

## "And When You Pray..."

Psalm 50:7-15; Matthew 6:7-15

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 27, 2017 – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

To the Hebrew people God was not remote, but imminently involved with human life. Not only was the Lord acknowledged as creator of the universe, lifted up and far away, but also near and accessible. Our forbearers in faith weren't as primitive as we might think them to be. They well understood aspects of spiritual life which we struggle with today.

So how did they reach to God? What was their secret? No secret at all. They prayed. People today might question the validity of prayer, but those we meet in the scriptures didn't ask that question. The answer was too obvious.

In our passage for the morning Jesus didn't approach his disciples by saying "If you pray...". He said, "**When** you pray..." Prayer was a part of life, just like getting up in the morning or going to bed at night. There was no doubt and, apparently, no hesitancy. As God provided the world with changing seasons, needed rain and sun to make crops grow, the rise and fall of the tides, the green meadows and soaring birds, so God provided people with the gift of prayer.

Yet, don't we sometimes question whether prayer does any good? Don't we really wonder if God hears us? If prayer is really just a hollow practice that we hold onto, then admittedly it has lost much of its power for us.

Today there is much questioning about whether there even is a God. Or if there is such a deity, what accounts for such a seeming absence in our world. Some go as far as saying that there's an eternal void in modern life, as if God has intentionally withdrawn. Actually, I think God is as close to us now as to the Hebrew people two millennia ago, but that something has been lost. If we don't feel the Lord's presence, could the problem be more with us than with God?

So, even as church people, we can easily fall into the thinking of the modern world. We learn to speak its secular language and adopt its skepticism. We tend to distrust everything we can't scientifically prove. We hear those voices which say, "What's the use of praying?" and wonder if it's true.

Archbishop William Temple, who was a humble man of faith, was one who believed wholeheartedly in the power of prayer. "When we pray," said Temple, "miracles occur." "Couldn't what you call 'miracles' be nothing more than mere coincidence?" a skeptic asked. "Yes, I suppose so," said the Archbishop, "but I have noticed that when I pray coincidences occur in my life, and when I don't pray the coincidences stop."

Few of us pray as often, as completely, or as trustingly as we might. We may pray just to be "on the safe side" rather than out of the conviction that prayer can actually change lives. If we

only give it half its due, should we be surprised then that prayer might not leave us more convinced of its worth?

When you pray, says Jesus, don't be like those who only do it for show. They love to make a big display of it so that others may see them and admire how pious they are. Instead, pray sincerely and from the heart. It isn't the length of a prayer that's important nor its eloquence. God knows what you need, so it is better to pray directly and with whatever words come naturally.

According to Jesus it's not all that hard to pray. To illustrate this, he gave them a simple prayer as an example, a prayer originally spoken in the Aramaic language of the common people: Our Father in heaven, holy is your name. May your Kingdom come upon the earth. May what you will be done here, as it surely is in heaven. Give us today the food we need to live. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have done wrong to us. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the power of evil.

Jesus said it is as easy as that. But don't be misled by simplicity, for there is great power in a relatively few words offered from the heart. And don't worry, God won't laugh at your efforts. God doesn't care what language you use or the style in which it's presented. Sincerity is the key element.

Let's look closer at this prayer he gave us. It starts with the words "Our Father." This is certainly an intimate way to address the Almighty, and it represents Jesus' own close relationship to God. Father, for Jesus, meant the one who loves, forgives, and is generous in providing. It signifies one so close that it is like conversing with a holy parent.

"Hallowed be your name." To hallow means to regard as holy, so the prayer opens in such a way that calls for God to be honored as the true God, the Holy One above all others.

"May your kingdom come." That is to say "May God's reign and dominion advance" and God's rule become more recognized by all. To recognize God's sovereignty is what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

"May your will be done." Here now is an intention, an action, on our part. Just as God's will is already reality in heaven, so this petition calls for us to put into practice right here what is pleasing to the Lord.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Bread is necessary for survival and this request would have been clear to the common people among whom Jesus lived and worked. This request asks God for the minimum necessary for survival. Bread does not magically appear, so it may serve as well as a model for those who have food to share with those who need it.

"Forgive give us our debts." Now to better understand this, take "debts" out of the context of money. Insert "sin" instead. Forgive us our sins. Now sins may be understood here in terms of a debt owed to God, a debt beyond our capacity to repay. We pray, therefore, to ask God for forgiveness. Yet, to ask of God what we are not willing to do for others, is simply hypocrisy. Forgiveness bring us into closer relationship, whether it is between ourselves and God or between ourselves and others.

“Lead us not into temptation; deliver us from evil.” This petition asks that we not be brought into a time of testing, where pressures might overwhelm our faith, but that we be saved from those powers that would seek to undo us. Yet, because everything cannot be avoided, we must prepare and strengthen ourselves for whatever may come our way.

“For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory.” You’ll note that this part of the prayer isn’t in Matthew’s text and is probably derived from verses found in I Chronicles and appended later. Yet, it is such an appropriate ending, few of us would be willing to drop these words from the prayer we know so well and have said for so long.

Jesus makes it clear that, in God’s own way, there will be a response to whatever is asked. It may not come for a long while; it may not come in the manner expected; and you may have to work hard to discern it but each prayer is heard. Of that, there is no doubt, by Jesus’ own assurance.

Garth Brooks, the country singer, does a song about a fellow who was once in love with a girl he hoped to marry. Each night he prayed to God to bring them together. It never came to be and later he marries another. One night, though, he runs into that old flame unexpectedly and after they struggle to find anything to talk about in common, he concludes:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers  
Remember when you're talking to the Man upstairs  
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean  
he don't care.  
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayer.

Not exactly standard theological language and its grammar is a bit off, but a good faith statement nonetheless. Even silence may be an answer to some prayers. Sometimes what we think is best for us is really not the best at all.

Prayer can be engaged in anytime, anywhere. The most spiritual people I know are those whose lives are really a kind of continuing prayer, an open and ongoing dialogue with God. In this way the whole of one’s life is offered to God for guidance, not just in moments of crisis, and concern for others is not never far from our awareness.

I’m reminded here of an old Jewish tale of two rabbis, one of whom was successful and the other one was not. One day their two wives were mending their husband’s trousers. It seems that one was repairing the seat of the trousers while the other was patching the knees. Do you catch its meaning?

So this morning I encourage you to pray, to turn to it regularly, and to do so in the manner of Jesus. And may all of **your** pants wear out in the right places.