

STILL ANOTHER SERMON ON PRAYER

Matthew 6:5-14

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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This is the third in a series of sermons on prayer, or communication with God. In a nutshell here's a summary of what's already been said:

- 1) Our need to pray is only equaled by our need to breathe. Without either we are cut off from the source of life.
- 2) Prayer, in essence, is a two way conversation with God. Sometimes we talk, other times we listen.
- 3) Even before we pray, God already knows what we'll be asking for, but that shouldn't stop us from praying. We pray, not to inform God, but for God to inform us.
- 4) We can ask God for anything, with the understanding we don't always get what we ask for. Like Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane we should follow our requests with, the proviso, "nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done," or, "not what I want but what you want."
- 5) When we pray for others, we should also pray for ourselves. Never think your needs are too petty for God's attention and never fear God doesn't want anything to do with you let alone hear from you, because you haven't prayed for a long time or you're feeling guilty for any unrepented sins. In the contrary God is desperately waiting to hear from you.
- 6) Although solitary prayers are sufficient, the prayer of the community bring us together, empower us to carry each other's burdens and gives us a sense of unity with God and each other.
- 7) Whenever we pray, alone or together, Christ prays with us, for us and through us. What's more, even when none of us are praying, Christ still prays for us, which is really amazing and comforting to know.

Having reviewed the content of the last two sermons, let's move on to still more insights about prayer.

In Luke's Gospel, we read that one day, after watching Jesus in prayer, one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray." You'd think this request would've been made in the early "sunshine" days of Jesus' ministry, instead it was asked during the waning days of his time on earth sometime after he told the disciples for the first time he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified.

You have to wonder, why didn't they ask Jesus to teach them to pray much earlier? Probably for the same reason we'd give. They were too busy to learn how to pray, plus things were going so well (it goes without saying we're mostly on our knees when things aren't going so well) therefore why make things more complicated?

It's also probable Jesus was waiting for them to broach the subject. If Jesus said, "Hey fellows, let me teach you how to pray," they probably wouldn't be ready for it. The request had to come from them, after finally realizing they needed to pray as much as Jesus.

In Matthew's Gospel we find before Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, he taught them how not to pray.

"Beware of practicing your piety before others..." (Matthew 6:1) In other words don't use prayer as a gimmick to draw attention to yourself by trying to market yourself as Mother Teresa's twin.

"When you are praying do not heap up empty phrases..." (Matthew 6:7) In other words don't babble on, be brief and to the point. All God wants from you is to speak the truth plainly and faithfully.

Jesus made these observations knowing ingrained multiple misconceptions about prayer can keep people from praying the right way, if at all. One of these misconceptions is any prayer must have the cadence and style of the King James Bible. That's why it's easy to feel intimidated if you're ever singled out and asked, "Will you give the blessing?" or "Will you pray with me before my operation?" Most people freeze up thinking, "I've got nothing prepared? What should I say?"

If that's the case, let me suggest something. Your words are not expected to soar to the oratorical heights of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address because your prayer isn't directed to the people listening, but to God. So just start talking to him. Look at it this way, when you get together with your best friend, do you spend the night before preparing you half of the conversation? Of course not, you just speak from your heart. That's all that prayer is, heartfelt, open conversation, plain talk with no need to impress with well chosen words and polished phrases. When you see prayer in this way it becomes less intimidating and more user friendly.

Which now brings us to the opening salutation in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. "Our Father in heaven..."

The salutation, "Our Father" immediately sets the tone for user friendly prayer. Jesus could have used Old Testament imagery for addressing God, something like, "Great and Powerful God, thou who should not be named, the source of great and terrible deeds who instills fear and trembling into the hearts of man whenever we dare trespass into your holy presence..."

Each phrase I just used is imagery used in the Old Testament to identify God. Yet even though God is great and powerful and shouldn't be named, and the source great and terrible deeds, who instills fear and trembling into the hearts of man, even so, Jesus wants us to address this same God as he addressed God by calling him "Father."

This was absolutely revolutionary because no one before ever dared address God in such an intimate way. Only a handful of times in the Hebrew Scriptures is God ever referred to as Father, but only as the Father of Israel. Never did any prophet or priest address God as “my father” until Jesus. That’s precisely why the religious leaders were scandalized and furious when Jesus publically said things like “...your heavenly Father knows you need all these things.” (Matthew 6:32) How dare anyone speak of God in such a personal and presumptuous way! They’d argue God is holy, sovereign, omnipotent, even great and terrible, and Jesus would readily agree with them. But Jesus also knew God as his father and he wants us to know God the same way.

Unfortunately not everyone is helped by being encouraged to see God as a father figure because sometimes, unfortunately, too many biological fathers are abusive, neglectful, unreliable and quite frankly unworthy of bearing the name “father.” Jesus had to know that, yet he still encouraged all of us to know the Father he knew and loved, maybe as the father we never had but always wanted, the perfect father whose overriding desire is to love and nurture his earthly children, even when we stray and disappoint him, the generous father who never needs to be bribed or coaxed to give us everything we need to live up to our fullest attention.

In Gethsemane, when Jesus was stressed beyond endurance he cried out, “Abba,” the intimate name a Jewish child would call his or her father. Some scholars dispute whether or not Abba actually means “Daddy” thinking it somehow voids the awesome respect God deserves. I can see their point, to a point, but I also wonder if these scholars are tipping too much towards the Temple Priests and Pharisees, the scholars of Jesus’ day, who were miffed when Jesus referred to God as his father. Even so, it’s good to balance our need for intimacy with God with our need to be in awe of God otherwise we’re in danger of creating God in our own image instead of the other way around.

Which leads into the balance of the salutation of the Lord’s Prayer

*“Our Father in heaven
Hallowed (or Holy) be your
name...”* (Matthew 6:9)

In Exodus we have the story of Moses and the burning bush, a theophany or close encounter of a third kind with God. Moses, you remember was commanded to remove his sandals for he was treading on holy ground. After being told by God Moses was to go back to Egypt to tell the Jews they were about to be delivered from slavery, Moses asked, “What’s your name, who shall I say sent me?” The voice from the Burning Bush replied, “Tell them I AM WHO I AM.”

The Jews considered God’s name too holy to ever to be spoken. I’m told if you whispered into a Hasidic Jew’s ear the name Yahweh, the Jew wouldn’t know what you said because though he’s seen the name Yahweh in print, the name is never spoken out loud. You get the point, God’s name is holy.

The Hebrew word “holy” implies being set apart, or the separation of the sacred from the profane, with the further implication that the holy is awesome, dreadful, even terrible. This fits in with the Jewish understanding of God being totally separated, unique and without rival.

When Isaiah had his vision of God in the Jerusalem Temple he heard the angels proclaim “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the earth is full of his glory.” (Isaiah 6:3) Isaiah could only see the hem of God’s robe filling the temple, yet he was awestruck, falling on his knees crying out, “Woe is me.”

All these Old Testament images continue to be valid for Christians. We’d agree, God is beyond us, God’s presence evokes fear and trembling.

Even so, Jesus wants us to call this all powerful, awesome God, “Our Father.” A contradiction? Not at all. Instead it’s an affirmation that God, the great and omnipotent King of the Universe, desires friendship, love and intimacy. We are not just his creatures, we are his children.

The opening salutation of the Lord’s Prayer lets us know who we’re praying to. The rest of the prayer is made up of petitions, the things God wants us to ask him for so through our prayers we’ll be in sync with the ebb and flow of God’s Spirit. Next Sunday we’ll review these petitions. Until then, remember to keep on praying, for yourself and for others so God’s glory will be revealed through you and me, the Body of Christ, as Christ prays through us.