Sunday, November 7, 1982
PRAYER CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE
Romans 8:26-28; Luke 11:1-3; Matthew 6:5-8

Whenever we know someone who has obviously excelled in some area, our first reaction is to ask that one for the secret of his or her success. This is what happened to the disciples of Jesus. Each time he returned from a time of praying alone, he was so clearly refreshed and renewed that the disciples could not ignore it. So, one day they said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

This is a desire that most of us have. We want to deepen our connection with God the Ultimate Source of all things. What did Jesus do? First, he gave his disciples a model prayer that they could begin using right then and there. We call it the Lord’s Prayer. In this brief prayer, the very heart of the Christian faith is summed up succinctly and profoundly.

However, Jesus also realized that there is much more to praying than simply learning the words of a given prayer and committing them to memory. If prayer is to change one’s life, then it needs to involve every facet of personality, one’s emotions and beliefs and relationships as well as one’s thoughts and words. Therefore, Jesus did not stop by just giving a model prayer but went on to get at some of the obstacles that stand in the way of authentic prayer. Let’s look at these.

1. The first obstacles that stood in the way of the disciple’s praying and that stands in the way of our praying is an inadequate or limited image and concept of God. Listen to people’s prayers and their conversations about prayer and you can learn more about their concept and image of God than in almost any other way.

Not too many months ago, a fundamentalist minister said that he had a vision in which God had rolled up his sleeves and was going to punch the federal government in the nose. Here’s an image of God as a brawler. There’s also the image of God as the “avid sports fan.” If you watch enough pre-game and post-game interviews and read enough sports personality profiles, you will hear athletes and coaches repeatedly saying things like: “If the Man upstairs wants us to win this big game, we’ll win it. If he doesn’t, we won’t. It’s all up to the big score-keeper in the sky now.” Or “When I hit that ball, I knew it was going to carry far enough, but I thought it might go foul. I said a fast prayer and sure enough, it landed right in the stands a couple of feet fair. I guess the Big Batting Coach in the sky was really with me on that one.”

Or “I’m disappointed that I completed only two passes in 30 attempts, and my left eye was gouged out and my leg was broken in three places, and we lost. But I guess that’s the way the Big Head Coach in the sky wanted it.”

After hearing enough of this, a picture begins to form of God sitting up there somewhere, flipping from channel to channel to keep up with every play of every game going on everywhere.

In a World Series a few years ago, television viewers watch a batter bless himself before entering the batter’s box, while up in the grandstand, the pitcher’s wife was shown reciting her rosary. The batter struck out. Did the rosary cancel out the blessing, leaving skill against skill, or was the rosary stronger than the sign of the cross?

There's also the image of God as the Warrior, or God the Commander in Chief. This is one of God's oldest roles, inspiring troops to go into battle, being at their side and being on their side. Throughout history, there have been very few ways in which God was not said to be on one side or the other, usually on both sides if you believe the Generals and leaders of the nations.

Mark Twain once wrote a prayer about war to illustrate the silliness of some of our prayers and images of God in relation to war. Here's part of that prayer. "O Lord, our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of their guns with the wounded writing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fie; help us to wring the hearts our of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended through wastes of their desolated lands in rages and hunger and thirst."

Another inadequate image which many of us hold is that of a God who is not good, not loving and not merciful. We mostly think of God as hostile or holding grudges and almost impossible to please. We still ask, "What can I do to please God and get in good with Him?" Or we say, "I know that God can't think much of me as I am. How can I get God's attention and do something to make God like me?" We think of God as an angry parent.

Jesus Christ, however, revealed a loving God, a forgiving God, a God of unlimited mercy and patience. God is not far off, or up there, but rather within us and around us all the time. God embraces us with all our faults, frailties and shortcomings. God never turns away from us. God's love cannot be earned, it is freely given and always there.

2. A second obstacle which blocked the disciple's praying, and which also stands in the way of our praying is the fact that we tend to hold onto feelings which are not healthy. There are four principle troublemakers that most of us have to deal with in this area. (1) fear, (2) guilt, (3) inferiority feelings or low self-esteem, (4) hate, or misguided love. Any one or all of these can be a block to prayer because they tend to fill our minds rather than us being open to God.

That's why Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

One cannot honestly pray or be in a mood of worship if there is still within one hostility, or hate, or envy or jealousy, guilt or feelings inferiority. Then we dwell on one or more of these instead of our prayers and God. Sometimes these feelings are below the surface and are blocking our prayers without our knowing it. That's why prayer has to be a practice in honesty.

In order to make prayer a practice in honesty, we have to first search out and bring to light all fear, guilt, hate and inferiority. Those feelings don't bother God, but they bother us. God already knows they are there. We can't hide them from God, but we try to hide them from ourselves. Again, remember that God is a loving, forgiving, merciful God, a Healing Power before whom and in whose presence we can make our prayers a practice of honesty.

3. A third obstacle to our praying is our sense of embarrassment over the immaturity of our prayer habits. We may talk a lot about wanting to deepen our spiritual lives, but most of us rarely do much about it and we don't pray very often unless we get into some kind of jam. We tend to forget all about God until we come to the end of our rope and have nowhere else to turn. Is not this the nature of the greater portion of our prayers? They are born in the heat of

crisis and take the form of personal petition — “give me this or give me that, help me, rescue me, save me.”

I’ve been particularly impressed with the fact that men have more difficulty in admitting their need for a deepening prayer life than women. Maybe it’s still the “macho image,” the fact that we men have more difficulty admitting that we do not know very much about prayer and are too embarrassed to learn more. Or maybe we have difficulty admitting that we need God in our lives.

These are the usual obstacles to our successful praying — (1) an inadequate concept or image of God, (2) our own inner feelings and many times hidden feelings of fear, guilt, hate, inferiority, and (3) our sense of embarrassment over our immaturity in prayer. What then can be done about it so that prayer can change our lives.

Here are four suggestions or steps in prayer which if followed, will help prayer change your life for the better.

1. Make prayer a regular activity. That isn’t as easy as it sounds. But those who use prayer like a spare tire, only when an emergency arises are very apt to be disappointed in its results. Prayer is simple, yes, but it is not an easy art, except sometimes for little children who are completely trusting.

In our regular praying, it is important to be patient with ourselves. Many times, our mind will wander. Sometimes it will seem as if nothing is happening; it will seem like a waste of time. But it’s important especially in those times to keep us the discipline. There will also be times when we feel that we do not need to pray; times when everything is going fine, but then again, it’s important to keep to our regular practice of prayer.

Regular prayer helps us to identify gradually with the Spirit of Love, and with the mystery of God. It’s important also in this regular praying, not to be discouraged with your faults; rather be patient with yourself in correcting them.

2. Secondly, make prayer an act of surrender. Literally imagine yourself in the hands and presence of God. The theory behind complete surrender is a well know fact to the physical sciences. Nature abhors a vacuum, in fact will not tolerate one. Something always rushed in to fill the emptiness. Now what would happen if we could manage by true surrender, holding nothing back, to create a vacuum and invite God to fill the void?

To surrender means to be willing to let God change us for the better. It means to be willing to be helped. To surrender in prayer also means that we stop blaming other people and outer conditions for what we find wrong with us. We are willing to let go of revenge, hate, envy, and any other negative emotions which can block us from accepting and receiving God’s love and forgiveness and power.

3. Thirdly, make prayer positive. I cannot emphasize this fact enough. Our surrender has created a void, and we must be sure that it is not filled with the same murky thoughts and fear that are always a part of our lives.

Too many of us in our praying continue to hold onto our unhappy thoughts and symptoms. These then remain at the center of our attention. Over and over again in prayer, people will declare their unhappiness, their suffering, their sinfulness and their pain. In so doing we are

actually affirming our misery rather than letting it go. And so, we go right on being unhappy, ill, sinful, just as we were.

Negative thoughts will continue to come to our attention in our praying, and whey they do, we need to gently let go of them and give them no power.

Suppose, for example, that we say the Lord's Prayer, which is a positive affirmative prayer once a day. But it doesn't get our attention. We brush it aside and go right back to telling God what a thorough failure, what an unhappy person we are and continue dwelling on these thoughts in our waking hours. What is getting our attention? It is not the brief moment with the Lord's Prayer, but rather our negative thoughts about ourselves and then this becomes our real prayer deep down.

4. Fourthly, make prayer receptive. Too often we pray but do not expect to receive. I've known people who have prayed and prayed for forgiveness, but never feel forgiven.

Again, part of the problem here continues to be an inadequate concept or image of God. We think of God as we think of ourselves. Since we are prone to hold grudges, ill-will, hate, contempt, in short to withhold the fulness of love, we think God does the same.

We have to remember that God is not like us in these ways. God's ways are higher than our ways. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. God does not hold grudges or have any ill will towards us. The Good News is that we are dealing with a God who accepts us as we are, and instead of berating our immaturity, is willing to start there and lead us from crawling to stumbling to walking in our prayers. The struggle is not with God, but is with ourselves.

Prayer can change your life. It has changed and continues to change the lives of thousands of people. Here's an invitation! Beginning this coming Wednesday morning at 7:30 a.m. we will have each Wednesday a service of morning prayer in the chapel. This learning in prayer is for everyone. It is especially for those who want to grow in their praying. I want men as well as women to take advantage of this opportunity. We will always end a little before eight so that you can get to work on time or go about your business for the day.

Prayer can change your life. Amen.