Sunday, March 18, 1973
PRAYER AND THE TRANSCENDENT DIMENSION (No. 2 in a Series)
Luke 11:1-13; Romans 8:26-27

As far as the Gospel records are concerned, only one thing did the disciples ever specifically ask Jesus to teach them. One day when Jesus had finished praying, as his custom was, one of his disciples, speaking for all of them said, “Lord, teach us to pray!”

Now I suppose the disciples had done some praying on their own before they met Jesus. Probably, like most of us, they had dabbled in prayer; they had tried it now and then--irregularly or when in some kind of crisis. But it had never become a kind of center from which they lived.

When however they came under the influence of Jesus and saw what prayer meant to him, the power he drew from it, his regularity at it, how he often entered his times of prayer worn out and discouraged and came from his prayers renewed and with a new light in his eyes, then they knew that indeed something was lacking in their own lives and it dawned on them that although they had tried prayer from their youth on up, they now wanted to pursue it more deeply.

We too want to learn to pray more adequately. We noted in last week’s sermon that there is throughout the country an increase of interest in prayer, meditation and the whole transcendent dimension. People are hungry for a deepening of their spiritual lives. Learning how to pray is at the center of this.

To put it another way, deep down all human beings want some kind of communication, contact, connection with God; the feeling and knowledge of being known by God. It can be said in so many ways — we long for a sense of depth, a sense of ultimate meaning. We long for the assurance that our life in this world makes sense; for the assurance that our life is bound up or based upon the kind of founda-tion that only God can provide. Although we often try to live within our own neat little systems in order to overcome our longing, yet we know we cannot.

Our minds continue to search, to question. We want to know what is in back of life and after death. We want to know what is beyond our own little spaceship earth; what is beyond the limit of space and time, what is beyond the reach of our telescopes and space explorations. All the time we are reaching out, searching, seeking, wanting to communicate, to comprehend that mystery beyond all mystery — God! We want to know how to pray, how to be connected. Prayer is the instinctive cry of the finite to the infinite. It’s built into all of us.

Yet at the same time that prayer is at the center of all religion, for some people prayer has become something of an embarrassment. People ask, “Is there a place for prayer in the kind of world in which we live? We no longer pray for rain, we irrigate.” Is prayer a kind of prescientific exercise which a modern person must put from himself?

Thus, in our exploration of the transcendent dimension, we are not only driven back to the fundamental yearning--"Lord, teach us to pray,” but also to the fundamental question, “what is prayer?”

So, although no one can ever completely or adequately define or explain prayer, we need to state some partial answers which can serve as starting points in our understanding of what prayer is.

I. Perhaps prayer can best be described in today's language as a kind of thinking. But what kind of thinking? Let's add some content to that word.

1. First prayer is PASSIONATE thinking. There is a kind of thinking that is content to analyze, measure and compare the phenomena of the world. But there is also a thinking that enters feelingly into the world and knows itself deeply involved in all that goes on there.

Such thinking is not content to only learn what is but considers what ought to be. It searches for values among the facts, for ideals. Such a thinking is sometimes intermingled with painful longing and desire as it catches the vision of what might be and longs for its realization; sometimes it is suffused with joy and thankfulness as it recognizes great achievement or great horizons of hope and possibility; sometimes it is tinged with shame as we acknowledge that so much of the world's grief and pain has come about through my fault. This kind of passionate thinking that is open to feeling the world as well as knowing it, is at least the threshold of prayer.

To deeply think of the world and at the same time long for its perfecting is a step toward praying for the coming of God's kingdom. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" is the way the Lord's prayer puts it. To think of the world with rejoicing for all that is good or to think of the world with shame for our failures is implicitly to ask forgiveness of our sins. Wherever there is this kind of passionate thinking there is something that has an affinity with prayer.

2. Prayer is not only passionate thinking, but it is also COMPASSIONATE THINKING. In prayer, we go out from ourselves; we stand alongside the other; we try to share his or her feelings and aspirations. In Buddhist spirituality, there is a meditative practice known as the "Brahma-vihara, an expression which could be translated as "dwelling with reality." Prayer is not as sometimes alleged, a flight or an escape from reality. It is a dwelling with reality in the sense of a compassionate confrontation in thought with human beings in their actual situations.

For the Christian, compassionate thinking often takes the form of intercessory prayer, a compassionate confrontation with the needs of the other in the presence of God. Intercessory prayer includes compassionate thinking, but it is something more and implies the belief that in such prayer not only the person who prays is sensitized and stimulated to action, but that the power of God himself is somehow related to the situation which is the concern of the prayer.

We really don't know how intercessory prayer works. It doesn't fit our usual scientific categories. Yet, prayer does seem to release or tie into some kind of energy which can have amazing results. Recently there have been all kinds of experiments under controlled conditions with such things as psyche healing, the power of prayer over plants and other things as well. There does seem to be a kind of psyche energy involved in prayer which we really know little about.

Basically, it seems to me that intercessory prayer provides, as it were, openings into the dense texture of the human situation through which can come the creative and healing power of the reality we call God; and because within the human situation, our lives are all bound together in a mysterious solidarity, then God's power is able to operate\ "· far beyond the particular person

who offers the prayer. Prayer helps to make the human reality porous, more open to God's energy. Surely that is part of what psyche healing is all about.

It needs also to be said that intercessory prayer makes no sense unless it is matched by action directed toward the realization of wholeness, health, peace, salvation. Furthermore, compassionate thinking is dangerous for anyone who wants to stay wrapped up in himself. It draws people out of themselves, and the results are sometimes quite dramatic.

3. Prayer is also RESPONSIBLE THINKING. By this we mean that it is to be taken seriously and not in a flippant manner. It would not be a responsible act for me to pray for a new automobile just because as a whim of the moment, I thought it would be nice to have one. Rather prayer is a kind of thinking that takes us out of ourselves.

4. Prayer is also THANKFUL THINKING. Here we are talking about a kind of mood which provides the setting for our prayers. We do not approach God in a demanding way, but rather in a mood of gratitude.

All of what we have been saying points to the fact that prayer is much more than emergency signals which we only send out to God when we are in a difficult situation. Prayer is a fundamental style of thinking; passionate and compassionate, responsible and thankful, that is deeply rooted in our humanity and that manifests itself not only among believers but also among serious-minded people who do not necessarily profess any religious faith.

Prayer is a kind of disciplined meditative focusing of the whole self on the Divine Center of all things whom we call God. It's a way of consciously connecting ourselves with God and with all other human beings.

II. But why is prayer, regular prayer and meditation so important for us, and what can we expect from it?

We live more and more in a time when we human beings are taking more and more control of our lives and our environment. I believe that God the creator wants us to accept increasing responsibility for the world. But we are wrong if, in the midst of all this, we come to believe that prayer is a weakness that should be put behind us or a childish habit that should be outgrown. Mature prayer is by no means opposed to human responsibility. On the contrary, mature prayer strengthens and deepens responsibility and gives a clearer vision of the tastes that have to be done.

It has often been said that we live in a time of increasing fragmentation. In our kind of complex technological world, each person tends to become competent in some highly specialized task. By breaking things down into bits and pieces such as in assembly line production, we have been able to do things which seemed impossible some years ago. But this has helped to make us a fragmented society.

At the same time, alongside the increasing specialization and fragmentation, there are factors at work that keep drawing us into an ever-increasing closeness and inter-dependence. So simple an operation as shopping in a supermarket is made possible by a worldwide network of enormous complexity, involving industries, transportation systems, communications, banking and financial arrangements and more; together with untold numbers of people who in one way or another contribute to the smooth working of the system.

We have become so used to this great network that for most of the time we remain quite unconscious of it. Only when it is threatened with a breakdown, as for instance when a city is paralyzed by a power failure or a heavy snowstorm, do we suddenly realize to what Rn extent we have all become members of one body.

We find ourselves in one world, but our mental training has been such that our attention is riveted in one little area. Yet the kind of world in which we live demands that we “think big” and recover a sense of the cosmic dimensions of existence.

We are in a strange predicament. The unique strength of the specialist which enables him to concentrate successfully on his limited tasks can turn into a unique threat that may deprive him of that wholeness of vision which he needs for the new age. Somehow the wall separating the compartments into which we have divided life must be broken down or at least made porous so that each part can be seen to be connected and make sense within a larger whole. Otherwise, it’s like looking at only a tiny part of a large map where the rest of the map can’t be seen. Have you ever done that? That tiny part of the map doesn’t make much sense until we see i:t in the context of the whole map and see its connections with the other parts of the whole.

Well, prayer is one important way in which wholeness can be recovered. To pray is not only to think, but to think “big.” What we have been calling “prayerful thinking,” is a kind of thinking which crosses barriers and establishes connections between things that were separate and between persons who were estranged or indifferent. The wholeness fostered by prayer is two-fold.

1. On the one hand, it brings wholeness to the life of the person who prays. When we take time to pray, the succession of activities in which we all too often engage unthinkingly is brought into focus. Things begin to sort themselves out, contradictions are eliminated, and we find a direction for where we are going. To think of these things in the presence of God and in the light of Christ is already to experience a meaning in life and to let our separate acts be brought together in a connected unity. Prayer is itself an activity of the whole person and in turn it pro-motes our growth into wholeness.

To lay one’s life regularly before God in prayer is already to have faith that in spite of our failures and inconsistencies, in spite even of life’s seeming absurdities and trivialities, our life and work can become a meaningful contribution to God’s universe.

2. On the other hand, prayer helps us to see the world whole. Although we do not often think of it in this way, prayer is not very far removed from theology. Both are reflective, meditative acts. They are forms of thinking in which we ponder the meaning of faith. To have faith is to meet the world with the conviction that in spite of all its ambiguities and its downright evils, there can be discerned in it the reality of love and a ground of hope.

Prayer helps to integrate our vision of the world, just as it helps to integrate our own lives. Some people were surprised when it was learned that Dag Hammarskjold, who was killed in Africa, while seeking peace as Secretary-General of the United Nations, had been a man of prayer and of deep spirituality, as was revealed in his diaries. But why should anyone have been surprised — at any rate anyone with the faintest inkling of what prayer means. Without prayer and meditation, how could one ever hope to see a possibility of unity amid all the conflicting facts of the contemporary world, or how could one ever have a vision of peace, for peace means wholeness and fulfillment.

Prayer then, enables us to see things in perspective, to attain a vision of them in their unity and interrelatedness rather than as just so many separate items. That's why Jesus asks us to pray for our enemies as well as our friends, and to pray for those who persecute us. This kind of prayer is an acknowledgment that what binds us together is greater than what divides us.

We shall see in a future sermon that one of the reasons a spiritual person feels himself to be more at home in the universe is precisely because he has developed a kind of identification, an at-oneness with all of creation. The saint can identify with anyone and be a brother or sister to that person.

The more complex and fragmented our world becomes, and the more extensively we human beings try to control the world, the more we need the vision of wholeness and identification which prayer brings.

There are many different for111s and levels of prayer and even though prayer is instinctive, to reach the deeper levels of prayer and meditation takes practice and discipline. Next week, we shall begin to explore how one through prayer and worship becomes a more spiritual, saintly person. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the greatest difficulty you have with prayer? Share your concerns with others in the group.

2. How would you define prayer? Do the descriptions in the sermon of prayer as passionate, compassionate, responsible, and thankful thinking help you in your understanding of prayer?

3. What have you found most helpful in your prayers?

4. If you feel able, have each member in the group pray for every other member in the group each day during the coming week until you come together again.