Sunday, June 2, 1991
PRAYER AND GOD (NO. 4 IN A SERIES: SERMONS YOU'VE REQUESTED)
Matthew 6:5-15

"How does God choose which prayers to answer?" "Does God answer all prayers?" "I'd like to hear a sermon that gives me some suggestions on how to pray." "What is prayer? Is it necessary to pray?" These are some of the questions about prayer that you have requested me to address in a sermon.

It has been my experience that many people try prayer at one time or another but aren't quite sure what to do with it. Especially in times of extreme emergency when we don't know where else to turn, many of us will mumble a quick prayer.

However, prayer on a regular basis is another matter. In a recent survey, people were asked what they used most often to cope with the problems of life. Only 6.4 percent of the people interviewed said they turned to prayer on a regular basis as a way of helping them cope with everyday problems. And only one percent said that they participated regularly in some kind of prayer group or were regular in personal daily prayer on their own.

But for some people, prayer is an integral part of their lives, as normal and important to them as breathing. Last week, I stopped in a Burger King to get a sandwich, and I couldn't help but notice a young couple at a nearby table. The man was in some kind of construction work because he was wearing coveralls and a hard hat. Before he and his wife or woman-friend began to eat, he took off his hat, and together they bowed their heads and said a prayer. They did it very quietly and unobtrusively. I suspect that no one else in the place even noticed. It was obvious to me in observing them that prayer was very much a part of their everyday life.

It is evident from the New Testament stories that the disciples of Jesus had lots of questions about prayer and that they wanted to learn more about it. 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 not yet become the kind of center from which they lived. It was not an integral and regular part of their lives.

However, when 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 something had happened in his prayers that was lacking in their own lives. 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."

And teach them he did. Not only did he give them some very specific suggestions about how, when, and where to pray—"Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others...But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your God in secret.... And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for God knows what you need before you ask." And then he also gave them and us a model prayer, which we today still use and call the "Lord's Prayer." Furthermore, and equally important, Jesus broadened and deepened their concept and faith in God.

Jesus knew that the first obstacle that stood in the way of the disciples' praying, and that stands in the way of our praying, can be 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.

For example, not long ago, I heard someone say 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 scorekeeper 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." As I heard that comment, I wondered what would've happened if the outfielder at the same time had said a fast prayer to influence God to make the ball go foul.

After hearing enough of that kind of talk, a picture begins to form of God sitting out 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 watched 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?

Lest you misunderstand, I'm not in any way putting down or poking fun at the piety of these individuals. I'm only saying that's not the understanding of prayer that Jesus had and taught, nor is it the kind of God that Jesus revealed. As you've heard me say many times in other sermons — prayer, as Jesus practiced it and taught it, is not for the purpose of changing God, but for changing us. Prayer does not have as its goal getting God on our side, but getting us on the side of God. Prayer is not to persuade God to do our will, but to help us discover and follow God's will.

Many people still tend to think of God as being "up there," or "out there," removed and away from us, or as being in a particular place where our prayers have to reach. But that's not the way Jesus experienced God. Part of our problem is language. 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. No one word can.

However, 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 ELOHIM. All three of these Semitic words come from the same root word, "AL." These words mean the ALL, essence, substance, basic energy.

If you were to ask one of the Semitic people what ALLAH meant to him or her, they might say something like, "ALLAH is my very breath, and my very heartbeat, and my very life." In other words, God is all around me, within me, and everywhere. God encompasses everything.

The Psalmist was expressing the same idea when he wrote:

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I get up.
You understand all my thoughts.
You know my way and my paths.
You know everything there is to know about me.
If there is deception on 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 cosmos is alive and dynamic. Our union with God is understood and felt intuitively, not only rationally or 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. The Spirit of God is within every cell of our body. This power continually works to heal all psychic and physical wounds we inflict on ourselves or which others inflict on us.

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, jealousy, resentment, and hate.

So the first thing we need to do in learning how to pray is to re-examine our experience, our concept, our image of God. When we pray, we are not praying to someone out there or up there. We are taking time to be open, receptive, and pay attention to the Spirit of God, which is all around us and within us.

It helps to remember 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. Words can even get in our way. Jesus warned us about this. Remember, 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.”

Think of it this way: prayer is taking time out to be more open or to be in tune with the spiritual forces that are constantly all around us and within us. Once we are open to spiritual forces, they are able to work in us.

Secondly, to be truly open to God’s Spirit, we need to remove as many of the obstacles within us as possible. There are four principal trouble-makers that most of us have to deal with: (1) Fear, (2) Guilt, (3) Inferiority feelings or low self-esteem, (4) Hate or misguided love. Any one or combination of these can be a block to prayer because they tend to fill our minds rather than allow us to be 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) It’s difficult to pray or be in a mood of prayer if there is still within us hostility, hate, envy, or jealousy. Sometimes these feelings are below the surface and are blocking our prayers without our being aware of it. 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, and hate. 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. I know people who are so filled with hate, envy, and guilt that there is hardly room for God's Spirit.

Here are several suggestions about prayer that have helped people for hundreds and hundreds of years:

First, as you are entering a time of prayer, examine your inner self as honestly as possible and then hand over to God any feelings of hate, envy, jealousy, and guilt. If someone has hurt you in some way, forgive that person. Then you will be able to experience God's forgiveness.

Secondly, make prayer an act of surrender. Imagine yourself as being in the loving, overwhelming, healing presence of God. Imagine God's loving Spirit filling every part of your body and life. "Here I am, God, fill me completely with your loving Spirit."

To surrender means to be willing to let God change you 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.

Thirdly, make prayer positive. I cannot emphasize this point enough. Too many of us, in our praying, hold onto our unhealthy thoughts and symptoms. These then remain at the center of our attention. Over and over again in their prayers, people will declare their unhappiness, their suffering, their sinfulness, and their pain. In doing so, they are actually affirming their misery rather than letting it go.
Remember above all, you are always in the loving, caring presence of God. Amen.