

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year A
June 30, 2017
Pentecost 8
Romans 8:26-39 • Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

“Lord, teach us to pray.”

You would think that Jesus’ disciples might have already acquired this skill, the skill of praying, but apparently not. They don’t get it, and so in Luke’s gospel, we hear them asking Jesus to teach them how to pray. And he does. “When you pray,” he says, “Say Our Father who art in Heaven...” He teaches them what we have come to know as the Lord’s Prayer. Pretty straight forward.

The writer, Anne Lamott, is even more succinct. She says there are really only three prayers, and you can summarize each one in one word. Help. Thanks. Wow. Think about that for a minute. When we pray for healing and cure, for an end to violence or hunger, for an end to conflict either close by or far away, even when we confess our sins, all of those prayers are long winded ways of turning to God to say “Help.”

And our prayers of Thanksgiving, either before a meal, or for a successful outcome for a surgery, or for simply another day of awakening to life and breath, are all variations on saying “Thanks” to God. And our prayers of praise, praise for the beauty and wonders of Creation, for the magnificence of Bach’s B Minor Mass, for the miracle of new life when we hold that baby grandchild – sorry, couldn’t help myself – those prayers of praise and wonder can all be summed up in that one word exclamation – Wow! Lost in wonder, love and praise like the old Charles Wesberg hymn puts it. Wow!

Three prayers. Easy to remember. Easy to say. Yet, prayer can still be elusive. Jesus’ disciples were really speaking for us, weren’t they? When our prayers involve a lot of talking, we sometimes wonder if there is anyone on the end listening. You’ve had the experience of talking on the phone – you know, going on and on – and suddenly realizing the call has been dropped? There’s no one there listening.

Now don’t get me wrong. Praying with words is important. It’s important to put into words what is in our hearts. To give voice to the longings of the heart, the desires of the heart. To disclose the secrets of the heart. And how beautiful when we pray together in community. I love when I hear our community speaking the names of the ones on our prayer list. And when I was in the midst of my own cancer treatment, knowing that my name was being spoken and that there were dear people praying for me by name was enormously comforting and played a huge part in my healing.

So, yes, “Help. Thanks. Wow” is really important. And there is more. We do have those times where we might feel like our call has been dropped. Times when we feel like there’s no one listening on the other end. It’s in those times that it’s helpful to recall the Collect for Purity that we say together at the beginning of each Eucharist.

“Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.....”

Helpful to remember that God already knows what’s on our minds and in our hearts. And while we need to say it to God, we aren’t providing God with any news. God is already at work, knowing what we need, giving us what we need. Not necessarily what we want. I mean, you might still have to get up and go to work in the morning to a job you’re not all that crazy about. Or you or someone you love may still be sitting with a bad diagnosis or some deep family conflict. Or maybe you’re just living with the malaise of boredom, the feeling that it’s just the same old, same old, every day. Where is the evidence of God working to give me what I need, you might fairly ask? A good question.

The Apostle Paul would offer in response to that very good and very human question, the 8th chapter of Romans which we have been reading the last few Sundays.

Romans 8 really expresses the heart of Paul’s vision for the new world that God is bringing into being through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And in this new world that’s being born, lies the answer to all our prayers. Paul assures us that when we cry out to God, we are being led by the spirit and become part of this new creation that is unfolding.

For all who are led by the spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then Heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

In crying out in longing and desire and wonder, “Abba, Father” that we become God’s own, God’s adopted. We did not receive a spirit of adoption to fall back into fear! says Paul. It’s another way of saying, “Do not be afraid”, which we hear over and over again throughout Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. “Do not be afraid!”

Then Paul goes on to describe the new creation, this new world that’s being born. And here’s something really important. What we call our suffering, our longings. Our desires, all of this are part of the labor pains of this new world.

Romans 8:8-24

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the

children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?

Not getting the answers to your prayers? Feeling like there's no one on the other end of the call? Wait. Your adoption, your redemption is happening. Live in hope. Live with patience.

And then to this morning's reading. Paul tells us that the whole point of our prayer, what we really need, is to draw ever closer to God. But we don't know how to do it. But thanks be to God, the Spirit working in us, brings us closer to God.

Romans 8:26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we sought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

You see? We don't really know how to pray. But if we simply have the sincere desire, the deep intention to come into God's presence, the spirit will lead us there. That's the heart of prayer. Simply the desire, the intention to be in God's presence. And that's what we need. Our deepest need is to be in God's nearer presence.

And then Paul closes with the most positive assurance imaginable. "If God is for us, who is against us?" Think about that for a minute. In the midst of all our suffering, all our longings, all our desires, everything in our lives that feels unfulfilled, if God is for you, who is against you? As the spirit draws us nearer to God, we come into a deepening awareness that even the worst that can happen – the deaths of the physical bodies of the ones we love – the death of our own physical bodies - is **not** the worst that can happen. It's not the end of the story. Why?

Romans 8:38-39

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There it is. The real answer, the kind answer, the only possible truly satisfying and complete answer to all our prayers.

Nothing. Nothing. Not even death can separate us from Christ. Nothing, not even death can separate us from Love. What more do we need to know? And we can come to know that – not just intellectually, in our heads, but in our hearts and in our bodies, as the Spirit prays through us with sighs too deep for words.

So today, tomorrow, this week, this month, for the rest of your life, put yourself in a place where the spirit can pray through you. In other words, be quiet. Be still. Let go of the frustration of not getting what you think you want. Everything you need is right here. As close as your heart! As close as the still place you make for yourself to be in God's nearer presence.

Because nothing, neither height nor depth, neither death or life, not anything from your past, not any present suffering, not any anxiety about the future – nothing will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.