Sunday, January 30, 1977
LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY
Matthew 6:5-8; Luke 11:1-4

Perhaps the title of the sermon today should've been, "Some things you always wanted to know about prayer but were afraid to ask." I say this because I believe that most people want to learn more about prayer, but often are afraid to ask, or don't quite know what to ask.

Most people pray at one time or another, but mostly use prayer in perfunctory ways, a kind of nod to God. And of course, most of us turn to prayer in times of extreme emergency, often after we've tried almost everything else. Thus, this past week the Governor of Ohio, asked people in his state to pray about the severe winter that has gripped a large part of the country and particularly Ohio.

A recent survey underscored this kind of use and understanding of prayer. In the survey, people were asked what they use most often to cope with the problems of life. The survey was done in the south in what is often called the Bible Belt, where many people claim to be "born again" Christians. Even here the survey showed that only 6.4 percent of the people turned to prayer on a regular basis as a way of coping with everyday problems. And only one percent turned to participation in prayer groups or Bible study groups as a way of handling their problems.

Their prayer-life, like that of the disciples was almost nonexistent except in cases of extreme emergency when there seemed nothing else left to do.

Like most of us, the disciples had done some praying on their own before they met Jesus. Maybe they had learned some of the formal prayers of the Hebrew religion. But prayer had never become the kind of center from. which they lived. It was not an integral and regular part of their lives.

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 often he 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 indeed something had happened in his prayers which was lacking in their own lives, and it dawned on them that although they had dabbled in prayer from their youth on -up; they did not really know much about prayer. So, they said to Jesus one day, "Lord, teach us to pray."

The disciples were beginning to understand that although prayer is to some degree instinctive; most of us cry out to some higher power in extreme difficulty, all of us can learn to pray more effectively. Like the disciples, we too need to learn the art of praying. We have to be taught to pray. And like anything else we learn, we need to keep practicing, to stay in condition, otherwise we decline in our effectiveness.

So, this morning we are going to talk about prayer, what it is and how to pray more effectively.

1. Note first that our concept or understanding of prayer is usually inadequate because our concept or understanding of God is inadequate.

Most of us still think of God as being “up there” or “out there” removed and away from us or as being in a particular place that our prayers have to reach. But that’s not the way Jesus experienced God. Part of our problem is that the English word “God” comes from the German language, from the word “Gut” which means good or good one. But that word does not adequately express the full meaning or experience of God.

In the language Jesus spoke, the word for God was “ALLAHA.” This is close to the Arabic word for God, ALLAH, and comes from the same root word. In Hebrew the word is ALOHIM. All three of these Semi tic words come from the root word, “AL.” These words mean, the ALL, essence, substance, basic energy.

If you were to ask one of the Semitic people what ALLAH means to him, he might say something like, “ALLAH is my very breath, and my very heartbeat and my very life.” He would be saying among other things that “God is all around me and within me and everywhere. God encompasses everything.”

The Psalmist was expressing the same idea when he wrote -- 3.

O, Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I get up. You under-stand all my thoughts. You know my way and my paths. You know everything there is to know about me. If there is deception in my tongue, You know it altogether, from beginning to end. Where shall I go from your spirit, or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there. If I make my bed in hell you are there also.

We live in a universe filled with God. The entire cosmic system is alive and dynamic. Our union with God is understood and felt intuitively and not just intellectually. Our physical bodies are in the constant care of God. The healing power, which is in all of us, the body’s ability to heal itself, is the God Spirit working within us which is also a part of us. This power continually works to heal all psychic and physical wounds we inflict upon ourselves, or which others inflict on us.

So, the whole universe is filled with God, from the tiniest seed or cell within our bodies to the sun, moon, and stars. Therefore, the counsel, guidance, and power we need is all around us at all times, ready — and waiting for us to be open to it. But what often happens is that we close ourselves off, or we are not aware, or we do not stay in tune to receive the power and energy and guidance we need. Sometimes we tune into other channels such as fear, worry, jealously, resentment, and hate.

To a certain degree we cannot escape God, we cannot get God entirely out of our systems. But we can keep God from taking over entirely. God respects our individuality and our power to make our own decisions.

So, the first thing we need to do in learning how to pray is to reexamine our experience, our concept of God. When we pray, we are not praying to someone out there or up there. We are opening ourselves more fully to a power that is all around us and within us.

2. Secondly, we need to know that prayer is not telling God what to do. Prayer is not saying, “God I need this” or I need that, or please heal my friend. Too often we think of prayer primarily in terms of words or phrases like that. But words can get in our way. Jesus warned us about this. He said, “When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words. God knows what you need before you ask.”

The purpose of prayer is not to change God, but to change us. No prayer can make God more loving or healing than God already is or was in the past or will be in the future. What prayer does is to open us, to put us in tune with the Spiritual forces which are constantly all around us and within us, and once we are open to these spiritt1alforces, then they are able to work in us.

Because we rely so heavily on words in our praying and because our concept of God is of a power “out there” or “up there” , we get ourselves and our wishes in the way of our prayers and are not open to God’s power all around us and within us.

Take for example a person praying about his or her sickness. That person may be holding the illness in the center of his or her attention and saying in effect, “I am sick, very sick, see how sick I am, give me health!” Well, even elementary psychology can tell us that the more earnestly we pray like that, the sicker we are likely to become.

It is not because God is not listening to us or is far away. It is because we have our own sickness so much in the center of our attention that we have closed ourselves off to God’s power. Someone has said that a person in this situation is not in reality praying to God, but praying to sickness, for sickness is at the center of his or her thought, and not God.

3. This means thirdly that prayer is simply being open to God who is all around us and within us. Prayer is being at completely in tune with God, in harmony with God as we can. Prayer is an attitude, a stance. Some words can be helpful to us in changing our attitude, or in getting us in the mood — the words may be important for us in that respect; but the prayer is not really the words, but the placing of ourselves as completely as possible in harmony with God’s power.

When we are in union or in harmony with God’s Spirit, this does not mean that we. lose our individuality or uniqueness. Rather, we are aware of our individuality, but we also are aware of our interrelatedness, our connection with everything else that is. All barriers come down and we sense our relationship to all other things that exist. Prayer is seeing things in perspective, attaining a vision of all things in their unity, and harmoniously working together.

Again, in the language which Jesus spoke — Aramaic, the word for prayer comes from the root word ZLA which literally means to “set a trap.” Prayer is to set your mind, to open yourself, like one opens a trap, and to wait patiently to sense and be in tune with the power and spirit of God.

As Christians we are taught to pray in Jesus’name. This means more than just saying the name “Jesus” after each prayer. To pray in Jesus’name means to pray with the same kind of understanding about God and what prayer is, the same kind of understanding that Jesus had. To pray in Jesus’name means according to his technique, his way, his method, his approach.

In some ancient languages, the word for religion means “balance” or “harmony.” Just as each planet or star in the universe is dependent upon other heavenly bodies, so we too, are interdependent and interrelated with one another and with God. Thus, to be religious in the true sense of the word is similar to what prayer is, it is to be in balance or in harmony with God and creation. Remove the balance from the universe and we will have chaos.

What does all of this mean specifically for our praying?

1. It means first that we need to set time aside regularly for prayer in our private lives. It means finding a quiet place where we can be alone, undisturbed, undistracted, uninterrupted. Jesus said, “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pry to your father who is in secret.”

2. Secondly, when you are in such a place, be quiet. Close your eyes. Then visually, intuitively, be aware of God’s presence and power all around you and within you. Try also to sense and be aware of your relationship with all the creation.

Begin, as you sit in your chair, or in the pew here during the time of silent prayer, to offer your whole selves, utterly and joyfully, in quiet glad surrender to God’s Spirit and power which is within us and all around us.

Your mind will wander as does mine. Gently bring it back and try again to visualize and imagine yourself totally connected to God. If you are going to pray for someone who is ill or in need of help. Picture that person in your mind, but picture that person as well and healthy, not lying in a bed sick. Visualize God’s healing power going through you into that person. Words need not be said.

These then are some suggestions about prayer. Thomas Kelly wrote, “Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a Divine Center. Each one of us can have such a life of amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence, on one condition — that is, if we really want to.”

“Religion or prayer isn’t something to be added to our other duties, and thus make our lives more complex. The life with God is the center of life and. all else is remodeled and integrated by it....Life from this kind of Center of life is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time but occupies all our time. Then we know that we need not get frantic. God is at the center. And when our little day is done, we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well. Amen.