

Partnering with God
Psalm 139; Luke 5:15-16, 6:12-13
March 1, 2009

When a nightclub opened on Main Street, the only church in a small town organized an all-night prayer meeting. The members asked God to burn down the club. Within a few minutes, lightning struck the club, and it burned to the ground. The owner sued the church, which denied responsibility.

After hearing both sides, the judge said, “It seems that wherever the guilt may lie, the tavern keeper is the one who really believes in prayer, while the church does not.”ⁱ

Prayer is one of the gifts of God given to us. During this season of Lent we will probe the depths of prayer. In these times of loss, change, and uncertainty, prayer is an anchor which can ground us and stabilize us. When fears feel overwhelming and anxiety threatens to overtake us, prayer provides a safe harbor where we can feel the protection of God’s presence.

Prayer was one of the hallmarks of Jesus’ life and ministry. As a Jew, Jesus experienced prayer as part of his daily ritual. Twice a day Jews said the *Shema*, “Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). A prayer known as the Eighteen Benedictions was said by Jews three times a day. The weekly Sabbath day of rest from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday would have been formative to Jesus’ prayer and faith life.

The four Gospels record some of Jesus’ prayers. This morning we’ve heard of times when prayer was “Jesus’ regular response to situations of crisis and decision.”ⁱⁱ Luke records six instances of Jesus at prayer. He prayed at the reception of baptism (3:21). He withdrew from the crowds seeking healing in order to pray in the solitude of the desert (5:16). He prayed before the selection of the twelve disciples chosen to receive his teachings and continue his mission (6:12). Once while in the presence of the disciples, he questioned them about his identity and Peter confessed Jesus as Lord (9:18-20). He went to the mountaintop to pray and experienced the transfiguration (9:28-29). He prayed before teaching his disciples the Lord’s Prayer (11:1).

Prayer was a regular part of Jesus’ everyday rhythm. Prayer was his connection to God; it kept him in tune with God’s desire for his life. There are many descriptions of prayer. One definition of prayer is “the conversation of the heart with God.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Green defines prayer as “an *opening* of the heart and mind to God.”^{iv} Theologian Marjorie Suchocki says prayer is “an openness to God’s own creative energy, and to the good that God intends for us. It is also an offering back to God, giving God the gift of ourselves.”^v

Our prayer life is greatly determined by our image of God. Some of our prayer habits indicate our belief that we are the all-powerful ones and God is our servant. For example, we sometimes imagine God to be a great genie in Aladdin's bottle, with prayer being the magic rubbing that draws the genie forth to do our bidding. This image attributes great power to God, but that power is controlled by the one who rubs the bottle. In other words, we rub the magic bottle in order to get our wishes granted.

A similar image is that of God as our divine secretary, to whom we dictate a daily memo with the expectation that our requests will be translated into actions.

Another image of God is that of a king holding court, who has the power to grant petitions. The king is aware of the petitioner's situation, but refrains from acting until properly asked. The king has the power to share health, peace, and plenty, but will do so only if proper protocol is followed. This image traps us into pleasing God or flattering God in order to curry God's favor and have our requests met.

One young man desiring to change his life sat in the church sanctuary for a while. He took out a piece of paper and began writing a long list of things he promised to change in his life, signed his name at the bottom, placed it on the altar, and sat down again.

As he sat there, however, he began to sense the voice of God speaking softly in his own soul. The more he listened, the more he heard God saying, "You've done it wrong. Go back there, get the piece of paper, and tear it up. Then I'll give you another instruction."

So the young man walked up to the altar and did as the Lord told him. He sat down and waited for the next instruction. It did not happen immediately, but finally the message came through. The Lord said, very gently, "Now take a piece of paper and sign your name to it at the bottom and let me fill in all the rest!"

God is not a genie or secretary or king or cosmic bellhop ready to jump and meet all of our requests. Instead, God is a partner in relationship who desires to be in conversation with us, to shape and enhance the lives God has given us, and to participate with us in the transformation of the world. This relationship understanding of God offers a very different understanding of prayer than simply a grocery list of wants and desires. "Prayer is God's invitation to us to be willing partners in the great dance of bringing a world into being that reflects something of God's character."^{vi}

I believe that this understanding of prayer is comparable to Jesus' understanding of prayer. The Son desired to be a partner with the Father in bringing into being a world reflective of the character of God. Thus, Jesus knew that he had to spend time listening to and being in relationship with God in order to have clarity about God's design. This is why Jesus frequently withdrew to a

deserted place to pray or went alone to the mountaintop to pray. Jesus was intentional about stilling the cacophony of voices that begged for attention to their own needs and fulfillment of personal agendas. He went into the quiet so that he could open his heart and mind to God.

Bishop Krister Stendahl tells the story of a little boy who kept following his mother around the house, from one room to another, until she said, "What is it that you want?" The lad replied, "Nothing, I just want to be where you are." That, suggests Stendahl, is prayer. We simply want to be where God is so that we can participate in the life of God.

Human relationships are fed by regular times spent together. "Prayer is like having a date with God," says Trappist monk and author Thomas Keating. "Regular periods of prayer let us get acquainted with Christ and God, not unlike the way we might phone someone who has impressed us or attracted us to their goodness. It's the same way in forming a relationship with God. We have to hang out together."^{vii}

What a privilege and a gift that God offers to us, to be in relationship and to be a part of what God is doing in the world. In prayer as we ponder the world and the people God loves, we discover how we might partner in loving that world and those people, too. Teresa of Avila said, "The important thing (in prayer) is not to think much but to love much." Percy Ainsworth said, "The end of prayer is not to win concessions from Almighty Power, but to have communion with Almighty Love."^{viii} The end of prayer is communion with Almighty Love.

This Lenten season I invite you to spend some time with God, sharing from the depths of your heart and listening for the movement of God in your life, in the life of others, and in the world around us. Make some dates to be open to the energy of Almighty Love present around you and within you. Accept the invitation to be a partner in the great dance of bringing into the world a reflection of God's character.

Almighty Love, you graciously offer the goodness of your presence to us. In Jesus Christ we see your love made visible. Your Holy Spirit etches your love upon our hearts, drawing us into fellowship with you. We are richly blessed by your presence, known in many ways.

We are honored to be invited to participate in your work of blessing others and the world through prayer. We long for a deeper connection to you, that your energies might abound creating transformation in our lives and in other lives.

We seek your peacemaking energies on behalf of nations suffering from violence and warfare, remembering Mexico, the Congo, Zimbabwe, Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. Work through leaders who seek to forge peace

with justice. Use aid workers, that they might be channels of your grace offering life-giving water, food, health care, and housing.

We seek your courage and faith for those who have been uprooted from jobs and homes, for those who desperately yearn for relief from economic devastation. We pray for wisdom for those in places of power making difficult decisions about priorities and use of resources. Make us aware of your desire for the well-being of all.

Rest your healing touch upon those who ache from illness. Shine your light into souls darkened by depression. Awaken hope in one who has given up. Be a companion to those who are lonely. We lift into your healing presence...

We unite your hearts with yours, Almighty Love. Infuse us with your vision and show us your will for our lives. Use us as instruments of your work that your people might know your love. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Herb Miller, *Connecting with God: 14 Ways Churches Can Help People Grow Spiritually* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 67-68.

ⁱⁱ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1975), pp. 20-21. Quoted by Robert J. Karris, *Prayer and the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), p. 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ From the catechism of the former German Evangelical Church, quoted by John Indermark, *Traveling the Prayer Paths of Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), p. 18.

^{iv} Thomas H. Green, S.J., *Opening to God: A Guide to Prayer* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1977), p. 31.

^v Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1996), p. 28.

^{vi} Ibid, p. 29.

^{vii} *Homiletics Online*, retrieved February 28, 2009, no reference cited.

^{viii} Percy C. Ainsworth, "Petition and Communion," *Weavings*, XXII:4, July/August 2007, p. 36.

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