

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for July 27, 2013 ~ Proper 12C
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I derive enormous satisfaction from watching the birds, butterflies, chipmunks, and other creatures that visit the Rectory Gardens. I am constantly amazed by the marvelous guidance system God has given to them! We call it instinct. It is one of the wonders of the natural order.

But an even greater wonder is the guidance system God has given to human beings. It goes beyond instinct and involves the human will and intelligence, the ability to choose and to act with purpose, the possibility of creative and dynamic living. We call it prayer. It is a spiritual discipline in which we wait for God's grace and by which we are kept in a state of grace as we progress in the spiritual journey.

Prayer is the chief means of grace because through prayer we have two-way communication with God who accompanies us on the journey. But prayer is a problem for many people. It always has been. Why else would Jacob have wrestled with the heavenly messenger all night? Why else would Elijah have searched for God in the earthquake, wind, and fire before he heard the still, small voice? Why else would the Israelites have abandoned the God who led them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and in favor of a golden calf, which they fashioned with their own clumsy hands? And, why else would the disciples have asked Jesus for instructions in prayer? It was the one thing they ever asked him to teach them. If those who were a part of Jesus' most intimate circle needed instruction in prayer, our need is even greater. Prayer is a problem. There are at least four persistent questions that make prayer a problem: To whom shall we pray; how shall we pray; when shall we pray; and why shall we pray?

To whom shall we pray? Sometimes when I am praying or listening to someone pray, I get the feeling that what we are really doing is talking to ourselves. Our prayers sound more like sermons, autosuggestion, exercises in consciousness raising, psychological manipulation techniques all of which are motivated by a desire to save ourselves. In this sense, prayer can be a kind of practical atheism in which God doesn't really matter because we are merely talking to ourselves. So, why bother? To whom we pray matters. So, we ask to whom shall we pray? And, the answer, for Christians at least, is that we pray to the God who has revealed himself in the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ. This is not just any god. If you have a conversation with a stranger, in all likelihood you will be more circumspect and reserved than if you have a conversation with a friend or a loved one who is known to you intimately. Is God a stranger to you? Do you not know what to say to God because you are unsure how God will take it? Is your image of God that of a cosmic dictator or that of a celestial cream puff whose will you can manipulate? Do you think of God in terms of anger and retribution or in terms of a kind of celestial tycoon or politician with whom you have to continually work to strike a deal?

If you are talking to that kind of god, you are not talking to the One whom Jesus called, "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:34). Our God is One who wrestles with people in prayer, One who listens and answers our prayers, One who cares enough about us to pursue us with a love that will not let us go. Someone has wisely said, "it is as dangerous to have a false mental image of God as it is to have a false metal image of God." It's dangerous because prayer is so essential to the saving relationship God wants to have with us. The prophet Isaiah lamented those who "keep on praying to a god that cannot save" (Isaiah 45:20). Those words might apply to our era when so many people seem to have a false image of God. Sign up

for a Bible study or check out a book about prayer from the church library. Become a part of a prayer group with people who know God. Go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But, whatever you do, resolve the question of to whom you pray because you may be a practical atheist and not even realize it.

How shall we pray? Communication is frequently hindered because we aren't sure what to say. My son who lives in another city sometimes goes for a couple of weeks without initiating communication with me. When I ask why, he sometimes says, "I didn't really have anything to say." I keep trying to find a way to help him understand that I like hearing the sound of his voice, spending time with him, and enjoying our relationship. I miss him when he doesn't call. Whenever he calls, it isn't so much the words he speaks as it is the fact that he took the time to stay in touch.

Prayer is communication with God. Like my son's communication with me, it is sometimes hindered because we aren't sure what to say. But God who created us because of a desire to share life with us wants to hear from us. God wants us to stay in touch and prayer is the chief means by which that happens. God calls to us constantly. It is important for us to respond.

When Jesus' disciples asked for instruction in prayer, he gave them a model prayer. Tertullian called it "an epitome of the whole gospel." It contains adoration, confession, supplication, thanksgiving, praise. It looks forward to the in-breaking of God's reign and at the same time celebrates God's sovereignty here and now. However, to say that it is a model prayer does not mean that it is the only prayer or that all praying must conform exactly to it. Jesus was telling the disciples to speak to the heavenly Father about these kinds of things because you will be heard and there will be answers. Sometimes we want to pray in the eloquent words of others. There are other times when we need to pour out our hearts in our own simple words. There are times when we can't find words that are adequate to express ourselves so we offer God images, feelings, tears, or "sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). And, there are even times when silence itself may be the form our prayers take as we just sit quietly in the presence of God, accepting a divine, loving embrace.

Whatever form our prayers take, the impulse to reach out and open up in faith to God is a wonderful gift of the Spirit working with our spirits. So, prayers are an outgrowth of faith aren't they? Don't concentrate so much on what you say as on the One to whom you pray, who has promised to hear and to answer. Whether you need God's help in a specific matter or you just need God to know how you are feeling, don't let the words get in the way. Whatever form prayer takes, it is two-way communication. It is impolite and unhelpful to rattle off a list of things we want God to do for us and then rush off without waiting for God's response. Ask whatever you will. But pray in faith, pray trusting in the One who always keeps promises. Such trust always expects and waits for an answer. If you are unwilling to trust enough to wait, to listen, to watch, you may never recognize the answer when it comes.

When shall we pray? People in our era think we have so many important things to do that it is more difficult for us to pray than for those first century Christians. In fact, people have always found busyness to be an obstacle to prayer. Busyness may even be a kind of status symbol for some of us. The busier we are, the more important we think we are. But we can never be too busy to pray. Martin Luther said, "I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer."

St. Paul made it easier for us when he answered the problem of finding time for prayer. He said, "pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians 5:17). Every moment, every breath can be a time of prayer. The

essence of prayer is awareness of the presence and influence of our constant Companion who guides us in our journey. When we pray, God makes time, life, and space holy for us by prompting us through the Holy Spirit. There is an objectivity about prayer that leads us to pray, even when we don't feel like it. For one person, an hour spent on his or her knees in a chapel can be a satisfying and powerful experience in prayer. For another person, prayer time might be the thirty-minute ride to work on a bus or in a car. One of the most helpful books on prayer for me is a little book written by an Episcopal priest, Malcolm Boyd, forty years ago. It is titled, *Are you Running With Me, Jesus?* In it, Fr. Boyd offers prayers for everyday, down-to-earth experiences, situations, dilemmas, in a vernacular, conversational way, as one might speak to a friend. What makes them wonderful is not the eloquence of the words of the prayers but the fact that they are prayed in the midst of a normal, hectic, busy life. These are no-nonsense, no-excuse prayers! Prayers without ceasing. Whatever good God may be trying to bring into your life is frustrated by avoidance and "busyness." So, in finding time to have a prayer life, try to remember that it is not our time with God but God's time with us.

Why shall we pray? Someone has observed, "what people usually ask when they pray is that 2 + 2 not equal 4." And, after all, don't we want prayer to be of some practical value to us? If we are going to devote time and inconvenience ourselves with such a low-tech, archaic activity as prayer, there had better be something in it for us. Well, here's another of those utilitarian kind of issues modern people like to raise. What will I get out of it? In our exaggerated modern kind of individualism, we have come to think that if we don't get something out of an activity, it has no meaning at all. Nothing could be further from the truth, especially with regard to prayer.

The reason and the value of prayer certainly go beyond petition. God, in God's own mysterious administrative policy, uses our prayers to give us faith to live in spite of a lack of what we perceive to be answers. The miracle of prayer is that the more we pray, the more attuned we are to the answers.

As our prayers ground us more and more in God's will, we will see the answers more clearly and know why we were led to pray. Kirkegaard wrote that "the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears what God wills." I know a woman whose experience certainly bears this out. Thirty years ago in August I officiated at her marriage to her husband. Her career required her to travel quite a bit and she has a chronic illness that is exacerbated by stress and fatigue. After she had been married about four years and had two children, she was in a miserable spiritual and physical state. Friends told her, "I'll pray for you." Her response was, "why don't you do something useful?" But then, one night while she was alone in a hotel room far from home, thinking her life was in shambles, questioning her marriage, her faith, her life, her cries brought her close to God and God's transforming power filled her life. I would say that some of her troubles since then have sometimes been worse than before. But what is different is that her prayers have given her faith that is greater than her problems. And, she sees her prayers answered every day. Prayer was a problem for her. Now, it is a way of life.

It can be the same for you and for me in our journey with the One who invites us to carry on a daily, living, two-way conversation and created us with the ability to do it. Don't get hung up on the procedures, the words, and the formalities. Just talk to God from your heart. And listen for God's response. God makes time for you; make time for God. Prayer is a means of grace, but only if you engage in it.