

## When You Pray....

Psalm 141:1-2; Romans 8:26-27

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On this second Sunday in Lent, we continue our journey to the cross of Christ, as we prepare ourselves for our observance of Holy Week and Christ's crucifixion and our celebration of his resurrection on Easter. Throughout this season of preparation, Lee and I are basing our sermons on various aspects of the Lenten disciplines which are intended to help us open ourselves to a deeper relationship with God. Last week we talked about the importance of confession and repentance. Today's focus is prayer.

To help me in my preparation for today's sermon, I sent out an email to everyone in our congregation whose email address we have in the church office, and I asked for your thoughts about prayer. I want to thank those of you who responded and shared your experiences of prayer and the part that prayer plays in your life.

One theme that ran through most all the responses I got was that prayer is a hard thing to describe. And that has been my experience also. Every time I talk about prayer, I find myself stuttering somewhat. I think that is because even though prayer is something that we participate in, it is not something that we control. The scripture that we read from Romans says that we don't know how to pray as we ought, so the Holy Spirit prays for us, using sighs too deep for words. As much as we may think that we are in charge when we bow in prayer, the truth is that we are not. I imagine we have all had the experience when a prayer seemed to come from out of nowhere. One of the emails I got from a member of the church said that there had been times in her life when God answered prayers she wasn't even praying. Prayer is not something we control; it's beyond us.

In his autobiography called *Soul on Fire*, Eldridge Cleaver tells about his conversion experience. He was living in France at the time, in what he described as "a hopeless situation." He was at a point when his life seemed to have no meaning. In deep despair, he made the decision to end his life; there was no reason for him to go on. But here's how he describes what happened next:

I just crumbled and started crying. I fell to my knees, grabbing hold of the banister; and in the midst of this shaking and crying the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm came into my mind. I hadn't thought about these prayers in years. After awhile, I jumped up and ran to my bookshelf and got the Bible. I turned to the 23rd Psalm and discovered that my memory really had not served me well. I got lost somewhere between the Valley of the Shadow of Death and the overflowing cup. I read it thoroughly. At last I lay down and went to sleep. It was the most peaceful sleep I have ever known in my life. (Mulder and Kerr, *Conversions*, p. 257).

Where did those prayers come from? I think that's an example of what Paul is describing in Romans: when Eldridge Cleaver didn't have the words to say, the Holy Spirit supplied the words.

So maybe the first thing to say is that all our attempts to understand prayer are at best only going to nibble around the edges of it because it is really beyond us—just like the Holy Spirit is beyond our understanding and control.

In several of the email responses I got, the writer described their prayers as brief interludes that interject themselves into our daily lives. One person described his prayer life as being like a commercial in a TV show. The show is the stuff that makes up the comings and goings of our lives, and from time to time, interjected into that is a message from the sponsor.

That has certainly been my experience. I'll be busying myself with the routine, and sometimes boring, things that are a part of ministry, when something will happen that makes me say, "Thank you, God." And for me, it generally has to do with the people I come in contact with. Someone will do something or say something that is such a word of grace and reminds me of God's presence. And I can't do anything else but say "Thank you, God."

Another time that prayers interject themselves into our lives is in those times when we are saying not "Thank you", but "Please." We will find ourselves in a situation when we are aware that we need some power greater than our own to get through it. "Please, God."

For our Call to Worship this morning, we heard again Jesus' familiar teaching about prayer, where he said: "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Jesus clearly teaches us to take our concerns to God and trust that God hears our prayers and answers them according to God's will for us.

But I think that sometimes we hear this teaching from Jesus and get the picture that God is up in heaven behind some closed door, and it's up to us to knock on God's door so that God will open it and answer us. God is waiting for us to start knocking. It's like prayer is a conversation with God which we initiate. God's perfectly willing to talk to us, but it's up to us to start the conversation.

I don't think that's the picture of God which the Bible presents. One writer has said that prayer is always "answering speech" (Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 90). That is, our prayers are always the second thing said in this conversation with God. The first speaker is God. The initiator is God. God is not holed up behind some closed door waiting for us to start knocking. No, God is the first speaker; God is the one who starts the conversation.

And so if that's true, if God is the one who speaks the first word in the conversation with us, what is the word that God has spoken to us? According to the Gospel of John, God's word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). The writer of Hebrews says the same thing in slightly different words. Hebrews begins: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us a Son..." (Hebrews 1:1). The word that God has spoken to us—the word with which God begins the conversation with us—is Jesus. That's the first word in the conversation between us and God: Jesus. If you want to hear the word that God speaks to us, look at Jesus, listen to Jesus.

Jesus said, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life" (Matthew 6:25). The first word in our conversation with God is a word of comfort, peace and love spoken through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so for me, one of the first steps in prayer is to try to listen for that word of love that God has already spoken. And I want to share with you just a couple of ways that I have found meaningful and helpful in this listening aspect of prayer.

Something that I frequently do is to sing this verse over and over again: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Singing that verse over and over again for 10 or 15

minutes begins to do several things to me. One thing it does is to plant in my mind the name of Jesus.

Another thing that happens when I sing this verse is that I remember when those words were first spoken. It was when Jesus was hanging on the cross dying. The thief hanging on the cross next to him said, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus replied, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Singing these words over and over again allows me to hear not just the prayer of the thief, but also Jesus’ response of grace and love.

Yet another thing happens to me when I’m singing this verse. I’ll admit it: sometimes as I’m singing my mind starts to wander. I’ll be singing the verse, but I’ll be thinking about something else at the same time. And then something remarkable happens: I’ll hear the name of Jesus being brought to bear on this other thing I’m thinking about. Sort of like in your biology textbook when you would lay one transparency over the top of another so that you would see things through that overlay. Singing this verse seems to work like that transparency that overlays itself on top of that issue that is stirring in me.

At risk of staying too long with this thing about singing a prayer, there is also another prayer song that I sing most days. It’s this: “Breathe on me, Breath of God; fill me with life anew; that I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou would’st do.” [If you want the words, they’re on p. 235 (red), 316 (blue) of our hymnbook.] This is generally how I drive to work, singing this verse from the hymn. It sets a wonderful tone for the day; it reminds me that my task for the day is to love what God loves and to do what God would have me do.

The reason I have to sing it every day is because it’s so easy for me to forget, and instead to love what I want to love and to do what I want to do.

One last thought about prayer. When we go to God in prayer, we often find that we don’t get what we ask for. God is not about being the magical provider of whatever we want. But what God always gives in response to our prayers is peace. Eldridge Cleaver described how after his traumatic experience and the blessings of prayer God gave to him, he had the most peaceful night of sleep he had ever had.

In Philippians, Paul writes, “Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests known to God, and the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

That verse from Philippians has a very special meaning for me personally because back in 1977 after my Father had surgery for a brain tumor and was told by the doctor that the tumor would likely return, he wrote out that verse from Philippians and put it on his shaving mirror so that he saw it every day—began every day with those words. Did he always get what he asked for in his prayers to God? No. What he did get was God’s peace that carried him through that day.

Prayer is certainly one way to be drawn into a deeper and richer relationship with God...and so throughout this Lenten season—and throughout every day of our lives—let us pray:

Lord God, we thank you for the word of love you have spoken to us through your son Jesus. And we ask that all we say and do may reflect our love for him. Amen. ✠