

May 24, 2009

“Lord, Teach Us To Pray”

Easter 7/Year B

John 17:6-19

It has been said that asking someone the question – “How’s your prayer life?” is just about as sensitive as asking “How’s your sex life?!”

“None of your business” may be the answer that comes to mind.

Every Sunday when we gather to worship at least once in the service we hear the words – “Let us pray.”

Praying together is something we do as God’s people.

“Let us pray” is a radical invitation. It is a statement of faith, of belief.

It invites us into an intimacy with God.

“Let us pray” assumes that there is a God beyond us who hears our prayers, who we can offer the deepest needs of our heart to.

“Let us pray” proclaims an alternative vision for the world – it declares that this is God’s world – “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

In today’s reading from John’s gospel the setting is thought to be the Garden of Gethsemane.

We find Jesus in prayer to his Father.

As he prepares to face death and to no longer be bodily present to his disciples, he prays for them.

We hear Jesus’ deep love and compassion for his disciples.

He asks God the Father to protect them, watch over them.

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me”

Jesus prays to the Father that the disciples will not feel as orphans, that they will continue to know that they are watched over and loved by God.

The power of prayer.

Sometimes we say to another person, especially if they are going through difficulties, - “I will keep you in my thoughts and prayers. I am praying for you.”

It is a great comfort to know that others are praying for us.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays for his disciples whom he loves and who will have difficult times ahead.

Yesterday in our Men's Circle we talked about male sexuality. Some of the questions we reflected on were – “Where did we learn about male sexuality? What messages did we receive about male sexuality from our fathers? What messages did we receive about female sexuality from our mothers?” The same questions could be asked about our prayer life – “Where did we learn about prayer? What did we learn about prayer from our father? From our mother? For many of us our prayer life began with grace before meals – “For what we are about to receive, dear Lord, make us truly thankful.” Perhaps we sang grace – “For health and strength and daily food we give you thanks, O Lord.” Maybe we learned at camp that saying grace and offering prayer could be fun as we sang “O, the Lord is good to me; and so I thank the Lord; for giving me the things I need, the sun and the rain and the apple seed, the Lord is good to me, Johnny Appleseed, Amen.” Camping can be a very important place for children and youth to develop their spiritual life and their prayer life.

Jane Vennard in her book “A Praying Congregation – The Art of Teaching Spiritual Practice” says – “My own memories of learning to pray are filled with contradictions. My parents did not pray at home, or if they did, they did not pray in front of me or tell me that they were praying. They were, however, faithful churchgoers, and I was taken to church at an early age.

But my church did not seem to be about prayer.

I do not remember receiving instructions on how to pray, but I did receive in church a powerful early image of prayer. Our minister was a large handsome man who had contracted polio as a teenager and who propelled himself around on old wooden crutches. When he prayed during the church service and everyone else's heads were bowed, I watched him stand in the pulpit, his arms outstretched, his face turned upward. He had a look of such joy on his face that I knew I wanted that experience for myself. The longing for a prayer life came alive for me. But, at the same time, this wonderful man prayed in poetic language, the words rolling out with such resonance and beauty that I thought I could never do what he was doing. I was just a little girl. I did not know all those big words. So at the same time that my desire stirred, I believed that prayer was beyond me.”

One of the strengths of our congregation is the opportunities we have to deepen our spiritual/prayer life. A number of us recently participated in “The Week of Guided Prayer”; Linda offers courses on the Spiritual Disciplines. We have a healing prayer service. A number of small groups meet for prayer.

A number of us offer our gift of prayer to our church community.

Thanks be to God.

Sometimes we need help with our prayer life.

When I was studying theology at Emmanuel College I was interested in deepening my prayer life/spiritual life. I bought a book by Karl Rahner entitled "On Prayer". I remember one of my colleagues chiding me about reading this book on prayer – "You don't read about prayer, you just pray."

There is some truth in that, but developing prayer disciplines can help us deepen our prayer life.

For Roman Catholics – icons, the rosary, prayer beads, help in the discipline of prayer.

I know people who set up in their living space a quiet area with candles, music, religious pictures, a comfortable chair, and use it as a special place for prayer.

A form of praying I learned in one of my continuing education courses is 'mantra's – brief prayers that are repeated. One of them that I use is "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, have mercy upon me." Repeating this prayer helps calm me and focus me.

Another prayer tradition passed on through many generations is prayer at the beginning of the day asking for God's help and presence as we live out our responsibilities that day and then a prayer at the end of the day as we reflect back on what has taken place.

Sometimes we need to pray that God will help us to pray.

Lord, teach us to pray.

Lord, help me in my prayer life, help me to wait upon your Spirit; show me who and what I should pray for. Help me through prayer to rest in your loving kindness and to listen for your still, small voice.

The other week Pat and I spent time with my parents at a cottage.

My mother has Alzheimer's.

In our time together Mom would frequently recite a poem or the verse of a hymn.

One of them is hymn #562 from the Blue Hymn Book:

"Day is dying in the west,
Heaven is touching earth with rest.
Wait and worship while the night,
Sets her evening lamps alight,
Through all the sky."

In the “Golden Book of Prayer” I found the rest of this hymn/prayer:

“Lord of life, beneath the dome
Of the universe, Thy home,
Gather us, who seek Thy face
To the fold of Thy embrace,
For Thou art nigh.

While the deepening shadows fall,
Heart of love, enfolding all,
Through the glory and the grace
Of the stars that veil Thy face,
Our hearts ascend.

When forever from our sight
Pass the stars, the day, the night,
Lord of Angels, on our eyes,
Let eternal morning rise,
And shadows end.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts!
Heaven and earth are full of Thee;
Heaven and earth are praising Thee,
O Lord most high.”

One of the ways my parent’s spend time together is reading poetry to each other and singing hymns. These are prayers.

For many of us the hymns of our faith are prayers that we offer up to God.

In our reading from John’s gospel this morning Jesus is praying his goodbyes. For three and a half years he has intimately shared this journey with the disciples. The journey has been full of peaks and valleys; joys and sorrows; successes and failures. They have stayed together through it all. There have been painful learnings, there has been betrayal, unfaithfulness, jealousy. Soon, Jesus will no longer be with them in body. A radical change is coming; Jesus will no longer be there to show them the way. Jesus prays to his Father his goodbyes to the disciples. Jesus in pray asks God the Father to protect the disciples who were entrusted to him. Just as Jesus has guarded and cared for them, so now he asks God the Father to guard and care for them.

A number of us recently have suffered a bereavement, the death of a loved one. I hope that as you gathered with loved ones, as you kept vigil at the hospital, as you offered up your intimate prayers to God, as you prepared the prayers and the hymns and the readings and the words for the funeral, as you gathered to worship God, I hope that in your grieving, in your goodbyes, you have felt the deep love of God, the deep love of Jesus who prays for us – “Holy Father, protect them in your name.”

Lord you pray for us. Teach us to pray.

Amen. Thanks be to God!