

“Spiritual Awareness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 11, 2019

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 86:1-7

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 11:1-10

A passerby once saw St. Francis tending a garden. He said, “you must have prayed very hard, Francis, for things to grow so well.” Francis said, “yes, and every time I prayed, I picked up my hoe.”¹

We are tempted sometimes to believe that prayer is inaction; and yet, as we hear from Jesus in today’s gospel reading, this is not the kind of prayer that he has in mind. When his disciples ask him to teach them how to pray, he offers them a pretty simple formula: after asking to keep God’s name holy and live out the kingdom life on earth, Jesus’ prayer covers sustenance (give us our daily bread), relationship (forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors), and safety (save us from the time of trial). These are the basics, the essentials of life; thus – as David Lose reminds us – prayer doesn’t need to be complex to be faithful.²

But the unnamed disciple who asked Jesus to teach him how to pray likely wasn’t hoping to learn technique; nor was his intention to get Jesus to institute a prayer that Christians could speak in unison whenever they met together for worship – although there’s nothing wrong with how we’ve come to use the Lord’s Prayer. Instead, the disciple probably wanted to know how to better love God: how to talk with and listen to the divine.

And so, maybe we need to pay some attention not only to the words that Jesus offers them to pray, but also what he teaches us about the way we ought to pray: the how and when and where; not just the what.

First, Jesus speaks to perseverance in prayer; describing it as being like asking for bread from a neighbor late at night. If it is important enough for us to keep asking, then the neighbor will eventually respond; even if only to make us stop. This speaks, I believe, not so much to the character of God – that we will get our way with God if only we are persistent enough – but to the importance of prayer for what we need – things like sustenance, relationship, and safety – rather than what we want; which might be that prayer takes place at convenient times, or

¹ As quoted by Joe McQ, *The Steps We Took*

² David Lose, “Teach Us to Pray”

that it comes about in socially acceptable ways. Persevere in prayer, Jesus seems to be saying, as if it were – and because it is – like your life depended on it.

The second thing that Jesus tells us about prayer is that it is an active exercise – that it involves asking, searching and knocking. Prayer is an act of imagination – seeking to expand the range of solutions that might exist for a problem; it is an expression of trust – calling on us to believe that the door is always open and the opportunity for relationship always exists. Just as we want to give those that we love good things, so does God desire even more to give us every good gift. It is because we trust in this that we pray, even if our prayers appear unanswered. We still trust that God is listening and loving us and all the world.

And third, Jesus teaches us that prayer is not just one thing but many. It can happen in a public place of worship, but also at home or in a garden or on the top of a mountain. It can be done in a group or alone; in the morning or at night or any time in between; it can involve a lot of words or none at all. Jesus knew that when he said to shut yourself into a closet to pray, most of his ancient audience wouldn't have a closet in their one-room homes; so he must have meant that they should do what they could to shut out the distractions of the outside world in order to pray. So, for us, that might mean that we need to turn off the TV or radio, or silence our phones, or light a candle, or kneel or lay down or sit in a different spot if we are going to fully immerse ourselves in prayer.

But Jesus also knew that prayer not only takes place when we are still, or when the world stops around us; because, often the truth is, it does not. As the story about St. Francis helps us to remember, gardens don't get planted by prayer alone, but when what we do – or work, our play, and our interactions with others – is bathed in prayer. Many people – myself included – have discovered they are more likely to pray when their body is in motion – planting or walking or cooking or, sometimes, even cleaning. Trying so hard to be still can sometimes be an invitation for distraction, and we quickly discover how short our attention spans can be.

The eleventh of the 12 Steps says: *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for the knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*

Richard Rohr likens prayer to having an alternative mind; that it represents an altogether different way of processing life. Many of us operate through what he calls our calculating mind: when we look at the world through the lens of our own needs, angers, fears and memories. Prayer and contemplation, on the other hand, allow us to widen our lens and get a better picture of the world. By looking

beyond ourselves, and beyond constantly calculating what we perceive is best for us, we are able to contemplate complex issues such as God, love, suffering and death.³

By using the twin terms of prayer and contemplation, Step 11 emphasizes that there are different settings, occasions and types of prayer. Sometimes, it means we talk to God, but other times, we listen for God to speak to us. When these steps were written, contemplation was not a term used as much as it is today – people were typically not going to yoga classes or taking silent retreats. So, the authors of the Big Book must have had something in mind when they described “conscious contact with God” this way.

Contemplation is that aspect of prayer when we seek God’s will. When Jesus assures us that all prayer is answered, it is because true prayer involves seeking what God wants; which is not always that same as what we – through our calculating minds – might want. Regarding this contemplative aspect of prayer, the Big Book offers these words of guidance: “As we go through the day we pause, when agitated or doubtful, and ask for right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day, ‘thy will be done.’”⁴

This type of active prayer, therefore, is both for the knowledge of God’s will for our lives and for the courage to carry it out. People’s willingness to find God in their own life struggles – whether or not those are addictions – and to let themselves be changed through their prayer life are among the deepest and truest testimonies of obedience to God’s will.

It might seem to us, who are comfortable with religious language about God, that the wording of Step 11 – referring to *God as we understood Him* – is nebulous, or wishy-washy. But a recovering addict’s understanding of God must change what (or who) they organize their life around; what offers meaning and purpose. For an alcoholic, that may be the next time they can drink; for an over-eater, it is food; for a work-a-holic, the project that needs to get done; for a co-dependent, it is the wants or needs of others.

In the initial three steps, those in recovery programs were asked to turn over their lives – their wills – to their understanding of God; even if that only meant that they held out the possibility that some higher power existed. In steps four through ten, addicts then worked to remove the things that were blocking them from relationship with God: resentments, fears, and debts owed to others. Those were

³ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*

⁴ *The Big Book*, vol. 4, p, 87-88

the preparatory steps to number 11, where now – through prayer and meditation – a recovering addict is able to receive the knowledge and power of God’s will for their lives.⁵

Of course, whether or not we have walked these steps, we proclaim as Christ’s followers that God has always had a purpose for our lives. Part of that purpose is highlighted in this step: that we are meant to be in relationship with God who loves us, and therefore we – as recipients of this unwarranted gift – respond by loving God. That response comes to life as we seek to understand and be obedient to God’s will for our lives; which, of course, means that our field of vision will focus not only on our own needs and desires, but on those around us as well.

Still, this is not the final step; “there is,” as the Big Book puts it, “action and more action.” Spiritual awareness is not the sole, nor the final, goal. We are meant not only to love God, but also to love others as ourselves. Step 12 will mean putting our prayers into action in yet another way; using the truth about how we have recovered (or been saved) from our particular challenges to impact the lives of others.

Sometimes, we are tempted to pray conditional prayers: to bargain with God, making “if...then” promises; thinking that we can or need to manipulate God in order to get what we want.⁶ But, as the spiritual principles behind the 12 Steps – and the very words of Jesus – teach us, we sometimes are not very good at distinguishing between what we want and what – in accordance with God’s will – we really need.

In other words, our prayers reveal something about what we – the pray-ers – believe that God is like: is the door open; is our knocking being heard; or are we just searching in vain? Is God merciful? Forgiving? Ordering the universe? Wanting us to be happy? Whether we pray – and what we pray – may just reveal how we understand God. AMEN.

⁵ Joe McQ, *The Steps We Took*

⁶ Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson, “Praying with Persistence”