

Sermon 7-28-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Prayers to Gather Scattered Lives - July 28, 2019

Last week, Sarah McWhirt-Toler shared how our lives can fill up with to-do lists that seem to crowd out life. She asked, "What possessions do we need to shed so that we might be present with God?" Jesus had quite a to-do list: heal the sick, proclaim the Good News, feed the hungry, save the world. Jesus' crowds, lines, and lists often ran long. Yet, Jesus began ministry with 40 days of prayer and "often withdrew into the deserted places to pray". (Luke 5:16) Did the disciples notice how Jesus' prayer life deeply nourished and renewed Christ's soul? Is that why they asked, "Lord, teach us to pray? Opening prayer.

Luke tells us, "Jesus was praying in a certain place." Jesus teaches us to step away from the distractions, find that certain space, shut the door, and dwell with God. Do you have a prayer time and space? What spiritual disciplines keep you connected to the Spirit? When do you realign with Christ's call and command? Do you keep a daily spiritual diet to fuel your life? Do you have a deserted time and space set apart, made holy by prayer?

One of my deserted places is our front porch where the Bluejays' squawk never seems to sidetrack my devotional and the fireflies perform sacred dance. Three days a week, I find solitude in the swimming pool. Forty minutes of silence to meditate, ponder, and pray with the black lap line below and a cross at each turn. As much as my phone is a tool of endless distraction, breaking life's spiritual flow with chirps and news, I employ it's timer to find 7 minutes of silence. When life feels overwhelming, I set 7 minutes and do nothing- sit still. I name and exhale the nervous energy welling up within me. Mother Teresa notes, "that not even God can fill what is already full... without silence we can not hear from God."

My middle school youth director, Greg Northcut, taught us to practice spiritual breathing. First exhale, release, name and push out the detris of your day. "Don't be anxious about anything; bring up all of your stuff to God." (Philippians 4) Breathe out the anxieties, inadequacies, stumbles, stresses, fears, phoniness, sinfulness, nervousness, or nothingness you feel. "Even God can not fill what is already full." Exhale. Confess. Repent. Empty.

Then inhale. Breathe in the peace of God that surpasses understanding. Listen to the BlueJays. Recite a Psalm. Read the Upper Room. "Train your mind on what is excellent, admirable, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise, and then the peace of God that surpasses understanding with rest within you!" (adapted Philippians 4)

John Wesley spoke of spiritual breathing, "The Spirit is breathed into our souls ... and that breath that comes from God, returns to God: as it is continually received by faith, so it is continually rendered back (to God) by love, by prayer, by praise, and thanksgiving; so that love, and praise, and prayer become the very breath of every soul born of God. By this spiritual respiration, spiritual life is sustained and increased day by day!" (Fourth Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount)

Seeing Jesus coming back refreshed by morning prayers, the disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus offers a model, a rubric, or an outline. It is not a formula. No incantation or magic phrases bring peace surpassing our understanding. There are no magic beans or beads, secret handshakes, nor undiscovered Prayers of Jabez. No, we must do the spiritual work of withdrawing and tuning our minds into the holy. "Holy" means set apart. We must set aside time and space to mature in faith, hope and love.

“Our father, who art in heaven, holy is your name.” We who trust the Holy Spirit and ancient church committees enough to translate the scriptures into English, Spanish and Karen should not get too hung up over the exact wording of Jesus’ model prayer. Holy moments always exceed words. Indeed, knowledge itself “will pass away” being supplanted by a higher love. (1 Corinthians 13) God hears our hearts, so address God with the words that honor God’s holiness and love. Pray: “Our Father,” “Our Mother,” “Precious Lord”, “Holy One,” “Loving Parent”, “Yahweh,” or “Creator God.” People make all kinds of judgements; God looks at the heart. (Luke 16:15)

Our family once drove from Grand Teton to Dinosaur National Park. Near dusk on an empty stretch of Utah highway, we pulled off to some hawks riding the canyon updrafts. Across that expansive western sky, we saw a thunderstorm hundreds of miles away. As the sun dipped low, the crimson clouds seemed to kiss the cliff walls alive with a pale redness that almost glowed. Our 10 year old requested a Rich Mullin’s song, “There is this silence in the Badlands. And over Kansas the whole universe was stilled, by the whisper of a prayer, the whisper of a prayer, and the single hawk bursts into flight, and in the east the whole horizon is in flames, I feel thunder in the sky, I see the sky about to rain, and I hear the prairies calling out Your name.” I felt Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty! A holy moment I hope I will always remember. Strangely since that moment the words “Our Father” have seemed inadequate. My dad was great and could fix anything, but that holy moment cried out “Creator.”

Holy is your name. Beauty is your name. Mercy is your name. Kindness is your name. Justice is your name. Excellent is your name. Pure is your name. Love is your name. What matters is not the words so much as our orientation towards God. So much of our modern Protestant prayer seems to revolve around “asking” for things from God. If you go into a mosque, you’ll see the names of God written around the top in Arabic. The word for prayer in Islam is more akin to “recite” than “ask”. Our Jewish ancestors and our Catholic friends know the value of pondering God beyond asking. Could our focus on asking really place more of a focus on us than God? Could always asking bring a kind of spiritually disempowering, wherein we passively wait for God to do something, instead of doing the things we know God already calls us to do? Could our asking keep us from shedding our possessions and wants? Did not Jesus pray, “Not my will, Lord, but your will be done”? (Matthew 26:3)

“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as in heaven” is a prayer for the transformation of the world. It is a shedding of our base desires, selfish wants, and our unloving instincts. Prayer recenters us in mission. Praise rekindles the image of God within us. It renews us passing our lives through a filter of forgiveness. However, without a commitment to do God’s will, prayer is fairly meaningless! When I was a child, a man had a heart attack during worship. Our pastor stopped everything calling for prayer. A first year medical student and a nurse rushed to perform CPR. The deacons shielded the scene providing privacy. At lunch, the excitement of my basketball coach and Chris King’s mother saving a life animated my 10 year-old imagination. Dad punctured the heroic scene, “I just can’t understand how Dr. So-So-MD just sat in the pew never offering a word.” I once bumped into a seminary professor at lunch who asked why I was so dressed up, then counting on his fingers he laughed, “Oh yes, I suppose it is Sunday.” Having a PhD in God’s will matters very little if you do not practice what you already know.

Jesus spent 40 days in prayer before beginning his ministry. Weary from work of healing and teaching the crowds, Jesus slipped away to deserted places to pray. Jesus prayed all night long before selecting the disciples. Jesus prayed before raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake while praying on Maundy Thursday. Jesus prayed from the cross.

“Give us this day our daily bread and deliver us from evil.” God knows our needs before we even ask. Ask for what you need. Name the evil, oppression, and injustice. But notice, it is not a prayer for my daily bread, my families’ budget or my deep fear. Jesus casts a grander vision-give us all enough to eat, end all oppression. Jesus came to do a public work. Indeed, when most of us think about food, our prayer becomes a holy nudge to share our resources and feed 5,000. When we ask “deliver us from evil”, we likely hear God speaking from the Burning Bush, “I have heard the cry of my people on account of their oppressors... now see, I am sending you.” Not what I possess and want, but your will be done on earth as in heaven.

“Forgive us our trespasses, just as we forgive those who have wronged us.” For heaven and earth to align we must forgive. To taste spiritual freedom we must practice forgiveness. We must exhale unforgiveness, pushing out wounds, payback, and vendettas. We must stop punching back harder. Forgiveness releases the soul but does not wipe away the demands of justice. If we do not forgive, we will stay bound to our wounds and enemies, with our chains unbroken. Forgiveness is not dependant on the offender, but a spiritual freedom given by God.

“And lead us not into temptation.” This is a puzzling line. God does not lead us into temptation. Perhaps, it is another reminder that we are together in this. Do not lead our nation, our church, our family... But maybe it is a caution sign. Terrible things have been done in the name of God. “Lord, do not thinking can do less than love and uphold your name.” Funny how we can shun a child, quit church, or hate others with a sense of holy entitlement. Perhaps, Jesus is reminding us to double check our action plans in the searchlights of faith, hope, mercy, and love.

“For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.” The liturgist wisely adds this refrain to Jesus’ model prayer, calling our attention back to God before we leave our prayer space and re-enter the world. May our prayers not center in our will, our needs, our wants, our fears, but instead root us in the love and justice of God. So here we are in a certain place set aside for worship. Exhale your stuff. Inhale God’s beauty, hope, and power. Listen to Jesus’ model prayer and commit your path to God.