

“The Less We Pray, The Worse It Goes!”

During this hour of worship, for the most part, we are as strangers gathered here. And yet, on another level and in some miraculous way, we are not strangers. There is one activity that links us links us to God and to each other. There is a common thread that binds us together. There is one practice that makes us whole. That activity, that thread, that practice ... that links us to God and to each other is prayer (Leslie D. Weatherhead). We hear of this linkage in today’s Gospel lesson. We are told, as Jesus prays, that Christian believers bond with each other because each other is in Christ and Christ is one with the Father. Also we hear about this linkage from the lesson in Acts, a lesson that emphasizes the midnight prayers of Paul and Silas that ultimately result in the conversion of the jailer.

One commentator writes: “Praying is to religion what thinking is to philosophy. Praying is religion in the making. [Our] religious sense prays, just as our thinking mechanism thinks (Novalis).” The Reformer Martin Luther commented that “faith is prayer and nothing but prayer.” Indeed, faith is the trust we have when we leap into the darkness of this world, assured that the darkness is not dark to God, but is light. Faith is trusting God, and prayer is the activity that tells God, “Yes, we trust you!” One of my favorite writings by Alfred Tennyson is:

More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.
Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.

The plain but simple truth is: where there is faith, prayer is involved!

We know Jesus practiced prayer, however, he does not have much to say about prayer. Jesus practiced prayer more than he preached about prayer. Jesus taught his disciples to pray a short and simple prayer. He encouraged them to pray with confidence and ask for what they needed assured that they would be heard. Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John is known as the high “Priestly Prayer.” We read that Jesus prays for his immediate disciples and for all disciples who will follow. It is an eloquent, rich, deep prayer; a prayer that clearly demonstrates that Jesus and the Father are one, and that that same oneness is something Jesus wants his followers to have among themselves ... made possible through him.

The Apostle Paul, too, practiced prayer. Our lesson from Acts begins with Paul and Timothy “going to the place of prayer” which is a general reference for a synagogue. Prayer is mentioned again later in the passage when Paul and Silas were put into prison and “were praying and singing hymns to God.” Interestingly enough, Paul and Silas did not petition God for deliverance, but took the opportunity to set an example of the triumph of faith over affliction. They witnessed their faith to those imprisoned and to their captors. Though they had been publicly humiliated, stripped of their clothing, and beaten, they never lost faith because they never stopped praying ... and singing ... and “those who sing, pray twice.”

The key word in today’s lessons is prayer, and the verb that goes with prayer is practice. Jesus and Paul practiced prayer. In order to get the hang of prayer one must practice. An old joke tells about a tourist in New York City asking a policeman, “Sir, can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?” To which the officer replies: “Practice, practice, practice!” This holds true for prayer. Too many people in our generation read books and listen to others talk about prayer and substitute these for prayer itself. There is no substitute for prayer in the life of the practicing Christian. Writes one author, “If something in us cries out: “O Christ Jesus, grow Thou in me,” daily prayer is the womb in which this growth may be most surely accomplished.”

Practicing Christians who ask whether they have time for prayer is like a carpenter asking whether he has time to sharpen his tools. All that one can say is that people of faith better take the time. For to take time for prayer is to save time for work. There is an orderliness about action that in the end outstrips activity. This same author writes, “The practice of prayer provides the inward sense of God’s abiding presence, which may grow until it flows on quietly behind all the rest of our day’s work ... like a hidden irrigation ditch (from which) the deep roots of plants can get moisture.”

Prayers do not have to be lengthy. On the contrary, Paul's advice to "pray without ceasing," is a command to pray often. These may be brief little flashes of prayer throughout the day that help us to maintain our focus on God. A simple prayer like, "Help me God get through this day," awakens our senses and makes us aware of God's continual presence. Prayer is also as simple a pausing in the midst of a hectic day and allowing ourselves to be in silence; pursuing the silence until we are free from this world and present with God.

The title for my message is a quote from John Chapman, "The less I pray, the worse it goes!" You know and I know this to be true. When we fail to link ourselves to God, we risk being fragmented by the craziness of this world. And when this happens, when our life is broken and torn; and we have a sense of not being whole, isn't it curious how we find ourselves in the posture of prayer. Prayer prevents our fracturing, but also when we are fractured, prayer mends and makes us whole again. "Faith is prayer and nothing but prayer!"

I remember reading a number of years ago from a devotional book called Weavings, an insightful article written by Avery Brooke entitled "Darkness." In the article, Ms. Brooke talks about the death of her husband. She said that their marriage was NOT made in heaven. "We made our marriage," she writes. She and her husband worked side by side in publishing and writing. Death broke their oneness carved out of much adjustment-making over the years. She said that she did not feel grief at first when everyone was hugging her, but much later. That grief had to be worked out over a long period of time. She also tried to pray, even going to a monastery to work at it. Nothing happened with that.

She decided, two years after her husband's death, to go back to writing again. She said, "As I sat with paper and pencil at the kitchen table early every morning, I realized that I felt closer to God when writing than when praying. Her friend, an Episcopal monk, told her she probably was praying in that moment. He advised her: "Pray the way you are able, not the way you are unable." She concludes her article, "Whatever I write may never be published. That does not matter. That is not why I am writing. We are all our own theologians. We all work out our own meanings. And that is what I have been doing. What does matter to me is that when I looked for God in the light, God was not there. When I faced the unfaceable, I found that I had joined God in the darkness. And so, paradoxically, the darkness had become light."

The practice of prayer makes the darkness of our life as bright as day. We have this guaranteed by our Lord, "I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." The greatest temptation this world places before us is to distract us from practicing prayer. Prayer is a discipline; a discipline that rewards us far more than any other activity we may choose to do. A Trappist monk wrote an article on this very point: "We Americans want everything in a hurry. Yet an interior life dedicated to the practice of prayer is not the work of a year or even ten. We of the high-strung Western world seek the natural outlet of nervous energy in action. It takes us a long time to discover the fact that mental activity can become the best and most satisfying kind of action that is the interaction which takes place between God and the Praying Soul. And it takes practice --- this practice of prayer. Don't skip practice!"

We may be strangers to one another, but we are not strangers to God. And because God binds us together in Christ; we in fact are not strangers. Our faith in Christ demolishes all that separate us. During this hour our faith brings us face to face. We may think we do not know one another, but God knows us, and because God knows us, we indeed know one another. We know one another's pain, because we have hurt. We know one another's grief, because we have grieved. We know one another's anxiety, worry, fear, because they are our own.

Yes, together we have known the dark side of life. But together, in faith, we go toward the light --- when we pray; when we lift ourselves and each other up in our prayers. "Prayer links us to God and to each other." At worship, during "The People Praying," pray for the person beside you, in front of you, behind you. Let us without ceasing lift each other up to God trusting in the power of prayer. Let our church directory be our prayer book. Let us take time each day to pray for this church, this community and surrounding area. Pray without ceasing! And remember: "pray the way you are able ... not the way you are unable!" Amen!