

Sermon for Proper 12C

July 25, 2010

Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas

The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

One of the most interesting things about living on a barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico on the coast of Texas is to be able to see such an amazing number of migratory birds. We're told that ninety percent of the species of birds in North America pass through Galveston on their annual migration. I suppose the same thing must be true here in Kansas since we are on the same flyway. And, the Monarch butterflies migrate over Galveston Island as well. One of the most magic days there for me was when a friend suggested that I go and stand on the beach to watch the Monarchs. It was such a thrill to see thousands of those tiny little creatures flutter off the Gulf waters after their long flight from Mexico. What a marvelous guidance system God has given these little creatures, the birds and the butterflies! We call it instinct. It is one of the wonders of the natural order.

But an even greater wonder is to be found in the guidance system God has given 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 means of God's grace. Grace is God's unmerited love and favor offered to us. The means of grace are those spiritual disciplines 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 toward salvation.

Prayer is the chief means of grace because through prayer we have two-way communication with God who accompanies us on the journey. Richard Foster describes prayer as "original research in unexplored territory." Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (NY: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 30. Those spiritually alive people we have admired most have been men and women of prayer.

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. If that is all prayer is, talking to ourselves, then why bother? To whom we pray, then, matters. So, we ask to whom shall we pray? And, the answer, for Christians at least, is the God who has revealed himself in the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ. This is not just any god. And, if you don't know the One whose divine name is holy, perhaps it is time to get acquainted. 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 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?

None of these images of God's nature is consistent with the Biblical revelation. If you are talking to that kind of god, you are not talking to the God of the Bible, whom Jesus called, "Abba, Father." (Mark 14:34). The God of the Bible 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 well apply to our era when it seems that so many people have a false image of God. Sign up for a Bible study, check out one of the books on 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 shall we 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'm 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 his 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 and he will listen to you and answer you. There are times when we want to pray in the eloquent words of others. There are other times when we need to pour out our hearts to God in our own simple words. There are even times when we can't find words which are adequate to express ourselves but 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 his loving embrace. The important thing to remember is that prayer is always an expression of that living, saving relationship God wants to have with us, prompted and guided by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Whatever the 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, your prayers are an outgrowth of faith aren't they? We shouldn't be so concerned about the words. Don't concentrate so much on what you say as on the One to whom you pray, the One 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. Remember that 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 waits for and expects 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. People have always found busyness to be an obstacle to prayer. In fact, busyness may 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. After all, we are on a journey with God. Awareness of the presence and influence of our constant Companion who guides us in our journey is the essence of prayer. As our thoughts focus on God and we ask for his presence in our lives, his help with a problem, his forgiveness for our sins, his guidance through a difficult time, or express our love, our praise, our thanksgiving for his goodness, time, life and space can be made holy for us. But it is not we who make it holy, it is God who is prompting us through the Holy Spirit. All the power and the meaning of prayer are not dependent upon us. There is an objectivity to prayer, which we have to respect. That leads us to pray, even in those times 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, their prayer time might be the thirty-minute ride to work on a bus or in their car. In fact, someone told me recently that when she used to ride the bus to work, she developed the discipline of using that ride as her prayer time. Now, she drives to work. When she gets in her car and starts the engine, there is a kind of trigger that starts her praying and she prays all the way to work, just like before when she prayed on the bus. One of the most helpful books on prayer for me is a little book written by an Episcopal priest, Malcolm Boyd, thirty years ago. It is titled, *Are you Running With Me, Jesus?* In it, Fr. Boyd deals with everyday, down-to-earth experiences, situations, dilemmas, in a vernacular, conversational way as one might speak to a friend. There are prayers for getting out of bed when you don't want to, racing off to work, sitting in a traffic jam, when confronted by the death of someone we think ought to have lived, and many other wonderful prayers. 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. The important thing to remember in finding time to have a prayer life is that it is not our time with God but God's time with us. Whatever good God may be trying to bring into your life is frustrated by avoidance and "busyness."

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.

Leonard Sweet has said that in the 70's "I want" became "I want, therefore I need." And, in the 80's, "I want, therefore I need" became "I want, therefore I need, therefore I deserve." And, he says, "that is also, some have added, why I'll kill you for your sneakers." Leonard Sweet, *Faith Quakes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p?? The reason and the value of prayer certainly go beyond petition. If you have experienced faith and know its power in your life, you understand that the main reason we pray is because 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. But, the miracle of prayer is that the more we pray, the more attuned we are to the answers. And the answers are often far beyond what we might have asked for or hoped for. The Reverend Jim Leggett, Pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Hearne, Texas, has led his congregation to set up a prayer room in which people are praying 24 hours a day. There are two record books in the prayer room. One book is to record the time and day you spent there. The other book is to record answers to prayer. Recently, in a Sunday morning service, Jim held up the record book of answers and told the congregation that in the two years it had been kept, they had recorded over 900 answers to prayer!

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." A young woman's experience certainly bears this out. I married her and her husband about 25 years ago. Her career required her to travel quite a bit and she has a chronic illness that is exacerbated by stress and fatigue. She shared with me that 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 to God brought her close to him and his transforming power filled her life. I would say that in some ways her troubles since then have 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. Get to know the One who invited us to carry on a daily, living, two-way conversation with him and has created us with the ability to do it. Don't get hung up on the procedures and the formalities. Just talk to God from your heart. And remember to listen for God's response. God makes time for you, make time for God. Prayer can be a means of grace only if you engage in it.