

Luke 6: 12-13

The Benefits of Praying

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The Congregational Church of Needham

As I begin our third sermon in a series on Prayer, I'd like to share with you a story I read in our Lenten daily meditation booklet. This is Thursday's March 12th meditation written by The Rev. Mary Luti. She writes: "At her denomination's annual meeting, a social activist listened impatiently to a keynote address about spirituality. She was heard to mutter, "The world is on fire, and the bliss-ninnies are doing guided meditations."

In her view, the spirituality types were several singing bowls removed from the real world, clueless about root causes and systemic solutions. You want to pray? Do Justice. That's real prayer. Want to linger over scripture? Take Matthew 25. Then get to work. Enough with the navel-gazing!

Meanwhile the keynote speaker was wondering why the social justice types always seem so grumpy; so touchy; so pushy. They have an air of fatigued arrogance about them, she thought, as if everything hinges on them – world peace; an end to hunger. They can't sit still for a nanosecond because maybe, just maybe, the next action or petition will be the thing that finally fixes everything. (quoted from Re-Lent; 2015 Lenten Devotional; March 12, p. 27; Still Speaking Writer's Group, UCC)

When I read this devotion for the day, I felt that this is one of the issues, our dilemma, we have with prayer. Because there is no one way, or one right way to pray, it is hard to commit to it. When we don't know what to do we often revert back to what we know which might be very little. In case of doubt, we call upon the professionals to pray.

There are many different definitions out there in regards to what prayer is. There are countless ways to pray; there are differences among Christian denomination, and even many more differences between the religions of the world. Prayer is a universal concept. Even though we are not sure about how to pray, I believe that we

know that prayer is good for us. We know that we should pray; it is part of our Christian tradition; it is the one thing that I believe held Jesus together and allowed him to do all that he did. Why is it so hard for so many of us? Not enough time? Missing the 'know how?' Or not having confidence in whatever we think is prayer is acceptable to God? Maybe.

I'd like to offer another explanation. Maybe the reason why prayer is so difficult for many people is because they have not yet connected with the kind of prayer that works for them. I believe that we have not given ourselves permission to find our own personal prayer potential.

The intent of prayer is to get closer to God, the Holy, the Sacred. It is to enable us to realize that God is in the world around, and that we don't have to go it alone all the time. Benedictine nun Joan Chittister says that "prayer is the needful practice of the Christian. Prayer is the exercise of faith and hope. Prayer is the privilege of touching the heart of God through the Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is being lost in wonder, love and praise."

All true, but not really helpful in finding out the best way to prayer that works for me or for you. How do we find out?

So I have to take on a little journey. In order to find out we have to dip into psychology a little. Because if we know our personality type alas Myers-Briggs, and then apply that to, in this case, Holmes' spiritual typology, which will help us to start understanding our prayer needs and what spiritual experiences speak to us. The goal is to get the best out of prayer for ourselves.

Not to worry, I'll keep it simple. According to Corinne Ware, there are four spiritual types: 1. the "heads"; 2. the "hearts"; 3. the mystics; and 4. the visionaries.

The "heads" love the spoken word, appreciate study groups, and good sermons (I am on my way to disappointing them!). They are looking to understand God; to make sense of God. They are happy to debate theology, ethics, read scripture because "God speaks to them through the written word." Their prayers are word-based, mostly already written, but they also use reading, journaling, and specific meditation with a definite focus as fruitful prayer activities.

The “hearts” love to connect with God through feelings and emotions. They experience God through art, music, and most of all, fellowship. The “hearts” are focused on personal service to others but with the caveat that service provides an opportunity to witness about their faith. They often pray more for others than themselves, and they are much freer using their own words. They trust in God’s guidance and goodness.

The mystics want to hear God. Their prayer is listening to God rather than talking to God. They are contemplative, introspective, intuitive, and focused on the inner world. Being is more important than doing for them. The mystics love to walk the labyrinth or go on a silent retreat.

And then there are the visionaries. For them, prayer and theology is best expressed in action. For them, work and prayer is the same thing. They want nothing less than the transformation of society, to right the wrongs of the world, and they are often willing to suffer for a cause. They are single-minded, with a deeply focused mind. And they often don’t feel the need for organized religion. Their greatest need is to do God’s will and to witness to God’s coming kingdom.

Now, I am not saying that visionaries cannot have a mystical experience of God, and “heads” cannot be moved by a sacred piece of music. I don’t want to pigeonhole anyone, but I think it is worth trying to understand that because of our personality type what kind of prayer or spiritual experience will speak to our personalities.

How would Jesus fit into all of this? I think that he embodies all of these spiritual categories. He is head and heart, mystic and visionary. We know that he prayed. He prayed a lot. But there are not too many places where we actually know what and how he prayed. We know that he prayed for himself in the Garden of Gethsemane that “this cup may pass him by.” He was honest with himself and with God in that moment. In the gospel of John, he prays to God for his disciples. He gave very simple instructions to the disciples to help them unlock the mystery of prayer. But other than that? What we do know is that he went off by himself to pray. He would leave his disciples and go off by himself to pray, to contemplate, to seek God’s presence, comfort and advice. It seems that this quiet time of prayer was what he needed to get ready for his daily life and his life’s mission. He knew what worked for him; what was good for him.

Our goal remains in finding the path that might bring us closer to God, emotionally and spiritually. I very much believe that prayer, in whatever form, is that path. Being close to God is good for us. So, praying is good for us. It carries some amazing benefits.

The power of prayer does not depend on faith in God or a sacred text, but first and foremost on the passionate commitment on the person that prays. "The goal of prayer is not to change God, but we pray to seek change for ourselves!" That is what Kierkegaard said about prayer.

There are so many different ways to pray. Prayers may be voiced in anguish or wrapped in silence, mumbled dutifully or constructed with care, put to melody or tears. They can be wordless yet put into action, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said when he marched for justice with Martin Luther King: "my feet were praying."

Why is prayer good for us?

1. Prayer helps us to take our emotional lives into the sacred.

Think for a moment of all the occasions for prayer: devotion and gratitude, hope for well-being and peace for ourselves and others, to celebrate the joys of life, for help in facing illness, war, or tragedy; the point of our praying is that we ourselves become more honest, kind, and grateful. Prayer helps us to harness the unruly energies of desire and emotion into a direction that can serve us spiritually; that is, it can help channel our heart's longings toward acceptance and gratitude, compassion and love.

2. Prayer also can help us in our spiritual and mental wellness.

Prayer helps us to accept and value all of our feelings. We all carry our share of petty resentments, self-centered desires, and nagging fears, anger, depression, despairing moments. If we don't harness them somehow, life can be pretty miserable, not just for ourselves but the people around us.

Prayer can help us to "befriend" these emotions so they don't run our lives. Through prayer we can share our misery with God – the source of Life and Goodness. Our emotions – the bad and the ugly, are not threatening to God; weeping and wailing, in prayer we can let it all hang out.

In prayer joy can be shared not as an ego-centered experience of "I got mine," but with a sense of deep

appreciation for the wonder of life: grateful acknowledgement to the God of religion or to the miracle that life exists at all.

3. **Prayer helps us to get to know ourselves on a deeper, more spiritual level**

If we want to be mentally and morally stronger, prayer can help mold the typically muddled, inconsistent wish to be a better person into a focused, disciplined intention to become one. Having prayed to God to be more accepting or less wasteful, we are more likely to take the next steps to accomplish the spiritual or emotional work we need to do. And it also leads us into a more mature journey of faith.

Certainly the vast amount of suffering that has been inflicted on innumerable prayerful victims of war, neglect, and injustice indicates that God not a vending machine where prayers go in and answered wishes come out. Prayer is spiritual only because it helps us become more accepting of and patient in our suffering, more loving to others, and more faithful to the tasks we have been given (incurable illness, a painful divorce, poverty) without succumbing to bitterness.

Learning how to pray is no simple task; in fact, quoting Kierkegaard, it is “a task for a lifetime”: to mean the words as we say them, to act upon our prayers without resentment; to go through the mental and spiritual activity the prayers call for, and then to choose honesty over self-deception, faith over despair, Spiritual Truth over pleasure or social status when our prayers are done.

In the end prayer is about giving our all to God. In that sense, it does not matter if you are a “head” or a “heart”, a mystic or a visionary, a bliss-ninnie or a social activist. It is, to quote Mary Luti again, “about yielding our whole selves – every gift and skill, picketing or praying – to the Living One, in the sure and certain hope that, with us and without us, the kingdom comes, pure gift beyond our dreams.” Amen.

Sources:

Joan D. Chittister, *Benedictine Prayer: a larger vision of life: living the rule of Saint Benedict today* (San Francisco and New York: Harper, 1991).

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Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: a guide to congregational growth* (Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 1995).

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