Sunday, September 2, 1979
ANOTHER LOOK AT PRAYER
Matthew 6:5-8; Luke 11:1-13

I suppose that people have more questions about prayer than almost anything else related to the Christian faith. Some of the questions which I hear people asking are: “Why pray to God if God already knows what one needs?” “How can my prayers help someone else in need? Doesn’t God already know what each person needs?” “If it is God’s will that we be well and not sick, how can prayer help the healing?”

In spite of these and other questions, most people who are serious about their religion feel that they should be praying persons but do not quite know what to do about it. And the very fact that not too many people have a regular and meaningful prayer like reflects this confusion about prayer.

The same confusion and some of the same questions must’ve been on the minds of Jesus’ followers because in the gospel stories Jesus had quite a bit to say about prayer. We also know from the New Testament that Jesus himself had a rich and relevant prayer life.

So, this morning and also next Sunday, we are going to take another look at prayer.

To begin, listen to some of the things Jesus had to say about prayer. “When you pray you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners that they many be seen by others and then others will know how religious they are. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door... and in praying do not heap up empty phrases as some people do; for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Note two points from these words of Jesus. First, prayer is not a matter of trying to impress God or of trying to impress others, and (2) second, prayer is not a matter of telling God what to do. As far as God is concerned, the words we use in prayer are not important. They are important only insofar as the words help us to direct and focus our thoughts.

Jesus had much more to say about prayer. According to the Gospel of Luke, he told these parables to his disciples when they asked him about prayer and to teach them to pray.

“If you have a friend who comes to you at midnight when you are asleep and that friend knocks on your door and wakes you up and says, ‘Please lend me some good because some unexpected company has just arrived at my house, and I have nothing to feed them.’ You would probably at first answer your friend by saying, ‘go away, don’t you know what time it is! I’m already in bed and don’t want to get up and besides all the noise you’re making will wake the children and then I’ve really got problems.’ But if this friend keeps on knocking on your door or ringing the doorbell, you will probably get up and give him the food because of his insistence and to get rid of him so you could go back to sleep.”

Then Jesus added this short parable, “What father or mother among you if his or her child asks for a fish will instead give that child a serpent, or if the child asks for an egg will give the child a scorpion.” Jesus was saying that even in our close human relationships we do not play such tricks on one another and even more so God does not play tricks on us.

For many years when I read these parables about prayer, I gave the main emphasis to the fact that if one keeps on knocking on the door, keeps on praying, God will answer one's prayer. But with this emphasis, I missed the one main point of the parables which Jesus states when he finished telling them. Listen to what he said, "If you friend will give you what you need because you keep insisting, how much more will God give you what you need."

In other words, in relating to God, we do not even have to tell God what we need. God's love and power continually surround us and uphold us. God is not the kind of God who only finally gives us what we need when we are worn out from the continual asking. Our many prayers may open us more to receive what God wants to give us, that is, our prayers hopefully will change us so that we are more ready and willing to have God more fully enter our lives.

Prayer then is an opening of our lives to the love and power of God which is always around us and present in the world. Prayer is being open to this presence of God. Prayer is a state of mind where all our thoughts are stilled and where our mind is not wandering all over the place. Prayer is an alert state of total sensitivity and attentiveness. It is a kind of focusing or attunement.

Thus, as we already mentioned, prayer is not telling God what to do. The purpose of prayer is not to change God, but to change us! Do we really think that through prayer we might be able to move God to do something God wouldn't otherwise do? There is no prayer than can make God more loving than God already is and has been in the past and will be in the future. What prayer can accomplish is to make us more open, more attuned to the Spiritual forces around and within us. Prayer can make us more conscious of our connection to God and to one another and can make that connection more complete, more vital, more helpful.

This means that much of what we often call prayer or think of as prayer is really preparation for prayer. As in all worthwhile endeavors, the preparation is very important.

If we attend a symphony concert or choral concert, what we experience in that concert also includes the preparation for the concert by the performers even though we were not present at the rehearsals and were not present at the long hours of individual practice and preparation. Yet all that preparation was necessary if the concert is to truly be a memorable experience. It could not occur without the preparation. And the better and more complete the preparation, the better the concert.

The same is true of sports events. Soon many of us will again be attending Nebraska football games or hearing them on the radio. The game itself is the culmination of weeks and weeks of conditioning and practice and, even before that, careful recruiting. Although the game itself is in a sense separate from the preparation, it wouldn't be possible without it.

Much the same is true of prayer. Most of the words we use in prayer such as in the verbal prayers in our worship services are more for us and our preparation than they are for God. Words are used to focus our thoughts and to remind us of who we are and who God is. Sometimes we choose words and phrase the sentences, so we sound as if we are telling God what to do and telling God what we are doing.

I'm sure God doesn't mind as long as the words don't mislead us or others. Lately, I've become very conscious of the words used in prayers which are really part of the preparation for prayer. I've heard public prayers begin thus: "O God, we are gathered here in this great auditorium on this beautiful day in September to remember our forefathers and mothers," as if

God didn't already know this. Actually, the words are probably meant for the persons present rather than for God. They are preparation for prayer, albeit many of the words we use are often poor preparation — thus Jesus reminds us, "When you pray, do not heap us empty phrases as some people do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for you Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask him."

Also, in our western culture in the last few centuries, we've overemphasized the use of words and thus many Christians have forgotten other important forms and ways of preparation for prayer, other methods for getting the mind and body quiet and relaxed with out total being focused and attuned. Words can certainly help.

Some other forms of preparation for prayer are: concentrating on our breathing until our body and mind are totally in tune; systematically relaxing all parts of the body beginning with the feet and moving up through the body to the top of the head; various yoga exercises; being led in a guided meditation using our imagination by a skilled leader who leads us to see visual images in our mind's eye: thinking a word or phrase over and over again in a quiet relaxed way until all stray thoughts and images are banished from our mind. All of these forms of preparation take time, but that shouldn't surprise us — preparation for anything important take time, lots of time and practice.

Our brothers and sisters in the Christian faith who have been brought up in the Quaker tradition have a lot to teach us about the use of silence in preparation for prayer; about learning to be quiet and waiting and only then after a time do we gradually put ourselves out of the way and begin to be open to God's Spirit which is always around us and present in the world. So often our own activity, our own problems, our own thoughts, our own busyness, keeps us closed to God's Spirit.

Last year when I attended a retreat and seminar on meditation, we were taught that it takes at least ten to fifteen minutes for most of us to get quieted down and to be able to focus our attention. But again, that shouldn't surprise us. Think of the hours of preparation and conditioning an athlete goes through to begin to condition his or her body.

While it is true that the whole universe is filled with God from the tiniest see or cell within our bodies to the sun, moon, and stars and all of creation, proper preparation is often needed for us to be open to God's Spirit and power.

It's so easy for us to tune out God, just as it's easy for us to tune out other people. Through negative mental attitudes we tune in other channels such as fear, worry, jealousy, resentment, envy, greed, and feeling sorry for ourselves.

We can never actually escape God completely, but we can keep God from taking over in our lives. We have that freedom. We can continually be crowding God out of our lives.

Prayer itself is simply communion with God, being open to God as fully as possible and how much we are open varies from time to time. Sometimes we can be open to God without being consciously aware of it and all of a sudden, we can have an overwhelming spiritual experience without any conscious preparation. And some people seem to be just more naturally open to God, just as some people seem to be more naturally open to God, just as some people seem to be more naturally open to other people. There are also times when a crisis or tragedy or illness or disappointment in our lives may break us open to God's Spirit. And there are countless other ways that God's Spirit can enter our lives in unexpected and surprising ways.

Prayer is the time we set aside to be as open to God's spirit as possible. Prayer is an attitude, a stance. Sometimes words can be helpful to us in changing out attitude, or in getting us in the mood — the words may be important for us in that respect as preparation; but the prayer is not really the words at all, but the placing of ourselves as completely as possible in harmony with God. Sometimes this takes lots of preparation and at other times not as much.

Part of our preparation for prayer is simply to set aside a time for it and to remove as many distractions as possible. Even then your mind will wander as mine does. It takes lots and lots of practice to be able to do one thing at a time.

Don't work too hard at it or be too hard on yourself. To be able to concentrate on one thing is very, very difficult.

Remember above all that prayer is not something we do for God — it's something that does us a lot of good. It's not God that needs prayer, we are the ones who gain from it. Amen.