Sunday, July 29, 2001
PRAYER AND PERSISTENCE
Luke 11:1-13

Whenever you know someone who has obviously excelled in some area, it's a good idea to ask that person what the secret is to their success so that you can learn all you can from them. That's what Luke reports the disciples did in the Bible story read earlier. They noticed that each time Jesus returned from a time of prayer, he was clearly refreshed and renewed. So one day they said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." They wanted to be more deeply aware of their connection with God.

What Jesus did in response to their request was first to give the disciples a model prayer, an outline for prayer that they could begin using then and there. We call it "The Lord's Prayer." We use it regularly in our worship services, and I'm sure many of you use it in your personal prayers.

However, Jesus also realized from his own experience with prayer that there is much more to praying than learning the words of a given prayer and committing that prayer to memory. Therefore, in teaching the disciples and others to pray, he gave additional suggestions for improving one's prayer life. Some of these are found in Luke's Gospel, while others are found in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

First, let's consider some obstacles mentioned in the Bible that can hinder the development of a more meaningful prayer life.

One obstacle that can stand in the way of meaningful prayer is an inadequate or limited image or concept of God. Listen to people's prayers and their conversations about prayer, and you can learn a great deal about their concept and image of God.

I once 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 an 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." Then, of course, if the team loses, it's not the coach's fault or the players' mistakes — it's because God didn't want their team to win. I once heard a baseball player say, "I wasn't sure the ball would stay fair, but I said a quick prayer, and sure enough, it landed in the stands a couple of feet fair. I guess the Big Batting Coach in the sky was really with me on that one."

A football quarterback once said, "I'm disappointed that I completed only two passes in 30 attempts, that my left eye was gouged, and my leg was broken in three places, and we lost. But I guess that's the way the Big Coach in the sky wanted it."

After hearing enough of this kind of talk, a picture begins to form of God sitting up there somewhere, flipping from channel to channel to keep up with all the games and personally directing who wins or loses.

In a World Series baseball game a few years ago, television viewers watched a batter bless himself with the Sign of the Cross before entering the batter's box, while up in the grandstand,

the pitcher's wife was shown reciting the Rosary. The batter struck out. Did the Rosary cancel out the Sign of the Cross, leaving skill against skill, or was saying the Rosary stronger than making the Sign of the Cross?

There's also the image of God as the warrior or God as 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 wars 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 the implied 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 writhing in a hurricane of fire; help us wring the hearts out of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander through wastes of their desolated lands in rags and hunger and thirst…."

Another inadequate image of God that many people still have in their minds — and which can be an obstacle to their praying — is that of a God who is not good, not loving, not forgiving, and not merciful. Instead, too many people still think of God as hostile, holding grudges, and almost impossible to please. They ask, "What can I do to please God and get in good with God?" Or they say, "I know that God cannot think much of me as I am. How can I get God's attention and do something to make God love me?" God is pictured as an angry parent.

Jesus, however, revealed a God of infinite love, unending forgiveness, and unlimited mercy and patience. God is not far off or up there somewhere but rather within us and around us all the time. The Bible tells us that each person is created in God's image, which is another way of saying that you are an expression of God. Consider how revolutionary that idea is. This implies that you do not pray "to God" but that you pray from the consciousness of God. Prayer becomes more active.

Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic, was aware of the very human tendency to be dominated by an objective perspective of God, an anthropomorphic God who rules over our lives with an iron hand. To change this way of thinking, he made what could be considered the most startling statement in the history of religion when he confessed that he boldly "prayed God to rid me of God."

What did he mean by this? He meant that if you believe you are dominated by a God who is "out there," you will always be restricted in your prayers. Prayer is not just a practice in which you should engage but a spirit in which you should live.

A second obstacle that can hinder your prayers is holding on to feelings and attitudes that are not healthy. These tend to fall into one or more of four categories: (1) fear, (2) guilt, (3) inferiority feelings or low self-esteem, and (4) hate or misguided love. Any one or combination of these can block prayer because they tend to fill your mind and grab your attention, preventing you from being open to God's Spirit.

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 at the altar and go; first be reconciled to them, then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

You cannot honestly pray or be in a spirit of worship if there is hostility, hate, envy, or any other negative attitude within you. These attitudes will block God's loving Spirit, which wants to work within you.

If you want to deepen your prayer life, it's helpful to search out and bring to light your fears, guilt, hate, and inferiority. It's not that these attitudes bother God's Spirit; they bother you. God already knows they are there. You may not know they are there or how powerful they are.

A third obstacle to deepening your prayer life can be the use of too many words. Notice how brief and focused on God the Lord's Prayer is. That's why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases… do not think you will be heard for your many words" (Matthew 6:7). Meister Eckhart said there is really only one word necessary for prayer: "thanks."

Many of the words we use in prayer are not actually prayer but a kind of "pre-prayer." The words are used to get us in the mood or spirit of prayer. They are a prelude, an introduction, and sometimes they can be very helpful. But if there are too many words, they can get in the way.

In the Hebrew scriptures, in the book of Psalms, it is written: "Be still and know that I am God." "Be still" means to become peaceful, concentrated, and quiet. Again, it is significant that Elijah the prophet had his most powerful experience of God when he was quiet.

To summarize, some of the major obstacles to prayer are an inadequate concept of God, negative attitudes within you that block God's Spirit, and the use of too many words.

According to Luke's Gospel, here are several guidelines for helping you in your prayers. Each guideline begins with the letter "P": persistence, practice, and patience. They are all connected and are different aspects of the same thing.

Being persistent in your practice of prayer and being patient in your praying is not as easy as it sounds. Too many people tend to use prayer like a spare tire — only when an emergency arises.

In prayer, it is especially important to be patient with yourself. Many times your mind will wander, especially in periods of silence. Frequently, it will seem as if nothing is happening and you will think you are wasting your time. It's crucially important in those times to keep up the discipline, to be persistent in a gentle way, which is another way of defining patience. Don't be too hard on yourself. Bring your mind and thoughts back very gently.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to be persistent in prayer. He used the parable of a person who goes to his friend's house at midnight, knocks on the door, and explains that an unexpected visitor has come to his house and he has no food for the guest. The person he has awakened to ask for help tells him to go away because it is too late, his family is sleeping, and he doesn't want to be bothered. However, the person keeps asking for help and does not give up. "Because of his persistence," said Jesus, "the person in the house will get up and give him what he needs."

Persistence, sometimes called endurance, is an important character quality not only in your prayer life but in every part of your life.

I meet many people who look back on their lives with regret and say, “Why did I quit? Why did I give up when I had such a good beginning?” One of life’s big mysteries is why bad habits are easier to maintain than good ones.

What Jesus is telling us here is that growing and maturing spiritually is a process that takes time. It therefore takes persistence, patience, and practice. For example, take the act of forgiveness. To forgive someone who has deeply hurt you and to experience God’s forgiveness fully takes time, which requires patience. A willingness to forgive is a good way to begin, but that does not mean it will happen instantly and you can move on.

A wise person said to me, “If you rush forgiveness, you will most likely miss the lesson you are being asked to learn. And you will not truly forgive either.”

There is one more word that begins with the letter “P” that needs to be added to persistence, patience, and practice in our prayer life: “positive.” Make prayer positive. Too many people in their prayers hold on to unhappy thoughts and symptoms. Over and over again, people declare their unhappiness, suffering, sinfulness, and pain. That’s okay to do, but you must also move beyond that. Otherwise, you are only affirming your misery rather than letting it go.

When you let those negative attitudes go, then expect positive results. Jesus ended his teaching on prayer with his disciples on a very positive note. He said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Amen.