

Exodus16:1-8

The Essence of Prayer

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The Congregational Church of Needham

Our worship theme for March is Prayer. What could be more traditional during Lent than a sermon about prayer? But prayer is in the news today. If you search for prayer on google you get 27 million hits. Though prayer is not part of our formal education in our public schools today, in most schools where tests are being given someone is praying. Over the years the prayers in the Senate have become the stuff of legend as the Chaplain of the Senate has offered words that inspired a nation. Invocations and benedictions at the inauguration of elected leaders are sentinels of faith. Americans like to pray. According to the Pew Research Center, people in all age categories talk to God. Among people 18-29 years old 48% of Americans pray every day. For those in their fifties 61% pray. For those over 70 – 70% are checking in with God on a daily basis. When the Twin Towers were hit by two planes, millions of people around the world held their breath and the first words they said were directed to God.

But the question remains but how does prayer work. Today's scripture lesson about the ancient Hebrews comes from the oldest part of the Bible. One of the important things they had to learn when they were released from slavery in Egypt was how to pray. Let's see what we can learn from this story for our lives today.

In the first place, prayer is natural and normal. I think of it like an instinct. This story of the Hebrews demonstrates how natural prayer is. When the Hebrew slaves were freed, they made their way into the desert. At first they were deliriously happy. Everything was new. No one could tell them what to do. They could barely believe their great fortune to be able to pursue

their own path and they were self-sufficient, at least for a while. The Bible says they packed some provisions; they did not have time for their baking bread to rise but they brought the crackers, the flat bread we remember as matzo and that Jews use to celebrate Passover today. For a week or so things were unbelievable good. But then they began to run through all the food they packed in their overnight bags, and only the desert trail lay ahead. They started to worry. As they got more and more hungry, they began to panic. So they called out to Moses and ultimately they cried out to God.

The Bible does not say that they had an assembly to discuss their options. Whether they realized it or not the Hebrew people were praying. Why? They prayed because it is such a natural response when you are scared or overwhelmed. It is what we do when we face the unknown. They prayed for the same reason that people pray on the highway when they see a car accident and someone lying in distress. They prayed for the same reason people bow their heads in hospitals while they wait for someone in surgery. It is what we do. We pray when a parent takes an unexpected turn. We pray when we cannot find a child, or when a teenager is lost in some fundamental way. It is a natural response.

“Anthropologists say that prayer is one of the earliest recorded behaviors of human beings. The cave paintings of Dordogne in France may well embody a 16,000 year old prayer ritual” {“ The Paradox of Prayer” by Bill Newcott, AARP: The Magazine. March 1, 2015)

Stanford Professor Tanya Luhrman has written a book about prayer entitled, *When God Talks Back*. She says in a recent interview, “I don’t think there is any society on earth that does not interact with Gods or spirits.” An expert on prayer, Luhrman has made a career of studying this mystery. “As far back as we have writing to describe human behavior, where there is religion there is prayer. “The Pew Research Center reports that among every faith group prayer is key. 86% of Protestants say they pray every week. 82% of Muslims. 79% of Roman Catholics prayer every week and 44% of Jews pray weekly. For those unaffiliated with any religion 65% converse

with God on a weekly basis. {"The Paradox of Prayer" by Bob Newcott, AARP Magazine Feb/Mar 2015}

But many people feel nervous about prayer. We assume it is for monks or nuns. We worry that we don't know how to do it. So when you feel nervous about prayer- try to remember everyone already knows how to pray. It is a basic human instinct.

In the second place, the best prayers are honest ones. In our story the Hebrews did not kneel down and say pious things to God. They did not make rosaries or prayer beads. They did not carve or paint icons. They yelled at Moses and his brother. They yelled at anyone who would listen. They worried out loud. They asked questions. They were sarcastic and speculated that this was a fool's errand they had embarked upon. The Bible says that God listened. God heard their cries. Why? Not because they were pretty prayers. The people did not even know they were praying. But they were compelling to God because they were honest.

Too many people don't really find their way to God because they try too hard when they pray. They think of prayer as a performance. Jesus told his disciples not to pray like the Pharisees who put on a show. Pray like the poor wretch who comes humbly to God and asks for forgiveness. Some of the best prayers are short. Prayers like "thank you" – when you find someone who has been lost. Prayers like "yes" when you fall in love. Prayers like "please" when you need something badly. Annie Lamott has written a small book about prayer entitled "Help, Wow, Thanks: Three Essential Prayers". We all pray for the common good, and that our leaders made wise decisions. In times of disaster we pray that aid come swiftly and people be comforted if they cannot be spared. But often the most authentic prayers are the most heartfelt. Those moments when we cannot figure out anything nice or polite to say to God are the times when we come closest to the essence of prayer. Lamott writes about her grandson Jax who had grown to love the family cat and now the cat has lymphoma. So in desperation she told Jax that angels would be carrying the cat away soon, a thinly veiled reference to the death of Elijah. But Jax was

not having it. “I hate the angels he screamed.” That is when Lamott prayed “Help”. It may have seemed like a desperate response, but those hard moments are often our most honest ones and God hears our honest prayers.

This month I invite you to try the 30-Day Prayer Challenge, and endeavor to pray for something you really need or want or don't understand. Pray consistently for 30 days and I think you will be surprised to discover that God hears you.

Finally we all need to learn how to pray. We may have innate gifts for prayer, but like any gift we need to nurture it and use it to make it really work for us. When you look at the story of the Hebrew journey from slavery to freedom one question you have to ask is why did the Hebrews spend so much time in the desert? It is not clear, but what is clear is that the journey was a time to learn how to become a people of faith. A very important part of that journey was learning how to pray.

When they prayed for food God sent manna- to feed them but also to teach them how to pray. God came up with this idea that they would wake every morning to find fungus on the ground. This stuff would be edible and full of nutrients. It would give them everything they needed, but it would not last more than the morning. So the people would need to learn to gather enough each morning to last for the day. In fact the Bible says that they were not all obedient at first. Some wise guys tried to save the stuff but it went bad and smelled up the tents. So they learned to take enough for each day, and not to hoard but to trust God. They learned that when you pray God will not give you more than you need, but enough for each day.

In the AA program when people learn to handle addictions and become less enslaved by them, folks have a process of learning which is similar to the journey the Hebrews took. Addicts – people who are into drugs or alcohol or any number of less obvious addictions – find themselves enslaved. When by the grace of God they find a way forward into freedom, they may

have a troubling time when they wander in the wilderness for a while. That is when the AA philosophy is so helpful. They learn that you cannot see the whole journey. You cannot see the way ahead. You cannot see beyond today. So you learn to take each day- one day at a time.

To learn how to do that, you have to learn how to trust. Trust is at the heart of prayer. It is the ability to say, I cannot see where we are going but I know that God is on this journey with me. That kind of trust takes a load of worry off your shoulders. It is a lot to carry the burden of the future. It is lot to try to walk through life's wildernesses needing to know everything. It is too much for human hearts to hold. If you trust in the power of prayer you will find the manna- God's grace sufficient to the day. It will be enough. It will be enough.

*God of all places, God of all times,  
we come to you today,  
travelers in your world.*

*Sometimes we are far from home,  
strangers in a strange land,  
Teach us to pray so that we will always be at home in the world. Amen.*