

Matthew 6: 7-18

Treasure in Heaven: Advice About Prayer

Sunday March 8, 2015

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Last week when her mother fell and broke her leg in the hospital, it seemed to Nancy that things were not going well. Although she was elderly, her mother had been getting along great. She had always been an active woman. She loved her children and took care of her family so well, even cooking the Thanksgiving dinner long after they had all left home and even the grandchildren were young adults. Her mom believed in exercise and insisted on walking several blocks a day, whenever the weather allowed. She had been taking a constitutional right up until the week before she fell. So she was strong but there was something about this fall and the way it threw her that made Nancy worried and so she called me. She was hoping that the church would pray for her mom. I told her we would. I told her how much we cared about her mother and that I would visit her this week. I believe Nancy called for comfort, but I think she also called because she felt scared and a little out of her depth. She wanted something more. She wanted the assurance that we were praying.

Prayer is our worship theme for March. Last week we talked about the way that we are hard-wired to pray. Anthropologists report that as far back as we have writing to describe human behavior, where there is religion there is prayer. People have prayed for thousands and thousands of years. It is a custom across all faiths- with 88% of Americans saying that they pray to God and 76% percent reporting that prayer is a part of their daily lives. Among ordinary Americans, Pew Research reports that in this group 25% received a specific answer to their prayers in the last week. Another 35% received several such answers in the last year. 9% have never received an answer. 6% say that they never pray at all. If prayer were in a drug trial these results would get into a scientific journal. 60% of people who pray get an answer with 12 months' time. { TL Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*}

Most of us are accustomed to public prayers- the invocation before Town Meeting, the blessing before Thanksgiving meals. But many of us feel a little nervous about prayer. What do you say when you need to talk

to God and it really matters? How do you approach God when you feel like you have not been talking to God very often and now you really need something? Are there special words or attitudes that make prayers more meaningful, or effective?

These are the same questions that the disciples were asking Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. After traveling with Jesus for a while the disciples noticed that he was different. He talked to God, and it felt like he knew what he was doing when he prayed. So they asked him for advice. How do we pray? His answer has a lot to tell us too, all these many years later, because it is timeless advice on prayer.

In the first place prayer is a relationship with God, not a way to get goodies. When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray in Matthew's gospel Jesus answered their question in a way that re-cast prayer. These men had all grown up in Jewish homes where they learned that if they followed certain formulas and wrapped the tefillin around their wrists and head and recited the Hebrew prayers at certain times of day then they would find their way into a life of prayer. I want to be clear that I do respect the Jewish customs of prayer. I think that anyone who stops at certain intervals throughout the day to wrap in a special prayer shawl or kneel on a prayer rug to recite words of devotion will heighten their sense of connection to God and will learn to pray over time. But what Jesus seems to be saying here to his disciples, and by implication to all of us, is that prayer is more than a recipe. It is more than a practice and more than memorized words, even beautiful words.

What the disciples are really asking him is how do **you** pray, Jesus. Christ says that for him prayer is more like a relationship. When Jesus introduces the words we recite each week that we name for him - The Lord's Prayer - he points to an incredible connection that he has built with God. He begins addressing God as Abba in Aramaic. We translate this word Our Father but the Aramaic word connotes both a familiar intimacy like Papa, but also a tone of respect like Father. When he prays, Jesus is talking to someone he loves with his whole heart.

If you want to pray you need to grow close to God. You need to connect. One reason I have been pushing the 30 Day Prayer Challenge is because I believe that Lent is an ideal time to deepen your connection to God. Thomas Merton says that prayer is not so much about results as it is about relationship. "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no

result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the [prayer] itself. That shift changes prayer from a result-driven program to a new connection with God and with yourself. “

Secondly there is a difference between piety and real faith. Jesus cautions his disciples to resist the temptation to try to turn praying into a performance sport. Often when people don't know how to pray they feel insecure and try to use prayers to prove that they are close to God. If you pray for attention your reward will be the admiration of friends. But if you seek a relationship with God then your treasure will be in heaven so keep your eye on the real prize here.

James Finley is a man who teaches spiritual meditation and is an expert on Thomas Merton. When he was young he went to the monastery where Merton was abbot to learn from the spiritual master. He told Merton that he had studied the path to faith and thought he was almost made it to the end of the path. But if Merton thought he was one step from the end of the path he could take it. He laughs about that conversation now because he sees how young he was. He had wanted so badly to impress Merton, when he should have been thinking about how to build a relationship with God.

The path to prayer is built on honesty and the ability to be ruthlessly open. Prayer begins when you are true to yourself. Prayer begins when you take a chance on God. How do rational people sit down to pray and really persuade themselves that someone is listening? How do people who have grown to rely on their five senses suddenly become convinced that an invisible and inaudible Supreme Being is concerned about them? How do you know that a supernatural being is not just a fantasy, not just wishful thinking, not just fervent hope when things are going wrong and you don't know what else to believe in? How does a living God become real to modern people? In her new book When God Talks Back Stanford anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann “learning to know God or hear God's voice when you pray is a long slow process like learning a foreign language, or living in a foreign country with its own social cues.” Reciting the Lord Prayer over and over becomes like learning to play the scales. Even when you know the scales you continue to work on the technique, the tone the position of your hands, the shaping of the notes. After lots of repetition you may find you have broken through to a new level. Mature prayer takes practice.

Finally, Prayer is based on love.

Prayer is a little like courting. If the world is like a high school gym, and you come in, feeling vulnerable and spy someone across the gym who you really want to dance with. That Someone is God. You decide when you enter the dance that before the night is done you hope to have a chance to take a turn around the dance floor- with this Someone. The good news is that just as quickly as you make that decision and try to catch God's eye you realize that God is coming over toward you because God has the same goal in mind.

When you look at the English word for believe it comes from the German word *beleiben*- the same root as the word for love. When you come to God in prayer, real prayer is rooted in a connection- unconscious but deeply sensed in your mind and heart, a connection with God based on love. But the word connotes something stronger than that; it is more like beloved. So when we pray we speak to one who is beloved. Every time we remember the primal connection to God and relax into that original love we have for God we inch closer to authentic conversation and prayer. Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling with a portrait of Creation in which Adam was reaching up to God and God was extending a hand to Adam but there was a gap between them. What prayer does is bridge the gap. When you think about that picture Adam reminds you of an infant reaching out to a parent, in expectation, wonder and awe, and need. That notion that we reach out to God with hope and deep affection- that is the foundation for prayer. That is the attitude for prayer. It is no more mysterious than that gesture of Adam's that reaches toward the one who is both familiar and unknown, our Mother and Father in heaven.