

Sermon 1-21-24

Paul Purdue preaching

Prayer is the oldest and most universal religious practice. People all over the world pray in what the Apostle Paul calls *"the rich variety of God's wisdom"* and adds that *"Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by God."* (Eph 3) The Bible assumes prayer as a practice its readers understood, and that makes sense because the Bible was read almost exclusively in synagogues and churches prior to the printing press. You heard the Bible read as part of daily and weekly prayer gatherings. So in the Garden of Eden story, prayer is as easy as talking to God who dropped by in the cool of the day. Cain, Abel and Noah all build altars without the editor explaining what an offering is. God just speaks to Abraham and Sara *"leave this land and go to a place I will show you."* In Genesis 12, there was no burning bush, no angel, and no explanation of what exactly "God told me" means.

There are so many ways to pray. We pray with Lectio Divina slowly listening to a repeated scripture, listening to neighbor with attentive compassion, meditation, mindfulness, or memorizing Scriptures. We pray through liturgies, books of prayers, the Psalms, devotional guides, rosaries, silence, prayerful walking, hiking, or picnicking beside a Tennessee river. We can pray through a meal remembering every person and force of nature that brought the daily bread to our table. We can pray by listening to inspiring music, dancing, chanting, singing, writing new songs, or as Paul encourages *"making melodies in our hearts."* (Eph 5:19) We can pause at the end of the day thinking about our doing in light of Christ's forgiveness, mercy and calling.

Almost any moment can be a moment of prayer. We do not need to ascend a mountain top or compose a proper liturgy. Like my mother, we can say "thank you Jesus" when we see cardinals finding the seeds we put out in the snow. When some powder blue Subaru hits an icy patch and almost slides into us, we can pray with our eyes on the road "Lord in your mercy, help that person slow down" or maybe when retelling the blue Subaru story we may realize our need to forgive that Subaru and release our tension praying "Lord rooted me more deeply in Love."

I have been thinking about how Jesus said: *"Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God"* in Matthew 5. If that is right then maybe anytime we think or do anything with a pure heart we are praying. If my heart is open, clear and loving: then maybe I am praying.

Most mornings before I swim, I read my upcoming sermon's Scripture, so that for the 40 minutes I move silently back and forth down the lap lane I can pray over the sermon. My swimming prayers are more daydreaming than orderly reflections. I let my mind wander through the text and my day. My understanding of prayer shifted dramatically in college, when I read Mother Teresa's "Everything begins with Prayer. Teresa teaches *"without silence it is impossible to hear from God because Not even God can fill what is already full."* The Psalmist declares *"that is enough, be still and know that I God"* (Psalm 46) I had grown up thinking of prayer as asking, but Mother Teresa allowed me

to offer my empty headedness to God; giving the Spirit room to fill my thoughts. So I swim or walk in silence hoping to get my heart a little purer, seeing Christ, losing my distractions, and casting off my inner busyness. Prayer might be less work and more sabbath. The Sabbath liberates us from the demand for consumption and productivity whispering a gentle mantra *“Do not do any work”* (Exodus 20) Jesus tells us to not worry too much about the words we pray saying *“do not pour out a flood of empty words... because God knows what you need before you ask”*. (Matt 6) God knows, so just dwell with God- feel your belovedness- let the sky crack open and hear deeply in your spirit that you are a child of God. (Rom 8) Jesus beckons us to abide in prayer *“come to me, all you who are heavy laden with big loads of concern, and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matt 11) Abide. Take it easy. Be still. Sabbath.

In Philippians 3 Paul invites us: *“Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in prayers, and give thanks. Siblings, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise”*. God invites us to bring our anxiousness to God. Bring your overwhelmedness to God. Bring any rejection, exclusion, or inner or external judgments to God, who loves you and forgives us all 70x7 to the 7th power. *“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”* (Eph 3) Shake off those images of an angry God, those lies that God can’t tolerate your sin, and see the God who came to live as one of us, Christ our Lord, who hung out with sinners. Come and dwell within that the Perfect Love of God that *“casts out all fear”* of punishment. (1 John 4)

“Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in prayers, and give thanks. Siblings, if anything is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, worthy of praise, focus your thoughts on these things. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.” Perhaps we are praying every time we focus on anything that is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, worthy of praise. Your gazing through your microscope, listening through your stethoscope, or your herding goats can be prayer if your heart tends towards what is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise.

I grew up in a tradition that elevated extemporaneous praying to the highest spiritual plane, looking down on prayers written by others as less than spiritual and from the heart. It was strange that we did this, given the fact we memorized Scripture and told everyone to listen attentively to the sermon. I have come to understand that we may learn to pray best by praying the prayers of others. On the cross Jesus prays aloud the opening lines of David’s prayer from Psalm 22. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”* I imagine Jesus retreated into the sanctuary of those 31 verses and found God’s

presence while enduring the worst moments of his life. I have had two longer nights of the soul, one as I left my childhood theology and one as we struggled with health issues. I found the prayers of others, holy communion, the daily office, the Lord's prayer, and Scripture the only ways I could pray during those dry spiritual seasons. Lament is prayer as much as is thanksgiving.

And deep listening, listening with compassion is a kind of prayer, (Matt 9) so when my covenant group bore my tears, their listening was as holy as any offering they might make. Jesus tells us "any time that 2 or 3 of us gather together in God's name, that Christ is present with us." Perhaps presence with God, ourselves and neighbor is the heart of prayer.

Our doing can be as much a prayer as the most liturgical correct day at the holiest monastery with the most sanctified celebrant. How could we live into the Pauline command to "*pray without ceasing*" if prayer always called us away from our work or play (1 Thessalonians 5). Anytime we do the things that Jesus did we are praying. Our Lord's Prayer reminds us that forgiving is a pathway to grace allowing us to embody God's deep forgiveness. (Matt 6). Jesus promises that when we stop judging, God will break the hold of judgment in our lives, and when we make peace, we live as children of God. (Matt 5 & 7). Those actions and attitudes are prayer. Jesus promises to be present when we welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, visit the sick, liberate the prisoner, stand up for justice and offer compassion to the hurting. Indeed, in Matthew 25 Jesus tells us that even if we are unaware that Christ is with us, Jesus assures us, "*every time you took care of those casts to the side you cared for me*". If prayer is being present with God, then serving may be our purest prayer. (Isaiah 1, Matt 9 & 25 children verses)

Art can be a kind of prayer. The book of Exodus, that powerful story of God's liberation of an enslaved people, ends with 5 chapters, an eighth of the book, detailing how the artist and carpenters made the tabernacle. "*All of you who are skilled in crafts should come forward and make everything that the Lord has commanded: the dwelling: clasps, boards, bars, posts, and bases; bread, lampstand, oils, incense, and altar; drapes, screen, gates, curtain, and vestments. ... Everyone who was excited and eager to participate brought their gifts offerings... and the Lord set apart Bezalel to be the architect and noted that "the Lord has filled them with the divine spirit, skill, ability, and knowledge for every kind of work."* And five chapters later when all the work was finished: "*God's presence in The Cloud covered the Tabernacle and the Lord's glorious presence filled the dwelling.*" Exodus 40 reports that, "*Now the presence of God was so thick that Moses couldn't enter the tabernacle (for days) because the cloud had settled on it, and the Lord's glorious presence filled the dwelling.*" All that art and handiwork was an offering or prayer to God.

Sometimes, when I am at my workbench repairing some broken piece of furniture and I choose to remove the distractions, leaving my phone on the kitchen table then my work can become prayer and my mistakes become simply part of what God and I are doing together. Indeed, releasing the results may be a key to prayer. We stop asking or

striving for perfection and simply to try to abide with ourselves and God. Jesus says give, serve, forgive “*without expectation of reward*”, when we learn to do that we feel a deep release. (Luke 6) When I can give myself to some project (at the workbench or my work laptop) and silence the inner critic and stop worrying about how it turns out, I come away from my activity renewed, rested, well sabbath and it turns out better (generally). You might find this prayerful release knitting, cooking, gardening, journaling or playing. This has taken time to learn, but letting go and just being aware of God’s deep love for me feels like prayer. I am pretty sure I learned how to prayerfully release things from Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, and some other good friends.

There is so much more I could say about prayer, indeed on Friday before the final edit my free-form sermon stretched to ten pages, on Wednesday Heather will lead us in some prayer practices at 6m. Friends, learning to pray is an essential part of living a life filled with grace and thriving spiritually. May God’s grace woo us more deeply into a life of prayer. Amen.