

Good Practices for Your Soul: Prayer Mk. 1:35-39; Lk. 18:9-14; Mt. 6:7-13; Lk. 22:39-42 2/21/21

Some of you have heard about the experiment designed by psychologist Daniel Simon in which he showed people a video of players passing a basketball and instructed them to count the number of passes made by those wearing white jerseys. During the video a man in a gorilla suit walks slowly right through the scene! You would think that everyone would see the gorilla, but in fact, only half of the participants saw it! They had been told to focus on the people in white jerseys passing the basketball and that's all they saw. Simon believes that this pattern holds true in real life, as well. We often see only what we are primed to see.

Part of the reason that spiritual practices are important is that they teach us to look beyond what we are used to seeing so we can see what God is up to in our lives and in the world around us. We live in a world that values wealth, power, achievement, and popularity, among other things. Because of that we are conditioned to see those things, to the exclusion of other things that Christian faith teaches us are more important! Love, courage, peace, and justice. We'll be looking at six spiritual practices during Lent, practices which help us see God's world in a different way, beginning this morning with prayer.

There is a lot to say about prayer, but I thought we'd focus today on a couple of the things Jesus teaches us about it. We'll begin in Mark 1.

Jesus was coming off a very busy day in the town of Capernaum. He had preached in the synagogue, where he was interrupted by a man with a demonic spirit, which Jesus cast out of him. That would be enough excitement for me for a whole day, maybe a whole week! But Jesus went on to heal Peter's mother-in-law, and then after sunset, he ministered to sick and demon-possessed people who continued to flock to him. He must have been exhausted. Here's what happened next. ³⁵*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.* ³⁶*And Simon and his companions hunted for him.* ³⁷*When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."* ³⁸*He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."* ³⁹*And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. (Mk. 1:35-39)*

Here, Jesus shows us that prayer is very important to him. After a draining day, he arose before sunrise to get away and pray. I'm guessing if prayer was that important to Jesus, it ought to be important to the rest of us, like Adam reminded us earlier in the service. And Jesus' experience in prayer shows us one of its purposes- guidance. The disciples came to him,

wanting him to go back to Capernaum to the enthusiastic crowds there. It was an open door for more ministry! But Jesus, whose call seems to have been clarified in prayer, says no! Instead, he says he is called to go to other towns and villages to continue his ministry there. By his example, Jesus shows us that prayer is important, and that God will guide us through our prayer. Let's keep going.

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Lk. 18:9-14)

Here, Jesus reminds us that prayer is not about us and how good we think we are. In fact, it's just the reverse. The tax collector, a social outcast who was honest with God about his faults, was the one whose prayer was heard, not the religious man who was too proud to see his sins.

Some people think they have to be perfect or at least very pious in order to be heard by God. Not so, according to Jesus. What is required is that we be honest with God about ourselves, and that we confess our sins humbly to God in prayer. That's one of the reasons we have a Prayer of Confession in our worship services- to remind us of the importance of confessing our sins to God on a regular basis. Honest confession is an important part of prayer according to Jesus. (Although, now that I think about it, Jesus didn't have to spend much time confessing, except maybe to say Peter was kinda driving him crazy at times!) Let's keep going.

⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases (or vain repetitions) as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:7-13)

In a Peanuts comic strip, Peppermint Patty and Marcie are having breakfast together at camp. “The counselor wants you to lead in our

breakfast prayer, sir,” says Marcie. Peppermint Patty prays, “Dear Lord, thank you for these pancakes...Amen!” To which Marcie replies, “No one can accuse you of vain repetitions can they, sir?” “The pancakes were getting cold...” responds Patty.

Charles Schultz, the creator of the Peanuts comic strip, is referencing the scripture we just read. “Vain repetitions” is the practice Jesus warns the disciples about in the language of the King James Bible. And Schultz expected that people would understand that reference when he drew this comic 25 years ago! Things have changed, haven’t they?

But Jesus’ point doesn’t change. Jesus says that the God to whom we pray is like a loving Father, who knows what we need and desires to give us good things. This was unlike the pagan gods of Jesus’ day, who had to be manipulated or sacrificed to in order to squeeze anything good out of them.

Jesus goes on to give them a model for prayer which, of course, we still use today. We could do a whole series of sermons on the Lord’s prayer, but for this morning, let’s just note that it is infused with confidence in the goodness of the Father. So much so that we pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We certainly bring our requests before God- in this case for daily food, forgiveness, and deliverance from persecution- but

we trust that God's will is ultimately best for us and for our world. That is the role of faith in praying, isn't it?

Here's one more passage. It's from very late in Jesus' ministry.

³⁹*(Jesus) came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him.* ⁴⁰*When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial."* ⁴¹*Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed,* ⁴²*"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."* (Lk. 22:39-42) This is Jesus' well-known prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. Again, there is a richness of meaning in this prayer, but let's focus on just two things.

First, it is good to come to God when we are distressed. God welcomes that! And, for a whole range of reasons, many of us have had a lot of being distressed during this pandemic. Bring those concerns to God. Jesus did!

Second is the reminder once again that in prayer we are entrusting our lives and our world to God. Jesus wanted desperately to avoid the horrors of the cross that lay before him, but he trusted God to do what was best for him and the world. "Thy will be done," he prayed.

So, from this brief survey of Jesus' example and teaching, we learn that prayer is important, that it can help to guide us, that humility and

confession are important parts of prayer, that the God to whom we pray has our best interests at heart, and we can express our honest fears and worries to God.

So, how do we get started or re-started? Some people find written prayers to be helpful. There are numerous books of prayers that are available. I've used the Book of Common Prayer, as well as prayers by Eugene Peterson, Stanley Hauerwas, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I've also used prayers from the Psalms. And, there are also lots of prayer blogs on-line, like sacredspace, youversion, and reflections by Richard Rohr. Written prayers can guide us into areas we might avoid or just not think about on our own. And, they can form jumping off points for our personal prayers. In addition, we can pray conversationally, just talking and listening to God. Perhaps we can guide our prayers by including the elements of gratitude, confession, and requests everyday.

We can have set times for prayer- perhaps morning and/or evening. And, we can pray spontaneously. I like this quote about spontaneous prayers by Francis de Sales from the 1500's, "Sprinkle a seasoning of short prayers on your daily living. If you see something beautiful, thank God for it. If you are aware of someone's need, ask God to help...You can toss up many such prayers all day long...Make a habit of it."

The most important thing is to start praying! How will you pray this week? Let's take a few moments in silence so you can reflect on that.