

"Practice Makes Perfect"

II Samuel 7:18-22; Romans 1:7-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 12, 2014 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

There's a story about a tourist coming up to a New York City policeman and asking, "Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?" To which the cop soberly replies, "practice, practice, practice."

Well, I think this advice applies to our prayer life as well. You've got to practice, practice, practice. And you've got to experience it directly, too. You can't know it by reading about it or by hearing others talk about it. You have to be directly engaged with it first-hand and on a regular basis.

Jesus certainly practiced prayer. The Gospels lead us to believe that he didn't have all that much to say about it, yet they tell us that it was truly second nature to him. Jesus taught his disciples to pray a short and simple prayer. He told them that eloquence and repetition added nothing. What is more important, he replied, is that it come from the heart and be sincere. Jesus said to ask directly for what you need and to have confidence that God will hear you.

In our Old Testament lesson we find a prayer attributed to King David. It expresses his thankfulness for God's promise to establish him and his descendants as a royal family. It's neither David's first prayer, nor would it be his last prayer, either. He knew the source of his blessings and to whom he owed his power. To express his gratitude in prayer was not at all unusual.

Paul, too, was practiced in prayer. There's a narrative from Acts which tells how he and Silas were going to the synagogue, a place of prayer. Even though the two men were seized and put into prison, it says they "were praying and singing hymns to God."

This incident is a prime example of how faith triumphs over affliction and here it truly sustains them during a trying imprisonment. While we don't know the actual words of their prayers, it is more likely that they were ones of praise rather than asking for deliverance. While they are saved from their immediate fate, but it is their trust in God which stands out to us as a testimony to what they believe.

Paul and Silas maintain their prayers of thanksgiving even when most would say they have nothing to be thankful for. The other prisoners are moved by what they do and they listen. Prayer, it appears, was fully ingrained in the lives of these early missionaries. They didn't have to ask themselves "Should we pray?" They just did it.

In the scriptures we see instances of how not to pray, like the Pharisees who do it publicly on the street corners, but the greater number of prayers in the Bible are unselfish ones like those of Paul and Silas. They show us an intimacy of sincere communication with God and provide us a model for our own prayers. They also remind us that prayer is not some option we have available to us, but that it is central to the development and expression of our faith. We can

be very learned about the scriptures but, unless they move us to direct involvement with our Lord, we still stand on the outside looking in.

Some years back, and in another church I served, we had a basketful of names on our altar table one summer. This represented every child who attended Vacation Church School which, at that time, had just ended. Each slip identified an attendee from one of several churches who put on the school jointly, or a visitor from the neighborhood. I invited everyone to take a slip out of the basket that Sunday and to pray for that particular youngster during the remainder of the summer.

I have to admit that I was hoping that my slip would have the name of one of our children. That's partly because it's always nice when you can connect a name and a face. Then, too, we naturally have strong feelings of affection and concern for our own. We already love and care for them.

Well, my draw was a youngster from the Disciples of Christ congregation up the street. I heard my inner voice saying "Darn. I wish it could have been one of our kids." Then I argued right back with myself, "A promise is a promise. This is the child you have been given. Carry through with your commitment."

Jesus said it is easy to care for someone you love, even the heathen do that; it's harder to pray for someone you don't know or perhaps don't like. When we only pray for those already in the circle of our affection we are denied a certain opportunity to practice our prayer life, to give without any expectation of return.

That summer it did make me feel closer to little Eddie. None of the children were told the identities of their prayer partners. He never realized that I was keeping him in my daily prayer, but I knew. I believe that lifting him up to God each day did benefit him and made me feel good as well.

The next summer I intentionally sought him out at Bible School and discovered that he was really quite delightful. I laughed to myself at how reluctant I was when I first picked out his name. Sometimes we have to be prodded to overcome the natural resistance in ourselves that we might broaden our caring to others in God's family.

Prayer is a disciplined way of caring about someone close to us. Importantly, it also allows us to show concern for others with whom we have kinship through being part of the human family. This latter kind of prayer, if sincere, requires a greater effort than prayer which more readily serves our vested interests. It's easy to pray for someone you love, someone you know, but harder to pray for a sister or brother you have yet to meet... or may never meet.

In our Epistle for today Paul says this in writing to the church in Rome: "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers...."

Did Paul know all of those faithful believers personally? Most unlikely. After all, he planted churches in many locales, and then had only infrequent contact with them due to distance

and limited means of communication. On the other hand, he didn't have to know them individually because he knew about them. They were part of his regular circle of concern.

Prayer in its fullest sense is not so much something we do, but something we live. And like anything else, the more we practice it, the more it will become a regular part of us, like breathing in and breathing out. We grow into our human potential by exercising our spirituality. It's not something anyone else can do for us. It has nothing to do with age or education or race or wealth. We all have the innate capability of realizing our closeness with God, and prayer is the doorway to that relationship.

It was Arthur Rubenstein, the pianist, who once said, "If I don't practice for one day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, my family knows it. If I don't practice for three days, my public knows it."

Prayer is powerful, a sustaining part of our lives, yet it is not something learned casually. To know its full potential takes the habit of months and years. Only then does it come as natural as breathing as we integrate it fully with our every waking hour. The highest level of prayer is not sporadic petitioning, which most of us do, but a continuing conversation entered into with God.

This doesn't happen without disciplined commitment or by saying, "I'll get to that tomorrow." We have to learn to open ourselves before God. When you know prayer in that way, you understand it to be effective even when things do not turn out in the way that you might want. Prayer is more than asking and receiving. Prayer is finding God's presence with us and realizing the love which will not let us go alone.

So if we want to increase our prayer life, what is it we have to do? That's an awareness we don't want to lose sight of. If you don't use this channel provided us, you lose it. If you never begin it, you never find it.