's words: "May my teacher stay home tomorrow to rest the terrible cold she seems to be coming down with -- thereby giving me the weekend to finish my paper that's due in the morning!" The young boy is motivated by self-interest. He wants a reprieve on the due date, even though his words create an illusion of care and concern for his teacher. Prayers like these suggest God's role in prayer is to align God's will with our will.

If we are honest with ourselves, we all want what we want from God. We want health and longevity, safety and security, freedom and plenty of resources. Yet, prayers of self-centeredness are often motivated by our fears. We fear we will not have enough, so we pray for more; we fear for our future, so we pray for something that will secure it. The motivation for these prayers is how do we get God to give us what we want. We act as if God is a vending machine or a magician. Our desire, if we are honest with ourselves is to bend God to our desires rather than to get to know God's desires for our lives. Notice the focus once again is on I, me and my: bless me, protect me, take care of me. Once again, this type of prayer doesn't make much room for listening for God's movement in our lives.

So, what are our prayers to be like according to Jesus? Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates what Jesus says: "Here is what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can imagine. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace."

Prayer is about honestly revealing your heart to God with no-role playing. God hopes that we will let our guard down when we pray; we don't have to pretend to be someone we are not. We don't even have to pretend we have it all together. We aren't to worry about what others think either. We are to simply and honestly lay our lives wide open before God. Yet, this honesty can be frightening even though we know that God already knows. As Jesus reminds his disciples God knows our needs before we even verbalize them. Yet, giving them voice makes us vulnerable. It is this very vulnerability that has the capacity to nurture our relationship with the mystery we call God.

If we think about our human relationships, how meaningful would they be if the only thing we ever discussed was the weather? How meaningful would they be if every time we talked to each other we only focused on impressing each other? I would suggest the relationship would be pretty shallow. Yet, in relationships with others, if you begin to share your questions, your heartaches, and even your failings, the relationship plunges to a much more meaningful level. Well, the same holds true with God. God desires a relationship with all of who we are, not just our best selves. God invites us to simply and honestly be authentic in whatever is going on in us and in doing so we open ourselves to God's transformative grace.

Now in this passage some take Jesus' admonition of "go into your room and close the door" as the only real way to pray. I don't believe this was Jesus' intent. The question is not where we pray or when we pray or even what we pray. The question Jesus is addressing is why we pray.

Whether we pray in private or in public isn't the issue. No matter when or where we pray prayer is first and foremost about nurturing our relationship with God. Therefore, the quiet, secluded place can be anywhere we can clear our distracted minds and be open to listening, really listening for God's voice. It may be in a special place such as this sanctuary or in the quiet confines of your car, maybe in the shower or even on a busy street corner, maybe in your garden or at the seashore. Jesus' admonition describes our willingness to bend towards God's ways rather than our ways. Jesus is saying, "Pray in such a way that you can be open to listening to the still small voice of God."

"When we do, when we pray like this," translates Peterson, "we will begin to sense God's grace." When we let down our defenses as we pray, when we authentically come before God with raw honesty, we will begin to sense the immensity of God's grace for our lives. We will begin to discover that we are beloved by God just as we are. Or as God says through the prophet Isaiah, "You are precious and honored and I love you." And in this process of experiencing our belovedness, I truly believe we will be transformed, because as Anne Lamott suggests, "[God's grace] meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

Well, are you anxious about prayer? You have every right to be, because prayer is the crucible where God transforms us. Our raw and honest prayers are the seeds of our transformation, from isolation to connection, from self-centeredness to centeredness on the greater whole of all creation. We are all part of something more than ourselves and prayer is the avenue to this truth. God has so much more in store for us, if only we will be honest with our words as well as willingness to watch and wait, to listen for God's movement in our lives.

My simple advice to each of us this morning, is when it comes to praying, just relax. Just be yourself, like Father Conrad, who I heard this past Friday at a presentation on homelessness. He prayed, "I screwed up, God." Be honest. Be real with your words. Be authentic even if you are uncomfortable with sitting in silence, with the watching and waiting. Just say it like it is and then trust God to be about the work of transformation in your life.

One last thought about prayer for this week. We all probably need to learn to listen more and speak less in our prayers. In our 24/7 wired world, listening has become a lost art. We want what we want now and we can usually find it on google in nanoseconds or order it through Amazon Prime in hours. Yet, God's timing is not always so quick. The art of listening while praying takes practice, whether you sit still or walk or run as you listen. Just remember that prayer is so much more than words.

So, whenever you pray... listen more; for in the listening there exists the capacity for you to be transformed, for us to be transformed, into the hands and feet of God as the body of Christ in the world. May it be so. Amen.