

Sunday July 28th, 2019
10th after Pentecost

CALL TO WORSHIP: “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord! O Magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.”

PRAYER: O Lord, ask whatever you will of us, and it will be given. Seek whatever you need from us, and it will be found. Knock upon any door, and it will be opened. For while we are yet weak, we ask of you, and receive; while we are yet sinful, we seek from you, and find; and while we are yet estranged, we approach your door, and discover it open-a door none can close. Come to us, Lord, and invite us in, that we might eat at your table-you with us and us with you. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: O God, you have revealed yourself to us as a friend worthy of our ultimate trust. You are always available: there is no time when we cannot approach you. You are always generous: there is no gift that we cannot seek from you. As parents would not dream of betraying their child with an evil gift, so there is no hint of malice or betrayal in your dealings with us. As children trust absolutely in their parent’s care and provisions, we know you are the source of all joy, all blessing and life; that you want to crown our lives with health and goodness; that you want to give blessings richer than the finest gold. We rejoice in the access we have to you, our dearest friend, through prayer. Make us eager to know you better, and serve you, by befriending all the world’s children. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God, who is rich in mercy, bids you lift your hearts and realize his presence. See God’s immeasurable grace in kindness toward us in Christ! In grace you have been saved through faith. It is the gift of God! Believe and accept the gift: your sins are forgiven. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: Jesus said, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Luke 16:13)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, whose breath stirs the trees, whose pulse moves the rivers, we praise you for your presence in our world. We can trust your presence-around us, among us, with us, within us-above all else. If shades of light and dark play tricks on our eyes, we can look to you for clarity in seeing. If clamoring voices make fools of our ears, we can listen to you for clarity of hearing. If competing powers make claims on our hearts, we can turn to you for clarity in deciding. Yours is the light beside which all others dim, the voice before which all others are faint, and the power against which all others are weak.

We thank you, dear Lord that we can take your presence for granted. But let us not take your presence lightly. Let us never forget that your presence makes two demands upon us: that we love you with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and that we love our neighbours as ourselves-two great demands, which really are but one, like the rising and setting sun.

Only one commandment...why do we have such trouble remembering, Lord? We can fill our minds daily with all kinds of facts and figures, memorize lists of names and lines of poetry, plan for a day twenty years hence or recollect a day twenty years before;

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but when the facts tell us that someone needs help, when the figures show someone is in trouble, we cannot remember our responsibility, before them and before you. Forgive us, Lord, when we thus deny our baptism.

We are your people, O God. We would live in Christ! We would be rooted in the goodness of Christ, like the great forests are rooted in the good earth! Yet we are afraid, we pull back. We live in a rapidly changing world, with shifting values and uncertain loyalties. Some of us want to conquer that world with our own schemes and skill and sweat. Others of us want to retreat. Our hands, which you would stretch toward the stricken, we use to cover our ears; our eyes, which you would turn toward the unloved, we squeeze tightly shut; our mouths, with which you would proclaim release, we open to declare we won't get involved.

Convict us, Lord! Teach us that the world is not ours for us to conquer, but yours for us to tend! Convince us that we are not to retreat from the world, but return to it, filled with your compassion. Empower us, Lord! As we commit to you in this place, remind us that our commitment is meaningless if we do not exercise it in other places. As we dedicate ourselves to you in this hour, remind us that our dedication is unacceptable if we do not express it in other hours. Let your will be our will; your kingdom, our kingdom; your power, our power; your glory, our glory-on earth as it is in heaven, forever and ever!

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Luke 11:1-13

“God’s Open-Door Policy”

James Vincent Forrestal was the secretary of defense for the United States in the years immediately after World War II. He was also, as his reputation suggests, perhaps the prototype of every future workaholic to follow. To prove this, we need only look back to an incident that occurred when Forrestal was working in London, and he received a phone call from his two sons, who had missed their plane in Paris.

Forrestal told his two sons to work out the problem for themselves and meet him in London. Sounds like a character building exercise doesn’t it, until you learn that his sons were ages six and eight at the time. How about a father in Scotts Valley California, who was arrested for leaving his toddler alone in an SUV for 45 minutes in a mall parking lot? What was Dad doing while baby was waiting in a car seat? He was sitting in a restaurant taking part in a bible study. (Well Duh! By Bob Fenster)

Maybe all of us have at least one story when our own parents were anything but stellar in their care of us. We could speak of being hurt, slighted, neglected, forgotten, and compared unfairly to siblings, or the children of our parent’s neighbours or friends. I mention this because I came across something very insightful that may help me understand the spirituality of folks that seem austere and ridged in their Christian witness.

In Phillip Yancey’s marvelous book called *Prayer*, there is a reflection by a man named simply John, who has spent 25 of his ministry life, working with homeless people. As part of the ministry, John and his volunteers run a coffeehouse where street people can drop in, and then on Sunday’s they even hold a small urban church service upstairs.

John states that they never know what will happen at these church services. As you can imagine, some of the people who come smell really bad. Some suffer from severe psychiatric problems and may be off their medications. And you just never know what they will say during the service; like one person prayed aloud one day, “Thank you Lord, for Metamucil” and another chimed in, “That’s a 10-4, God.”

Then John goes on to make a startling observation that made me sit up straight. He says, “I was surprised to learn how many street people are fundamentalists, at least those who claim any kind of faith at all.” He goes on, “No wonder: the missions they go to preach a steady diet of hellfire and brimstone, and many street people carry around some notion of a mean God from their childhood.”

He goes on to say; “There is plenty of shame and worthlessness to go around. I have a theory that both street people and fundamentalists suffer from *attachment disorders*. Somehow in childhood they never learned to bond with parents, and never learned to bond with God either. How can you trust another person with who you are; much less God?” Then John concludes, “If I am right about *attachment disorders*, the best ministry I can offer is a long-term relationship.” (Prayer by P. Yancey. P.34-35)

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When the disciples approach Jesus in today's gospel lesson, they are reacting to an observation. Yes, I know the disciples made mistakes, but they did try and learn something on occasion by watching and listening. Jesus, as was his custom, had been away on his own praying, and when he returns to the group, the disciples pose a question, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Their question, obviously, arises out of their observation that both Jesus and John as well, it seems, gave evidence of an intimate relationship with God. Jesus gives no evidence of any kind of attachment disorder when it came to dealing with his Father. I think this also helps us understand why Jesus was so compassionate, patient, and understanding of those who suffered from a lack of attachment; not only to God but to other people.

The disciples wanted that same kind of intimacy with God, but their connection to God felt so dysfunctional. It didn't look or feel anything like the relationship Jesus had. This disconnection between what Jesus experienced, and what they experienced, produced a hunger in them to know God as Jesus knew God. I think we can all appreciate how the disciples felt; I know I can. Honestly, who among us can say their relationship with God is where they want it to be? In all of us there remains an unsatisfied hunger.

Jesus recognizes the importance of this moment and offers the key to an intimate relationship with God. The first thing Jesus does is he presents those familiar words of what we call the Lord's Prayer. It is a shorter version than what Matthew gives in Matthew chapter 5 and we regularly recite, but the core of the prayer is here. The point of this model of prayer is really quite simple. Pray to God as your Father. Assume, in prayer, the intimacy with God that you long for.

God is as near to us as an earthly father is to his children, so pray like he is. And because God is so close, and knows everything about us, and we desire to praise and please him; the focus of our prayer needs to be on those things that honour God and improve our connection to him. For example: God gives us food, so acknowledge that. God forgives us, so acknowledge that. God helps us forgive others and keeps us from temptation, so acknowledge that as well.

Treat God as if he truly is your Father. Stop trying to build a connection to God that already exists. "Stop reinventing the wheel", so to speak. God is already a part of your life; he is just waiting for you to acknowledge this truth and start living this truth. To illustrate this further, Jesus goes on to tell a little story. Originally, when Jesus told this little story he likely provoked smiles and chuckles among his listening audience.

The story goes that a man opens his door to an unexpected guest late one night. This is not a ridiculous situation. The audience saw this as a common experience in a desert climate that encourages travel after sunset. The host discovers to his horror that his cupboards are bare. In a region renowned for hospitality, no decent person would turn away a weary traveler, or put him to bed without some food. Remember Martha last week? So, in order to care for his unexpected guest, the host heads over to a friend's house to ask for bread; again not an uncommon experience for the audience.

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Kenneth Bailey, a retired Presbyterian missionary, who lived in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon for forty years, illustrates the cultural nuances of this story. Palestinians use bread as Westerners use silverware: they break off bite-size pieces to dip into a common dish of meat and vegetables and then eat whatever they pick up in the bread. The man in the story was likely also asking for the main course as well as bread. Villagers frequently borrowed from each other in hospitality emergencies.

Bailey recalled one particular instance. “While living in a primitive Middle Eastern villages, we discovered to our amazement that this custom of rounding up from neighbours something adequate for the guest, extended even to us when we were the guests. We would accept an invitation to a meal clear across the village, and arrive to eat from our own dishes which the villagers had borrowed quietly from our cook.”

In the story Jesus told though, the neighbour stubbornly refuses the request. He is already stretched out on his sleeping mat with his family in the one room house and the door is bolted shut. “Don’t bother me!” he calls to his neighbour from his sleeping mat. A Middle Eastern audience would have laughed out loud at this lame excuse. “Can you imagine such a neighbour?” Jesus was asking.

I can see the indignant audience now saying in part. *Certainly not! No one in my village would act so rudely. If he did, the entire village would know about it by morning!* Then Jesus delivers the punch line: “I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is a friend, yet because of his boldness [his persistence, his shamelessness] he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” (Yancy-Prayer p.14)

The application to prayer follows immediately, “Keep on asking, and you will be given whatever you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks.” Do you get Jesus’ point? It’s a good one!

If a cranky neighbour who is doing everything in his power to ignore you, and hoping you will go away, eventually because of your persistence gets up and gives you what you want; how much more will God respond to your boldness and persistence in praying to him? No earthly father would respond to their child’s request for good things with a gift of evil things.

You ask for a fish and your father gives you a snake. Who does that? Ask for an egg and instead you receive a scorpion; unheard of! If earthly fathers, despite their flaws, know how to give good gifts to their children, then how much more will your perfect, holy, heavenly Father give to you if you but ask him. Go back to the Lord’s Prayer for a moment. Let us be honest, these words have for many of us become a bit too familiar.

We kind of stumble through them like some tired old ritual. However, in light of the story Jesus told, we should pray the Lord’s Prayer with the boldness of a sales person who won’t take no for an answer. Maybe we need to be like Jacob in Genesis 28 who wrestled with God all night long, refusing to let him go.

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We need to stop behaving like people in some religions who feel they have to ring bells or bang drums to wake the gods. We have to assume from the get-go an intimacy with God. This passage, however, raises a bit of a concern for me, and I am sure you as well. We need to ask in response to Jesus' words; why this demand for persistence?

Perhaps the following illustration will help. Many of us who are parents have shared a common experience. Your children have come to you to ask for things, and over the years the number of things asked for is quite substantial. They ask for everything from bicycles to ice cream. You name it and they have asked for it. Most of the time, out of necessity, we say no or ignore these requests.

Our children might conclude of us that sometimes we are like stone walls to them. However, there is something interesting that occurs from time to time. Sometimes our children become quite persistent in requesting something in particular. It is like they have become obsessed with this particular thing. They go on and on about it, even providing logical reasons why such a thing would be beneficial.

You can't help but notice their persistence, although we might question their motives. Sometimes such persistence indicates they are serious about something. Well, unlike an earthly parent, God always knows my true motive, whether pure or impure, noble or selfish, from the very moment of the initial request. So why does God want us to be persistent. Why must I pound on the door in the middle of the night, making a pest of myself?

Let me suggest that the reason for persistence goes back to what I said about attachment disorders. Prayer helps us strengthen our connection to God; and through persistence God takes us through the process of sorting out our priorities. We may approach God for some material benefit and thankfully sometimes he answers that prayer. However, often in persistent prayer I begin to see the world as God sees it.

Remember God sees more clearly what I really need more than I do, and sometimes in my persistence, he is leading me to see things the way he does. Usually, when I am negotiating with another person, my goal is to get them to see things my way. When I buy a car for example, I want a certain model, for a certain price, and financing on my terms. In the early stages of prayer, I may approach God this way.

I may want to persuade God to see things my way, but by being persistent and bold in approaching God, I begin to see God as the wise and senior partner in our relationship. In a real turnabout, I discover in prayer that, just like me, God has been quietly asking, seeking, and knocking. He has been encouraging us to wrestle with him just as children like to wrestle with their parents.

It also needs to be said as Simone Weil does so well, "Isn't it the greatest possible disaster, when you are wrestling with God, not to be beaten?" Sometimes what appears to be a defeat, may over time become a great victory. Jacob walked away from his nightlong match with God with a limp, but he walked into history as the father of nations.

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The real value of persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want, but that we become the person we should be. A person prays, said St. Augustine, “that he himself may be constructed, not that God may be instructed.” Yancey sums up this subject with this observation...

In prayer we present requests, sometimes repeatedly, and then put ourselves in a state to receive the result. We pray for what God wants to give us, which may turn out to be good gifts or it may be the Holy Spirit. Like Peter, we may pray for food and get a lesson in racism. Like Paul we may pray for healing and get humility. We may ask for relief from trials and instead get patience to bear them. We may pray for release from prison and instead get strength to redeem the time while there. (Prayer, p.154)

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,” Paul writes. Workmanship comes from the Greek word *poiema* from which we get our word *poem*. In other words, Paul is telling us we are God’s work of art. Prayer offers an opportunity for God to remodel us, to chisel marble like a sculptor, touch up the colours like an artist, and edit words like a writer. And this work continues through our lives, never being fully perfected until our death, and our arrival in heaven.

So, I ask you. Have you got an attachment disorder with God? Are your hands getting tired from banging on his door? Then maybe what God is trying to tell you, is that what needs to change is not your circumstance, but you yourself. Maybe the problem with our prayers is that we have become so focused on the subject matter that we have forgotten who we are talking to.

So, keep asking, keep knocking, keep seeking, but also remember that no matter how our heavenly Father responds to our prayers, it is always, and I mean without exception, to the betterment of our lives.

BENEDICTION: As once the spirit of God dwelled bodily in Jesus of Nazareth, so now the spirit of God dwells in us, the body of Christ. Being therefore members of one another, let us care for one another. If any of us suffer, let all suffer together. If any of us rejoice, let all rejoice together. Amen.