Sunday, July 26, 1998
LEARNING TO PRAY
Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:5-8

According to the stories in the New Testament, the first disciples who followed Jesus asked him to specifically teach them only one thing. One day, when Jesus had finished praying, as was his custom, one of the disciples, speaking for all of them, said, “Lord, teach us how to pray.” In partial answer to their request, Jesus gave them a model prayer, which we now call “The Lord’s Prayer.”

In the New Testament, there are several different versions of this prayer, and in church tradition, there are even more. Some traditions say, “Forgive us our debts,” while others say, “Forgive us our trespasses,” and still others say, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Later church tradition added the final phrase, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

According to Old Testament scholars, the Lord’s Prayer was not totally original with Jesus. A similar prayer was prayed in the synagogues. What Jesus did was to take this prayer and place a different emphasis on various parts of it. More than anything else, he gave the prayer as an outline, a model of what prayer can be. In other words, he was not telling the disciples that they should always use those exact words as he said them, but he was giving them a form for prayer, a pattern, an outline.

Learning to pray is easy and difficult. It is easy because praying is instinctive; we have been created in the image of God and are always connected with God, so it is natural to pray. It is difficult because as we grow and mature, we can easily misunderstand the nature and purpose of prayer. We let other things get in the way of true prayer. That’s why Jesus told his disciples in another place, “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, so that they can be seen by others... but whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to God who is in secret... When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as some people do, for they think they will be heard for their many words.”

Now, let’s look at the deeper meaning of prayer so we can better learn how to pray. Most scholars agree that Jesus, when he was teaching, spoke in Aramaic. The literal definition of the word “prayer” in Aramaic is “to set a trap.” In the part of the world where Jesus lived, when individuals went hunting, they would get a box, some bait, and a string. They tied the string to the box trap, set up the trap with the bait inside, and then hid behind a rock or some other adequate hiding place, still holding the string, and waited patiently for the animal they desired to catch. When the animal came into the trap, they’d pull the string and hopefully trap the animal. Prayer, then, literally means to prepare your mind like a trap and wait patiently to catch the thoughts or directions from God.

Formal prayer can also be thought of as a state of mind where all thoughts are stilled. It is an alert state of sensitivity and attentiveness, a form of relaxed concentration.

Here are some definitions and descriptions of prayer that have been helpful to me in learning how to pray. Prayer is a way of allowing yourself to be as open as possible to God’s Spirit,

presence, and energy. Prayer is an attitude of trust in God's goodness. It is the quiet confidence which opens all channels of one's person to the divine inflow.

Electricity can be used as an analogy. Science did not create electricity but rather discovered it and, since then, has been learning how to fulfill the conditions that release its power. In the spiritual realm, this is what prayer means. Prayer is inwardly fulfilling conditions so that power is released. Prayer is plugging in on a current whose sources are cosmic and not simply individual, a current that brings light and power. Prayer is completing the circuit. Prayer is not begging God as if God were an errand boy; it is not self-isolated autosuggestion.

Learning to pray is based on the assumption underlying our Christian faith that we live in a universe where God's presence and energy are everywhere. We live in a creation that is filled with God's Spirit. The entire cosmos is alive and dynamic with the loving energy of God. This means that God's Spirit and energy are both within us and all around us. We are created in God's image. God has breathed into us the breath of life.

We, however, do not always keep in tune with God's Spirit. Think of the radio as an analogy. The atmosphere around us is filled with radio waves which we cannot see or hear. But with the proper receiver, and if it is tuned to the right frequency on the dial, we can bring the radio waves into our hearing. First, of course, we have to turn the radio on, and then unless we have it tuned properly, we will not receive a clear signal. The signal can also be interrupted with static.

Sometimes prayer is difficult for us because of the static in our lives. Our lives can be filled with static such as fear, worry, greed, jealousy, resentment, and guilt, or just plain noise. These can interfere with our "tuning in" to God. There are times when it takes a lot of tuning to get beyond the static so that we can experience the presence and power of God. There are times when it takes time to "be still and know God."

Harry Emerson Fosdick described it as learning to pray receptively. We are not always receptive to God's Spirit.

Yesterday, for example, you may have had a very busy schedule. There were things you needed to get done. You worked hard to get everything completed. But then, in the evening, you had tickets for a concert. You went to the concert hall and heard a glorious symphony. You had to change your approach. Earlier in the day, you had been active; now for the concert, you hopefully became receptive. You had been aggressive; now you became appreciative. You had been doing something to your world; now you let another world do something to you.

Fosdick put it this way: "The failure of much popular praying arises from the fact that when we pass from our ordinary, aggressive, workaday world into what we call prayer, we do not thus change our technique. Despite our supposition that we are praying, we are not. That is, we are aggressively trying to force our will upon the world. To many people, prayer is only an additional way of getting what they want, a kind of spare tire to be used when the others fail. They are as much go-getters when they pray as at any other time, and the whole tone of their praying is, 'God, get me what I want!'"

Learning to pray, then, is a way of intentionally tuning in to God's Spirit, to God's presence and power. Here's what's been helpful to me. I think of the words I might use in prayer not as the prayer itself, but the words can be helpful in focusing or quieting my thoughts. The words are

really part of the preparation for prayer. They are for me and not for God. God already knows what I need and is ready to provide it.

You have heard me say it here in the worship services many times — prayer is not for the purpose of changing God, but for changing us. God doesn't have to be reminded of our needs or the needs of others; we need to be reminded. That's why Jesus said, "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as many people do, for they think that because of much talking they will be heard. Do not be like them, for God knows what you need before you ask." No prayer can make God more loving than God already is. However, prayer can make you more loving than you are.

Jesus's experience of prayer was one of direct and intimate communion with God, and he understood God as the essence of all life, both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible.

He taught his disciples a new manner of praying because he knew some things about prayer they didn't yet know. He knew that we human beings do not have to beg God to give us good things, as if God would not do so if we didn't ask. He knew our capacity to receive good is limited only by our failure to be open to it, to choose to accept it, and to claim it. We also have the freedom of choice to choose that which is not good but evil. Jesus also knew that our spirit and God's Spirit are of the same essence because we are created in God's image, the only difference being that in this world we are finite while God is infinite. But we do have the capacity to be aware of God's truth and to be guided by it. It is by tuning into God's Spirit that we are more able to create that which is good and worthwhile.

In addition to praying receptively, we are to pray positively. As I mentioned earlier, the trouble with much popular praying is that it is mainly begging. In addition to being based on an inadequate concept of God, it puts the emphasis of the prayer in the wrong place. What we are asking for occupies the center of our attention.

For example, here's a person praying about a sickness, holding some illness in the center of her attention and saying in effect, "I am sick, very sick, see how sick I am. Give me health." If you pray like that, you are likely to become more sick.

One finds no praying like that in the New Testament or in the powerful spiritual leaders of the church through the centuries. True prayer is affirmative. It is filled with praise and thanksgiving. It says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul."

We are to pray receptively and positively. In addition, Jesus taught that we are to pray patiently and with a long-term view. Too often we demand things immediately. Even in our praying, the spirit of "get rich quick" irreverently enters.

When we pray for peace and justice, we do not know how in the future that might be attained or how long it will take for people to live peacefully with one another, but we pray with the confidence that the energy of God will continue to work toward that end because that's God's will, and our prayers help advance that will.

Great praying is always scaled to a long-term enterprise. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Prayer like that is handed on from one generation to another.

Great praying is always inclusive and not exclusive. Remember, the model prayer which Jesus gave us to use as a pattern begins with the words, “Our Father,” not “My Father.” None of us owns God. God is not a local or a tribal God or a national God.

Exclusive prayers are plainly wrong and should not be practiced. Some of the most critical statements made by Jesus were about ways of praying he disbelieved in. He told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, thieves, scoundrels, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” It was a mean, selfish prayer, exclusive and not inclusive.

It’s like the modern prayer, “Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four, no more. Amen.”

Learning to pray and to understand what true prayer is in its many dimensions is no light matter. There are many different forms of prayer. Our hopes and our dreams, when they are in accord with God’s will, are in the very deepest sense prayers. That’s what Paul meant when he said, “Pray without ceasing.”

Some of you could be thinking, “Much of what you have been describing I know in my own experience, but I have never called it prayer.” My answer to you is, it is prayer and has been through the centuries. Now that you know it, do not let it remain unconscious and unrecognized in your life. Keep praying in all of its forms. Use words, your actions, your dreams, and your hopes. Amen.