

“Prayer: The Language of the Heart”

Philippians 4:4-7

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This morning, I want to address the subject of “prayer.” However, you can’t speak about prayer without also addressing the role of the human heart IN prayer. When we speak of one’s heart, we are generally referring to the seat of the soul- to that inner place where our nature and character, our feelings and will resides; where we say our conscience is located and matters of faith or hope or our deepest desires originate. Well prayer can only begin once we come before God with a SINCERE AND HUMBLE heart. Simply mouthing the words does not constitute it. When we read the Prayer of Confession together or recite the Lord’s Prayer as we do each week during worship, they don’t become REAL prayers, that is REAL communication with God, unless the heart is ALSO engaged, unless there is what the psalmist describes as “deep calling unto deep.” You see, REAL or EFFECTIVE prayer engages God in complete openness and honesty knowing that God is doing more than just offering a sympathetic ear but is someone who intensely loves us and desires to live in a dialogical relationship with us. Thus, to engage in REAL prayer, we must become “wholly present” to God and allow our hearts to become fully receptive to him so that as God speaks to US, WE may hear God and so live in submission to his will.

In fact, we might say that TRUE prayer is a form of “practicing the presence of God.” That might mean taking a few moments to center yourself, to rid yourself of any and all unnecessary distractions so as to enter into complete communion with God. I have to confess that maintaining a few moments of pure silence and undisturbed concentration in order to focus on God is one of the hardest things I or ANY of us can do. To put down that book or turn off the television, to quiet our cellphones or separate ourselves from our beloved computers FOR EVEN JUST A FEW MINUTES in order to give God our undivided attention is never an easy thing to do, IS it. It often feels more like a form of punishment when in fact it is the highest honor and greatest gift we can possibly receive- the privilege of openly communing with our Heavenly Father, one who is ALWAYS ready to listen to every one of our cares or needs.

What makes prayer even MORE difficult is that approaching God always requires an act of faith and trust. One must be confident and courageous enough to believe that we are relating to one whom we cannot SEE with our eyes, or HEAR with our ears, or SMELL with our nose, or TASTE with our tongue, or FEEL with our fingers, and yet STILL trust that God is present to us ALL THE SAME. And what’s MORE, it is to believe that such a God DOES INDEED hear us and that he cares about us and will respond in some positive way to our comments or requests, WHATEVER they may be.

Our scripture lesson this morning gives us some insight on HOW we are to pray. St. Paul wrote these words while imprisoned in Rome and the irony here is that while he was confined to a dark and dank prison cell, it was PAUL, the Early Church’s GREATEST Apostle, who offers the Christians in Philippi encouragement when you would think HE would be the one needing such inspiration and support FROM THEM. He exhorts them to be anxious in nothing, that they were not to fret or worry about anything. Not only does worry not change anything but it drains one’s energy and depletes one’s faith. Certainly, God expects us to do what we can for

ourselves, but what we CAN'T do, we must leave the rest in GOD'S hands. What God HAS PROMISED is this- that he will never leave or forsake us, that he will save unto the uttermost all who come to him in simple humility and faith, and that all things shall work together for good to them that love him. THAT is what God PROMISES us and that is what we CAN trust.

Then Paul says that in everything "by prayer and supplication" we are to let our requests be made known to God. Now prayers and supplications are not necessarily the same things. You see, "prayer" is a more general term which expresses one's needs and desires to God without going into specifics such as when we pray "God help us," or "God forgive us," or "God bless us." "SUPPLICATION," on the other hand, looks to specific petitions. It looks to God for some definite and specific need such as if we were to ask God for food to eat or a healing to take place; we are never to be afraid to ask God for ANYTHING. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Thus, we are encouraged to make our requests personally known to God REGARDLESS how large or small, whether emotional, material, or spiritual, with the understanding that God will NEVER turn a deaf ear to any of our entreaties but will answer them in God's OWN way.

Probably the MOST IMPORTANT element of our prayers is the ATTITUDE in which we offer them, that they are to be made with "thanksgiving" in our heart. It was Paul's habit to be grateful for EVERYTHING, REGARDLESS how small. Throughout his writings, his standard refrain was that "in everything we are to give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus to you." He was constantly instructing the churches that we were to "abound in thanksgiving" and to "continue steadfastly in prayer, watching therein with thanksgiving." And if we DO get into the habit of developing deep, faithful, and thankful prayers, then with v.7, we are told what the result will be- "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When we develop the confidence that our Creator and Supreme Lord knows our name, when we are aware that our Lord feels our heart and understands our situation BETTER THAN WE DO OURSELVES, then we will begin to see our worries and anxieties dissipate so we can enjoy a peace unlike any other- the peace of God, a peace which transcends our deepest thoughts and highest feelings.

However, it must be remembered that with respect to our prayers, God doesn't promise to fix any and all problems or difficulties that may come our way. God is not some resident genie who with the snap of the fingers will suddenly make everything all right once again because realistically, NOBODY is ever guaranteed a smooth and stress-free future. His ONLY promise is that whenever and whatever obstacles DO lie before us, he will always provide us with the comfort and the wisdom and the strength needed to manage and eventually overcome them. Christ through his Holy Spirit becomes both our surety and our pledge that nothing, NO NOTHING shall ever separate us from either his presence or his love, and with a promise such as that, we can take great comfort in knowing that NOTHING IN ALL THIS WORLD will ever be able to destroy us or rob us of his peace.

Last year, Bob Abernethy, who for many years had been a television correspondent for NBC News, passed away. When he retired from the news business, he went into the “faith” business as he went on to co-create and become executive editor and host of *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, a religious program which aired on PBS from 1997 until 2017. During the final weeks of the show, he reflected on some of his favorite interviews from past years. He especially enjoyed his conversations with preachers and scholars of various faiths who shared their deepest religious beliefs. One who PARTICULARLY stood out for him was the great South African Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In 1998, the Archbishop was spending the year at Emory University in Atlanta where Bob talked with him about many things, including his morning prayer. He shared how over time, he had come to realize how prayer is just being in the presence of one who loves you deeply, who loves with a love that will not let you go. “So,” he said, “when I get up in the morning I try to spend as much time as I can in the sense of being quiet in the presence of this love. It’s like I’m sitting in front of a warm fire on a cold day. I don’t have to do anything. All I have to do is be there. And after a while I may have the qualities of the fire change me, so I have the warmth of the fire. I may have the glow of the fire, and so it is the same with me and God. I just have to be there, quiet.”

Another person he enjoyed interviewing was Reverend Gardner Taylor, a legend of the civil rights movement who served for many years as the senior minister at the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn. Taylor shared how in recent years, he had begun to practice what the 19th-century British pastor Alexander McLaren called “sitting silent before God.” He said, “This is not praying. It is not reading. It’s just opening oneself. It’s a mystic kind of thing. But we do so little of it, and we who preach are likely to engage ourselves in so many things and to neglect that aspect of being open to what God has to say. And I wish to heaven I had practiced this more, early on in my ministry.”

Similarly, the late theologian Phyllis Tickle practiced what she called “fixed hour prayer.” Every three hours her alarm went off and she would stop whatever she was doing and pray, usually by reading out loud. Before she died, she had completed a series of books called *The Divine Hours*- a collection of written prayers for every part of every day. Referring to one of them, she read, “I will praise thee, Lord, before the peoples, and I will sing praise to thee before the nations. For thy mercy is great, even to the heavens, and thy truth unto the clouds. Be thou exalted above the heavens, oh, God, in thy glory over all the Earth.” She said she did this because we’re told in Christianity that there must be constant prayer in our lives, and also that there should be a constant cascade of prayer offered before the throne of God. Unlike most prayer, it’s not petitionary; it doesn’t ask for anything. Rather, it simply glorifies God and acknowledges him. She found it was also a way of remembering who it is she was not and how very little she mattered within the whole scheme of things.

Another figure who left a profound effect upon him was the author and one-time Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner. Although he had never had a church and rarely attends one any more, HIS WRITING, he admitted, was his ministry. To quote Buechner, “What makes me a believer is that from time to time, going back almost as far as my memory will go back, there have been glimpses I had, sometimes literally a glimpse, which have made me suspect the presence of something extraordinary and beyond the realm of the immediate. You encounter the holy in various forms, which unless you have your eyes open you might not even notice, they’re so subtle and so elusive. The phrase ‘listen to your life,’ pay attention, observe.

That wonderful phrase ‘religious observances’ means, among other things, I think, just what it says: observe religiously.”

As these interviewees reflected on the importance of prayer in their lives, one can see how they connected with God in different ways which leads us to the conclusion that there is no “fixed” or “right” method to praying, that each person has to figure out what works best for him or herself just as THESE figures did. Yet, each of them would agree on the importance of taking time out from our busy lives to turn off the devices and tune out the cacophony of voices out there so that we might actually HEAR the ONE voice that TRULY counts- that we might LISTEN to God, more so than even SPEAKING to God.

Of course, there have been times in life when we have approached our Heavenly Father with a petition for something such as a healing and it never materialized. Our prayers which were either for ourselves or on behalf of someone else were intense, specific, and faith-filled, and yet despite our best efforts, our pleas for deliverance seemed denied. It left us wondering whether our faith might not be what we thought it was, or maybe God’s answer to us was a flat no, or perhaps, JUST perhaps, God really wasn’t interested in hearing our prayers AFTER ALL. Well let me disabuse you of this thought for the fact is that most of our prayers DO get answered- most people we pray for who are sick eventually ARE healed. In time, they DO RETURN to their homes, their churches, and their places of work; they DO find that job or see that broken relationship restored. But then there are times when we find OURSELVES wondering if prayer works AT ALL or if so, then why is it that it only seems to work OCCASIONALLY? I’m sure YOU’VE asked yourselves that same question! Then what are we to DO when such questions or doubts arise?

Well I have two responses to that. The FIRST is that we are to ask God for things that are important to us NO MATTER how we might feel about God or prayer or that which we have prayed for; REGARDLESS if we feel like we’re accomplishing nothing more than “flapping our gums in the wind” with our words. Jesus didn’t say, “Ask when you feel hopeful.” He simply said “ask” and it will be given. WHAT exactly will be given is not entirely clear! WHEN it will be given is not noted! HOW it will be given is not specified! We are just told to PRAY!

And the SECOND response is that once we have announced our need or care, it’s then GOD’S job to deal with it. Prayer is not manipulating heaven to fulfill our desires- it’s putting what we desire into the hands of a loving and somewhat inscrutable God and then letting God fulfill it in HIS time, in his OWN way. Like Paul says, in everything, by prayer and supplication, we are to let our requests be made known to God- REGARDLESS how large or small, whether emotional, material, or spiritual. We are to gratefully and thankfully leave them at our Lord’s feet and then trust for him to do what’s best with them- THAT’S ALL. We can’t worry about the effect or outcome of our prayers; we are simply to obey God by trusting him to do what’s best with them. And if we DO, then we will then discover that “the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus,” just as Paul SAID it will.

I repeat what I said earlier, something that can’t be stressed ENOUGH- how faith and trust form the keynote and foundation of all prayer. And it is not merely trust in the Word of God or God’s promises in scripture but rather trust in the PERSON of God, trust in the One who speaks through his Word and who makes those promises come to fruition. We must believe that we are addressing God PERSONALLY, that the very One who created the heavens and the

earth, he who formed us while we were yet in our mother's womb, is uniquely "personal," a "subject" who loves us dearly, one who gladly receives us when we come to him with our every need or concern. Like Jane Vennard says in her book *When You Pray*:

"I believe that prayer is all about our relationship with a God who loves us. Prayer is the way we connect and stay connected to God. We enter into this relationship at the urging of God. God wants an ongoing, vibrant, loving relationship with all of us. God desires us not because we are good or holy or set apart in any way; God calls all of us, just as we are, into relationship and offers us the possibility of intimacy."

I want to end my sermon by sharing with you an experience I had less than two weeks ago. I had just returned home from the Chautauqua Institute where I had gone for two weeks on my study leave when I received news from Tracy, my nephew, that my twin brother Howard had been hospitalized again, but THIS time, it was looking like he wouldn't be coming home. The doctors had found a hole in his stomach and they wanted to close it up. However, due to the colon cancer he's had for the past few years which neither radiation nor chemotherapy has been able to contain, they decided against operating, feeling he probably could not survive it. They said that even if his stomach WERE to heal, the cancer would eventually kill him anyway. It had metastasized to the point where they knew it was only a matter of time.

At hearing this news, Rose and I immediately began packing our bags for New Jersey, not just to offer some comfort to my brother and begin the process of making plans for his eventual funeral, but to also spend time with my sister Diana who weeks before had been placed in a nursing home due to her Alzheimer's Disease. The next four days were a whirlwind of activity, running between various family members who had been looking after Howard. I have to admit that the moment we walked into my brother's room at the rehab facility he'd been transferred to the night before, I thought we had entered the wrong room. The man in the bed I was looking at no way resembled him- he was so thin and gaunt that he appeared almost skeletal. But it was Howard, all right.

What amazed me about our time together was that rather than feeling sorry for himself and asking "Why me?" or displaying signs of dejection or depression over the prognosis he'd been handed, he remained strong and confident throughout. He assured us he had no fear of death for he had made peace with God and there wasn't a day when he hadn't felt the presence of Christ close to his side. Much of his days, he said, were spent talking to God and reading his Bible. He related how his priest, Father Andrew from the local Russian Orthodox Church, had visited him on several occasions and how happy it had made him.

After about three hours, it was time for the two of us to take our leave. Thinking it just might be the last time I ever see or talk with him, he said to me, "David, don't worry. Jesus hasn't come for me yet." After discussing what arrangements he would like when the end DID come, I offered to pray for him. With Rose taking my right hand and Howard my left, I then closed my eyes and began to address him who had referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. I started by thanking Christ for his love and how he had always been such a real and vital presence in Howard's life, ESPECIALLY NOW when he needed him most. I asked that when the time came for him to enter into the inheritance he had spent his entire life anticipating and preparing himself for, he who had always provided him with support on THIS side of life would softly and tenderly escort him across that mysterious threshold we call death into that NEW life which God promises to ALL his children- a world in which there will be no more tears or pain or mourning

or death. At that point, I found I could pray no further as my voice became choked by my own tears.

After fifteen or twenty seconds during which I couldn't get any words out of my mouth, Howard suddenly took over and began to pray. However, he prayed not for HIMSELF but for ROSE AND ME, imploring our Heavenly Father to hold the two of US tightly within his grasp and close to his heart. He prayed that our faith would remain full in the days ahead and that when the time came for him to leave this world, we would experience the peace and the joy of the Lord instead of the pangs of grief and sorrow. The marvel was that here I had come to minister to my own twin brother and he wound up ministering to ME INSTEAD with the most beautiful prayer I think I had ever heard. It was like St. Paul all over again, encouraging those members of the Philippian church from the bowels of a dank, dark prison cell when you would have expected HIM to receive such inspiration and support FROM THEM. As Rose and I left his room and headed for the exit, I had no more fears or worries about my brother- he was ready to go and as a result, I found myself filled with the profoundest sense of peace and gratitude about it.

And so, friends, THAT'S why we pray- it not only draws us CLOSER TO GOD, the "author and finisher of our faith," but it draws US closer together despite all our fears and infirmities, our faithlessness and our brokenness. Over the next few months, we are going to learn that there are many different kinds of prayers just as there are a myriad of reasons you or I might come to God in the FIRST place. Regardless of why, as long as we seek God with sincerity and humility in our heart and not merely for selfish reasons, and so long as we possess the confidence that God loves us and will never turn a deaf ear to us, we can be assured that our needs, our concerns, our joys, and our hopes will never be in greater hands. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, teach us to pray with prayers that are deep and honest and from the heart. Develop in us such a love for you that we would never consider prayer an intrusion upon our time but rather abiding with you as our highest honor and greatest joy. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.