

"A SERMON ON PRAYER"

INTRODUCTION

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"I think a lot of people have forgotten two of the three worlds I feel essential for life. A number have forgotten how to laugh and how to pray."

And then, expanding upon the latter concern, he went on to add these thoughts:

"If I talk about prayer, I think the petitionary side of it is purely a preliminary, superficial thing, because it is quite involuntary. Naturally, we are always asking: can I marry this girl I love? Can I sell my house? - or whatever.

But a prayer really begins at the point at which one listens to a voice. I am not going to argue with people about this; I would call it the voice of the Holy Spirit; you could call it the inner light. The only things you cannot call it, you cannot call it reason, and you cannot call it the super-ego, because the super-ego could never say anything new."

DEVELOPMENT

"A lot of people have forgotten how to pray". Few of us would question the poet's conclusion, and some might even acknowledge that his diagnosis comes dangerously close to home.

I think the reasons for such neglect of prayer are many. There's the rush of modern life that so easily crowds out any priority for prayer. There's the sometimes sense of self-sufficiency that lessens any great concern for prayer. Also, there's the reliance on scientific power rather than on spiritual power. You can add to the list of reasons why prayer is neglected. Mr. Auden is undoubtedly accurate in his temperature reading at this point in the last third of the 20th century when he claimed: "A lot of people have forgotten how to pray".

Yet, we cannot quite bring ourselves to forget Jesus, and it soon becomes clear that we can never separate His living from His praying. He never argued with people about prayer. He never spent much time in exhorting people to pray. He simply prayed, in the clear understanding that God is personal, that He hears and that great power is released to a person through prayer. And the more the disciples lived with Jesus, the more they saw that they could never explain Him unless they understood His praying, and so one day, they came to Him with the request we heard in the Scripture reading, "Lord, teach us how to pray".

Consider some of the lessons He taught them and us about prayer and its practice.

BE QUIET WHEN YOU PRAY

First, Jesus would say, "Be quiet when you pray". How often it is recorded for us in the Scriptures, "He went away to a quiet place and prayed." Maybe this is part of what He was getting at when He said, "When you pray, enter into your room, close the door and pray to your Father." Jesus would agree with that line of Auden's that "a prayer really begins at the point at which one listens."

To be sure, this is part of our problem. It's difficult for us to find that

quiet place and time when we can listen. Horns, sirens, bells, buzzers, shouts that tell us about the things going on in the world. Even the few moments spent in a sanctuary like this can be less than quiet as we hear a parade passing by.

There's some correspondence in the archives of our Church that dates back some 75 years or more. A letter from the Official Board to the President of the New York Central complaining that the whistle on the engine of the noon train every Sunday was violating the quiet reverence of worship in this Church. And the President of the NY Central courteously replied that he would ask the engineer to "go light on the whistle" as that Sunday train approached 86th Street and Park Avenue. That must have been back in the last decade of the last century before the tracks were covered over on Park Avenue. But that Official Board letter was prophetic of a concern for noise pollution that has intensified, not only here - but just about any place that one goes. How difficult it is to find a quiet place and time - even in the Church building.

Yet, in all honesty, that's not really our basic problem. Our real problem is ourselves - to be quiet when the environment is relatively quiet. But we're not - most of us. We're activists - tense, restless. We're not at home with silence - that is, the absence of talk, or noise, or movement. That's part of our world-crisis. Pascal once wrote:

"All the evils of life have fallen upon us because men will not sit alone quietly in a room."

This is part of our worship-crisis. We don't know how to deal with silence. We're often uneasy or embarrassed if the period of silent prayer runs too long, and we wonder what's happened "up front". We need those margins of silence for preparation and for our listening.

The Quakers have a lot to teach us in this regard. "Centering down" is what they call it. One of them, Thomas Kelley, wrote:

"If we 'center down', as the old phrase goes, and live in that holy silence which is dearer than life, and take our life program and life concerns into the silent places of the heart, with complete openness - ready to do - ready to renounce - according to His leading, then many of the things we are doing lose their vitality for us. I should like to testify to this, as a personal experience, graciously given."

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GO BEYOND BEGGING

A second concern Jesus would emphasize is that we go beyond ~~begging~~ in our prayers. begging -

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as though God were some sort of a celestial Santa Claus or errand boy to do our bidding. This is understandable in a child's ego-centric universe, but sometimes - even as grown-ups - we don't move beyond prayer as the insistence on what we personally want for ourselves.

David Head, an English author, wrote a book a few years ago, entitled, "Prayers For the Natural Man" in which with tongue in cheek, he opens the door on people at prayer and sees them often insisting on their own selfish wants, like his "Prayer of the Natural Parent" which goes in this fashion,

"O Lord, do not let William grow up too quickly. May he make no decisions without consulting me first. May he still find his greatest pleasure in my company. I know he is developing new interests and making new friends, but I do want to share in every part of his life. Remind him constantly of all that he owes to his parents. Prevent him from growing too independent. And if he must have a girl friend, let it be that sweet little Cynthia Black."

A caricature, perhaps, but not too far removed from the main thrust of many a prayer. "Give me" "Do this for me". "Let me have my way."

Some thoughtful people have swung wide in the other direction and suggested that Christian prayer should never include asking for ourselves. Still, Jesus did not hesitate to include personal petition in prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread...." "If it be thy will...if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" And remember what He said to His followers: "Ask, whatsoever ye will...."

There is a rightful place for presenting in prayer the things that matter most to us personally, and as these prayers of petition are channeled and are cleansed in His name and spirit, then how many people of prayer have known "turnings" and "dawnings" in which they have traced God's hand in answer to a specific prayer.

OTHER NOTES IN PRAYER

We need to remember that there are some other notes in the music of prayer. In how many ways, Jesus enlarged the meaning of prayer. He assumed that the disciples prayed for things they wanted and needed, but beyond that, He showed them that prayer is a RELATIONSHIP in which God can do in us and for us and through us what He wants to do.

He assumed that they used the words "my" and "me" in prayer, but He taught them to pray saying, "Our Father..." He assumed that they would see and give thanks for their blessings in prayer, but He taught them to face up to themselves in prayer - to confess their faults and failures, their sins and selfishness. He assumed that they would pray for their friends, but He went on to ask them to pray "for them that despitefully use you". When was the last time you prayed for someone you really didn't like very much, some person who has been unfair and unkind to you? See how much is involved in Jesus' kind of prayer and how many grades there are in His school of prayer beyond the first or second stage of asking for things for ourselves?

TRUST GOD FOR THE OUTCOME

One other thought. Not only would Jesus say, "Be quiet when you pray" and again, "go beyond asking for yourself in prayer" - but also, learn to trust God for the outcome of prayer.

Even for Jesus, prayer was no guarantee that the outcome of prayer would be in accordance with His deepest wishes. So, in Gethsemane how earnestly He prayed: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me", and then He added, "nevertheless, not My will, but Thine....be done".

I suspect that this is where prayer breaks down for many moderns. People pray sincerely for what seems so important to them. And sometimes it is not granted to them in the fashion they desired. They feel betrayed and disenchanted with prayer. They may even go to Scripture to prove that they were cheated. "Ask: and it will be given you". But hold on. Go back to another version that seems more in keeping with the spirit of Jesus. "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it." Most of all, go back to the example of Jesus, who in the time of intense agony could pray, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."

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For many years, I've had in my sermon notebooks of illustrations and quotations what you might call a modern day example of the meaning of prayer, in the highest sense. Written by Judge Harold Medina, it was written against the backdrop of an intense trial he was presiding over here in this city. At times he felt he was going to pieces. His nerves were frayed, frazzled by constant bickering, telephone calls threatening his life and the lives of his loved ones. The pressure on him was very great. Later on, he wrote of an experience that was a turning point. Let me read it:

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And then, expanding upon the latter concern, he went on to add:

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Yet we cannot quite bring ourselves to forget Jesus, and it soon comes clear that we can never separate his living from his praying. He never argued with people about prayer. He never spent much time in exhorting people to pray. He simply prayed, in the clear understanding that God is personal, and that great power is released to a person through prayer. The more the disciples lived with Jesus, the more they saw that they could never explain him unless they understood his praying, and so one day, they came to him with the request, "Lord, teach us how to pray".

Let's consider then this morning some of the lessons he taught them and us about prayer.

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And to be sure, this is part of our problem. It's tough for us to find a quiet place and time when we can listen. The crowded and congested walks of our ^{TOWNS &} city. The traffic up and down ~~86th~~ Street. The intermitten sirens and horns and

bells and shouts that announce things happening in the world around us. ~~Even the parades that go by our church on a Sunday morning while we're trying to spend a few moments in prayer and thoughtful worship.~~ There's some correspondence in the archives of our church that dates back some seventy-five years or more. A letter from the Official Board to the President of the New York Central complaining that the whistle on the engine of the noon train every Sunday was violating the quiet reverence of worship in this church. And the President courteously replied that he would ask the engineer to go light on the whistle as that Sunday train approached 86th Street and Park Avenue. That must have been close to a hundred years ago before the train tracks were put below Park Avenue. But that Official Board letter was prophetic of a concern for noise pollution that has intensified, not only here - but just about any place that one goes. How difficult to find a quiet place and time.

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"All the evils of life have fallen upon us because men will not sit alone quietly in a room".

Good. That's part of our worship-crisis - because we don't know how to deal with silence. We're often uneasy or embarrassed if the period of silent prayer goes too long, and we're waiting for something to happen. That's part of our prayer-crisis, as though prayer were entirely a monologue or a filibuster on our part, with no margins of silence for preparation and for listening.

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One other thing. Jesus would not only say, "Be quiet when you pray", and "again go beyond asking for yourself in prayer" - but also, learn to trust God for the outcome of prayer. Even for Jesus, prayer was no guarantee that the outcome of prayer would be in accordance with his deepest wishes. So in Gethsemane how earnestly he prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" and then he added, "nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done".

I suspect that this is where prayer breaks down for many moderns. People pray sincerely for what seems so important to them. And sometimes it is not granted

to them in the fashion they desired - and they feel betrayed and disenchanted with prayer. They even quote the scripture to prove that they have been cheated. "Ask and it will be given you". But hold on a minute, go back to another version that seems more in keeping with the spirit of Jesus. "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it". And most of all go back to the example of Jesus, who in the hour of most intense agony could pray, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done".

A line from a book by William Temple, one time Archbishop of Canterbury, has been helpful to me over the years. He wrote:

"The proper outline of a Christian prayer is not, 'please do for me what I want!'. It is 'please do ~~with~~ me what You want'! That prayer will always be answered in proportion to its sincerity."

That prayer is not an easy one for me or anyone else honestly to make. But it is the height of Christian prayer. And perhaps we begin to scale that height of prayer when we see prayer as ultimate trust in God and as a relationship by which a power not our own is set free to work in us and through us.

I close with a modern day example of the meaning of prayer, in that highest sense. Remember some years back, the trial of the eleven Communist leaders here ^{county} in this ~~city~~ for conspiracy to overthrow the government by violence. That trial went on for eight months and was presided over by Judge Harold Medina, who exhibited unusual patience. The communists did everything in their power to break him down. About the seventh month, Medina felt that he was going to pieces: his nerves were frayed by constant bickering, telephone calls threatening his life and the lives of his loved ones. This is what he later wrote about an experience that was a turning point:

"One day I had to leave the court room. My head suddenly began to swim. I recessed the court and walked quickly to the little room at the back and lay down. I felt panicky, and I'll be frank about it, I was certain that I could never go back. I had stood as much as a human being could endure. I knew that I would have to quit. But suddenly there in the little room I found myself like a frightened child calling to his father in the dark. I asked God to help me, just to take charge, that His will might be done. I cannot report anything mysterious or supernatural, there was no vision or visitation. All I know is that as I lay on the couch some new kind of strength flowed into me. I was in that little room for only fifteen minutes, but that brief communion with my God saved not only the trial, but my sanity as well. I opened the door and walked again to the bench with a firm realization that I could take whatever was ahead."

Was it not something like that with Jesus, when after kneeling in Gethsemane and praying, "not my will, but thine be done" - he could return to the disciples and say, "Rise, let us be going". Let us pray:

"Lord, what a change within us one short hour spent in Thy presence will prevail to make!
We kneel, how weak! We rise, how full of power!"

Amen

It has been a pleasure and privilege for me to have opportunity to share in worship with you again today, as well as two weeks ago today.....

We have enjoyed being with you and wish you well in coming days as your new minister comes to lead you and serve you.

Announcements of congregational concern are before you

Chances are that there are some visitors in our congregation this morning - friends from other parts of our land, vacationing in this community and spending this hour of worship here. On behalf of the resident pastor of this parish, and the people of this congregation - we welcome you and trust that your stay here will be pleasant and memorable....We invite you to join us next Sunday if possible and other Sundays while you're in this area. We hope, too, that we may have opportunity to greet you in a more...