

July 29th, 2007

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Luke 11:1-13

9th Sunday After Pentecost

Years ago attending first year theology classes at Emmanuel College I wanted to improve my prayer life so I bought a book by Karl Rahner entitled “On Prayer”. It satisfied a philosophy that I’ve used for a long time – “when in doubt, buy a book!” or “Salvation by book alone, whether read or unread!” Showing this book to my colleagues one of the mature students responded – “you don’t need to read a book telling you about prayer, you just pray!”

Prayer is not so much about technique as it is about practice he was trying to say. For him the Nike philosophy fits prayer: “Just Do It!”

Still, a challenge for many of us is to move our prayer life beyond prayers only at the meal table or when we’re in trouble.

Are there techniques, approaches, understandings, that we can learn that will deepen our prayer/devotional life?

The first disciples acknowledged their need to learn how to pray. Seeing Jesus at prayer in different times and places and situations they ask him – “Lord, teach us to pray.” The desire on the lips of the first disciples is a good one for us to have who gather today – “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Let us recognize firstly that it is God who prays in us, who gives us the words to pray. Prayer is first of all the grace of God working in us, enabling us to listen to God in our lives. It is not me praying but God praying in and through me, God working in me.

Thomas Green in his book “When the Well Runs Dry” says: “The art of praying, as we grow, is really the art of learning to waste time gracefully – to be simply the clay in the hands of the potter. This may sound easy – too easy to be true – but is really the most difficult thing we ever learn to do. This is the real reason why so few of us ever come, in this life, to the full experience of God’s love for us.”

Prayer is the ability to allow ourselves to be clay in the hands of the potter. God molding, making, remaking us. Imagine God as the potter, you and I are the clay. God lovingly shaping and reshaping us, refining us, a tweak here and there, a major overhaul sometimes. Prayer invites us to really know deep within that God is the potter and we are the clay; being aware of God’s hands shaping and reshaping us out of love. AH!!!

In my journey I am learning that we have a deep tradition of prayer and prayer techniques in our Judaeo-Christian heritage. In the Roman Catholic tradition the day was lived by the discipline of prayer. “Pray without ceasing.” In the morning a prayer of thanksgiving to greet the new day; prayer time during the day; prayer at the end of the day giving thanks for the day, for the people whose lives have touched ours that day; giving thanks for the blessings of the day; raising up prayers for others whose pain and struggles we have become aware of. Lord, teach us to pray; to set aside time for prayer, for peace, for quiet, for listening to God speaking in our depths.

I recall two elderly women at St. Paul’s United Church in Warkworth who would call each other every morning. Grace’s eyes weren’t good so Mary would read to her over the phone the daily reading from “The Upper Room” devotional guide. They would hear the scripture, the reflection on the scripture and would offer the prayer together. It was an important part of their morning, putting their day into focus, focusing on the love of God.

One of the things I am planning to do is to set aside a space in our condo for prayer. In that space I will put candles, the Bible, devotional readings, music, and pictures, art, what have been called icons –visual symbols that lead us more deeply into an awareness of the love of God, the presence of God. A sanctuary; just like this sanctuary has icons, visible symbols that help us experience the love of God, the presence of God.

The Arts can be a wonderful window into prayer; into an awareness of the presence of God.

There may be some truth in my colleagues words – “you don’t read about prayer, you pray”but I have also found that there are approaches and techniques that I have read about or experienced or learned from others that are helping my prayer life.

In one of our small groups in Warkworth we studied book by the Buddhist, Thich Nhat Han. His practice of mindfulness, of silence, of being aware of our breathing, breathing in God’s love and breathing out our fears and anxieties; of being led in guided prayer with lots of time for silence and lots of images, were helpful prayer techniques.

Seekers after God have used mantras, repeating a phrase over and over, as a way to center into God's love, God's presence. I've tried mantras like: "Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Saviour; Have mercy upon me."..... or "I calm myself. I smile. I dwell in the present moment. It is a beautiful moment." Each phrase is offered with our breathing in or out.
Lord, teach us to pray!

The other day on my way to work I walked prayerfully and I recognized it as a gift. I was given the ability to be present with myself and my surroundings; to be in the moment, to notice things around me, to be aware of an inner peace and clarity; to take in whatever came without judgement but with appreciation, thanksgiving, gratitude. My thinking, critical mind, shut off. I had no need to be anywhere else than where I was. I would call that a time of prayer. There were no words involved. My head wasn't bowed nor my hands clasped in the sanctuary, but I was in a state of prayer.
Lord, teach us to pray!

Sue Monk Kidd has this to say in her book, "Where the Heart Waits":
"And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here, while I pray.'"
It was the eve of Jesus' death. He was on the verge of being arrested. The hour was late, and the crisis surrounding the disciples had drained them inside and out. Jesus took them to a garden to wait through the long night. Did he ask them to pray? To plead his case? No. Sit down and rest, he said. I'll pray.
Sit here while I pray. I looked at the candles glowing in a quiet cluster on the altar and considered those words. Suddenly they became Christ's invitation not only to the disciples but to me. He wanted me to sit while he prayed.
What could this mean? I kept wondering. The notion was remote to me. Was the Spirit of Christ present and active within us, praying for us? Could it be that the prayer of waiting is being still and believing that Christ prays within us? I was thunderstruck by the idea.
I recalled a particular verse in the Bible, one that had always seen cryptic to me. Back home after church I looked it up. "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:25-26)

Dear God, I thought. You do pray in me while I wait. You pray with sighs too deep for words.

Spiritual writer Maggie Ross pursues this idea: “We delude ourselves that we pray: he only prays. Our act we call prayer is yielding to him and his prayer springing from the molten core of this love within us.”

To take upon ourselves the posture of sitting while Jesus prays brings us into the most grace-ful mystery of the waiting experience that there is: that of opening to the intimate presence of the Spirit praying within, penetrating, speaking, and holding us in our darkness.

Again the emphasis isn't on what we're doing but on what God is doing. Ultimately, we don't heal, transform, or create ourselves. We posture ourselves in ways that allow God to heal, transform, and create us.

The posture of sitting while Jesus prays reminds us that the Spirit is active and speaking. Our part is to learn to sit, yielding to God's activity in us, opening ourselves to divine prayer, listening to the silent words.”

The first disciples asked Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

And Jesus replied: “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your Kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

For we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Amen. Thanks be to God!