

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Called to Pray"
Dr. J. Dent

July 24, 2011

Many of us were taught to pray as young children in the following format: Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless...mom, dad, etc. I am not here to criticize or tell you that how you learned to pray is wrong. I am not here to tell you that I am an expert in prayer. I am a fellow struggler in this important area of life, and I want to try to help you and me to find some new strategies for prayer, praying and not giving up.

The child's prayer above that I learned had me confront death at a young age without me knowing it. This prayer may have originated during those times in human history where plagues, food supplies, wars and other disasters would make life uncertain and death a distinct possibility. It was good to learn a way to bless others at the end of the day. It was good to entrust myself to the Lord no matter what will happen. These are good things.

Prayer, however, often is thought of as asking, requesting, and knocking on heaven's door. This is true and the Bible often refers to prayer in these ways. However, these are not the only way the Lord teaches us to pray in the Bible. We have to understand that prayer is at least as dynamic and multi-faceted as human conversation is. In conversations, we debate, we listen, we analyze, we encourage, we show gratitude, we try to communicate love, we blow up, we are harsh, we are sad, we tell jokes, we are downtrodden and sometimes speechless. And perhaps you can think of other aspects of conversation.

So prayer can certainly take on any of these qualities. If you look at David's prayers in the Psalms, you will find praise, petition (asking for one's own needs), confession (honesty about one's failures), intercession (asking for other's needs), anger outbursts, cries for revenge, love songs, educational, inspirational and spiritual discourse. And I could go on.

My point is we need to re-vision our prayer life. We can continue to do what we have always done, and add to it a sense of the dynamic of a conversational relationship. Everyone has their sense of what is at the core of the Christian faith. I strongly believe that there must elements of a

conversational relationship with God, otherwise we have a religion that is impersonal, demanding and not very fulfilling. Christianity can be portrayed in the media as an unthinking, demanding religion with little joy and little life. And to be fair to the media, some Christians live this way, which partly proves their point. But we don't have to be like that.

We have many choices. In Paul's seminal letter to Rome, he tells us a lot. In chapter 8, which we often read at funerals, he reminds us about prayer. So let's spend a few minutes there.

Verse 26 starts with the words, "in the same" or "likewise" in other translations. This makes us look a little bit further up above this verse and brings us back to conversation last week about hope. We need hope, (vv. 24-25) because there is so much in this life that drains it from us. In fact, Paul says all creation is broken (vv. 21-22) and is looking forward to that time in history when all will be restored, that heaven time, that new time. Meanwhile we live in this life, with all its brokenness. We live in this time where we do not know how to pray.

So God reassures us that when we do not know what to pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans, with communication patterns deeper than words, that express our heart toward God, and better. So the conversation between the members of the Trinity deepens with the context of every human life, certainly of every believer.

So if God is already interceding for us, why should we pray? Won't God do a better job, and we simply receive the benefit? Of course, this argument is something like the following: if God knows what I need before I pray for it, why pray? And if I know that God knows that I know that, why pray at all?

This line of logic does not take into account the relational understanding of our Christian faith. We talk to God, even if he knows in advance because we are in relationship with him. We talk to our parents, even if they know what we will say in advance, because they know us so well. We talk to our spouses, even if they can predict word for word what we will say because they know us so well. It's not about knowledge, or foreknowledge, but about expressing ourselves, listening to the other, and receiving the benefit of both those processes.

And we pray because the Bible also teaches us that God is for us. Like a good parent, he may not always give us exactly what we want, but he does listen and care for us in profound ways. Paul says he does all things for our good. Sometimes we cannot see that good. We only see the tragedy, the dissatisfaction, the illness, the loss.

But when we see the perspective of eternity, we may better be able to see that God is leading the whole process, right from the beginning, he knew us before we were born, he knows us now, he will always know us. God begins, works through our whole lives and brings us into the next. He is there protecting all who call on his name.

So if God is for us, Paul writes, who can be against us? Of course, there may be many in our lives who we perceive are against us, or at least not helping us. The devil and his demons, the broken institutions in which many of us live and work, the abuse of power and so on. But what Paul means is that any individual or corporate power pales in comparison to the power and person of God.

In the end, Paul simply says that nothing can separate from God's love in Jesus Christ. So this should be supremely reassuring. Why then is it not so for some of us?

Because we know we can be separating ourselves from God and God's in Jesus Christ. We can choose to argue ourselves out of our spiritual life back to our thoughts and tapes recorded in our heads with many voices, that I am not worthy, or good enough for this. Or perhaps I am wasting my time in this spiritual stuff. Yet this is not a waste, quite the contrary.

This is the moment to consider how much God loves you, how much God has already done to show you personally God's love for you. The question is how we will respond to such love, just like in any relationship. Will we talk to this person? Will we get to know them better? Will we spend the rest of our lives with this God? Or will we go another way? Will we choose to not make time for this one? Will we give God the cold shoulder? I don't think any of us intentionally takes this position. But it happens. And when we realize we have neglected a relationship for a long time, we can go and give it the time it needs or not. That's what prayer is, giving that relationship with God the time it needs.

Prayer is also reflecting on what Paul writes here, so that it is not simply intellectualized, but taken in, deeply into who we are. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul was convinced of this. But are we?

It takes time to be convinced of truths such as this. Knowing I am loved by God or any other person in a deep way takes time to digest, and to internalize, but makes a great impact upon who we are. God's confidence in us is different than self-confidence. One depends on our own actions and abilities, the other depends on God. And we all know who has more resources and creativity.

This type of meditation or reflection on a truth of Scripture is prayer. We need to see prayer as more than Yosemite Sam's in Bugs Bunny. "Say yer prayers, varmit." It is more than a rote or religious part of who we are, it is the vital personal connection to God that we all need. And as I said at the beginning, I am very much still learning. It's not about how well or how much you pray in public.

And we as a church need to give a higher place to prayer, in our existing groups and in new groups which will focus specifically on this activity of praying together. If you would like to be a part of this new thing, please tell me or one of the elders. I haven't worked out the activity. I simply know God is calling us to pray, personally and corporately in the church.

Let us pray.