

Psalm 25:1-10
Matthew 14:13-23

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Third Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2006

IT DOES A BODY GOOD

Now when Jesus heard this [That his cousin, John the Baptist, had been killed], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself...
And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.
When evening came, he was there alone....
Matthew 14:13, 23

Jesus' day was not so much encapsulated by prayer, as it was a life lived in the spirit of prayer, breathing God in and out. He lived a prayer, an unrelenting conversation of the soul with God through action, word, and presence.

There are many ways to pray. Silent prayer, spoken prayer, solitary, corporate. We can pray running, walking, fasting, swimming, biking, standing, seated, lying, arms raised, hands open, hands clasped, with tent-like fingers, public, private. Music can be a prayer; as all sacred music is. That's what hymns are, anthems and solos. Performance has the capacity for prayer, and listening to sacred song as we allow it to speak for us to God, to lift what lies within. Psalms are prayers, especially when sung or spoken out loud, which was their original setting. Creating art can be a prayer as it looks into the heart of life and nature. Writing has the capacity for intimate prayer. Journaling, particularly is a wonderful way to pray because it searches the inward self. Listening, deep listening is a key to intercessory prayer, that is, praying for others. Embrace is prayer in thanksgiving mode, in gratitude. Preparing a meal is an act of prayer. Love making is an act of prayer.

Praying may be the only dialogue in which we cannot bring ourselves to tell a lie. Huck Finn said that: "You can't pray and lie—I've found that out." Like the boy whose turn it was to say grace at the family table—remember the family at table together . . . ? They waited and waited, then eyes started opening a slit to see if he was OK. He shot a glance at Mom, then at Dad, then his sister, and back to Mom. Finally he said, squinting, "But if I thank God for the broccoli, He'll know that I'm lying."

There's a lot we can learn from our children about prayer. If you've ever overheard a child praying, it sounds like a conversation. Much of our reticence about prayer, especially public prayer, is not so much knowing what to say as how to address God. Queen Victoria once disclosed why her favorite Prime Minister was Disraeli and not his great rival, Gladstone. Gladstone, she said, addressed her as if she was a public meeting, while her "dear Dizzie" (as she affectionately called him) addressed her as a person. I suspect God wishes we'd do that more. Imagine you're talking to your best friend.

Donald Peattie never had much stock in institutional religion. After graduating with high honors from Harvard he went on to become a distinguished natural scientist. Faith exhibited itself in an impersonal scientific-intellectual way in what he called The Great Ally in the cosmos. He wrote:

In my 56th year I became desperately ill. The doctors told my wife to be a brave woman and give me up. But hers is a fighting courage and, yes, a praying courage. More, she brought me word that my friend the Neapolitan tailor was praying daily for me, and that the devout waitress in the little restaurant near the hospital included me always in her prayers. I did not question, in my gratitude to them, what weight these petitions could have in the scales that balanced life with death for me. Humbly, I discovered a reverence I had lacked. . . .

Through a long convalescence in that top room of the hospital . . . I discovered how healing are the unspoken prayers of gratitude. Besides my friends, the tailor and the waitress, I had many others to thank. And my thanks, too, went higher.

In recent years some wonderful studies have shown how prayer very positively affects *the one who prays*. A regular discipline of prayer, even for a few minutes each day, has been shown to inhibit stress markedly, to promote better, healthier, longer, and more productive lives, and the effects registered in wellbeing are virtually instantaneous. Now I'm not suggesting that prayer be a substitute for exercise, though it may achieve many of the same results. But for our pragmatic age, 5-10 minutes makes for a perfect supplement to the 1 -1½ hours it takes to dress, go the basement or drive to the gym, exercise, shower, and change. Indeed it seems a very economical supplement, if such a thing can be said in good conscience of time spent with God and one's inmost self.

Scientists are now taking the study of prayer to the next level, to its influence on those *who are prayed for*. Duke University Medical Center, for instance, in a study of persons facing the same illness, compared the effects different forms of intervention on four groups who separately were treated by intercessory prayer, mental healing (using positive thinking techniques), therapeutic touch, and alternative medical intervention. Those prayed for by a religiously diverse people scattered across the world, outshone the other groups in progress made. Perhaps a hindrance to prayer is the perception that the other half of the conversation is silence, and we're often uncomfortable with silence. But silence, stillness, can so often be rich with satisfaction. Henry and Dana Thomas's capture such a moment in *Living Biographies*. Emerson had traveled to Scotland to meet with the historian Thomas Carlisle, "hermit of Craigenputtock." Carlisle welcomed his young American guest, gave him pipe and a pouch of tobacco, and took one himself. They eased themselves into two armchairs, and then in perfect silence, so the story goes, the two puffed away at their pipes until bedtime, whereupon they shook hands and congratulated each other on the fruitful evening they had spent together, and departed.

We've all experienced the intimacy of silence in the company of another. A boat ride, a long car ride, a fishing trip, a long walk, with pockets of silence, in the company of a loved one or friend, a concert, an hour on the back porch as daylight ebbs, two fingers hooked in silent companionship, communion, a hike through virgin forest, two silent readers in the room each with a good book, being in dialogue with great art. A few weeks ago I went to the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and stood in awe of two paintings by Rembrandt, one the astonishing self portrait which must rank among the best of all time, the other a masterful depiction of Lucretia Borgia at the point of suicide. Her face captures such a range of intense emotion that I came away stunned, shaking my head, asking, how does he do that? How *did* he capture that final annihilation of the human spirit, that wrenching mix of emotions on a painted face? All these packets of silence have something of the timbre and attitude of prayer. Prayer has

the capacity to become rich, even richer than all of these things. Silence is not nothingness.

Just last week, you may recall, we spoke of the young Simone Weil who found in her time with God in prayer not so much answers as a still and silent presence that gifted her with a changed disposition toward the thing she prayed for. Indeed, one of the extraordinary things about prayer is that, when we pray fervently (not trivially—“God please give me a Hummer like the Sampson’s next door”) we become what we pray for. When we take to heart the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “give us this day our daily bread,” it is hard, if the prayer is heartfelt, not to be more conscious of those who have bread—by which is meant ‘daily necessities’—and those who do not. As Ted Jennings, a professor at Emory, once said, “If I offer up this prayer, how can I live in contradiction with it.

Robert McCracken called intercessory prayer, that is, praying for the needs of others, “the best arbiter of all differences.” By that he meant that when we pray for someone who spitefully uses us, we break down the barrier we feel toward them. When you pray to be relieved of envy or jealousy, the prayer becomes its own healing salve. If there are people whom you dislike or shun, praying for them helps disassemble the barriers between you. Something sinks away. When I was in grade school, whenever enmity boiled over and I got into a fight with another boy, afterward we inevitably became best of friends. A new respect emerged. I don’t recommend the means, but it was an experience rekindled with an old familiarity in subsequent years when I discovered prayer to resolve conflict, and found that it worked so well. As Paul said when you embrace your enemy, you “heap burning coals on his head” (Romans 12:20). It doesn’t mean you punish your enemy unmercifully. On the contrary. The expression came from an old Egyptian custom of carrying a pan of burning charcoal on the head in public as a sign of one’s penitence. It was a good thing.

In Luther’s judgment, faith is prayer, and nothing but prayer.” Faith is a life lived in conversation with God. Our virtuous actions, intentions, thoughts, are all part of a prayerful dialogue with God, whether spoken or unspoken.

As you can, I encourage you to speak the words of prayer out loud. The ancients always prayed, even read this way. Some years ago I looked at every instance of praying and reading throughout the Bible and not one was silent prayer or reading. Our silent prayer would be as odd to them as their spoken reading is today to us. Still, I recommend it, not for tradition’s sake but because the ancients knew something our minds discover in the experience: forming and speaking the words gives life to the prayer, it gives it wings and an intimacy that satisfies something in our desire for real conversation. If you’re in the car alone and want to pray but feel awkward, put on the headset, or hold the phone, no one will give you a second glance.

Prayer, said Peter Marshall, is not the sending of night messages, but conversations with God. I sense God must often feel like a parent when the kids go off to college, not wanting to intrude, but hoping daily for a call. Give God a daily call. Make God’s day.

Amen.