

Sermon for Sunday May 4, 2008

Prayer

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All week I've been looking at the subject of prayer knowing that was my theme for today's service. I was really looking at three questions. What is prayer? What did Jesus teach us about prayer? How should we pray? We each have our own way of praying and our own understanding of prayer. I realized that there are no easy answers to questions about prayer but I'll share with you what I've learned and thought about so far.

First of all, throughout the stories of Jesus are references to him going off to pray. We might think to ourselves, what a faithful man, he would often go off by himself, away from the disciples and the other demands of his life and pray. And then we remember, as read in our passage this morning how Jesus taught the disciples to pray. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is angry that the disciples were unable to stay awake in the time of prayer. And so as followers of Christ, we see prayer as an important part of our lives of faith as well.

To understand why Jesus felt it was so important to pray, I'd like to share with you what I learned about Jewish prayer while studying in Israel, for of course we know that Jesus was Jewish and his understanding and practice of prayer would have come from what he had been taught himself.

In the introduction of the Siddur or Jewish prayer book is the following explanation of prayer. It describes prayer as "a timeless need". It says that when we think of the word "prayer" we tend to think of our own needs and requests, and the list can be endless. "Heal me, help me, make me smarter, fix my marriage, help me pass this test, let me score..." So rather than thinking of prayer as something we do to get what we want the Talmud describes the synonym for human as "the creature that prays". The Talmud teaches that even the word for "life sustaining soul" is synonymous with prayer. It says that what is man but his soul, for it is the soul that differentiates us from all other living creatures. And what is man's soul but his innermost longing, whatever matters to him most? **Prayer then is not a list of requests. It is an introspective process, a clarifying, refining process of discovering what one is, what one should be, and how to achieve the transformation. Indeed, the commandment to pray is expressed by the Torah as a service of the heart, not of the mouth.**

According to the Talmud, prayer's function is to judge, to differentiate, to clarify, to decide. Thus, prayer is the soul's yearning to define what truly matters and to ignore the trivialities that often masquerade as essential. It goes on to say that people always question the need for prayer – does not God know our

requirements without being reminded? Of course God does, God knows them better than we do. If prayer were intended only to inform God of our desires and deficiencies it would be unnecessary. Its true purpose is to raise the level of the supplicants by helping them develop true perceptions of life so that they can become worthy of God's blessing. This is the function of the evaluating, decision-making process of "Teffillah" prayer. Prayer is a process of self-evaluation, self-judgement; a process of removing oneself from the tumult of life to a little corner of truth.

What is the earliest experience of prayer that you can recall? The first prayer I remember learning was "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." This prayer has its origin in the Jewish prayer book as well. These words were then followed by a number of supplications for family and friends and pets, God bless so and so and so on. Then I can recall times when I prayed to God when I was frightened especially at night when it was dark. As an older child I can remember praying fervently to be accepted in to the school band. Minutes ticked by as student after student was called down to the main office to sign up. Just as the bell rang for dismissal the office called and I was called to go sign up. I felt God had answered my prayer. As an adult, I can think of different occasions of praying in times of distress or fear as well and sometimes I felt frustrated and angry that God didn't seem to be answering my prayers. I think of last year when I among many, prayed through most of the night when we heard of my son's teammate being gravely injured by an errant hockey puck at his neighbourhood park. At Nicholas's funeral his parents spoke of the 1000's of tears of sadness they had shed in grief over his untimely and tragic death yet also spoke of the 1000's of tears of joy that were shed by the half dozen or so families whose children were recipients of some of Nicholas' organs. Each family was praying for their child. Were their prayers answered?

Any of us who pray can at times struggle with whether or not our prayers are "answered". But in light of the understanding of prayer in the Jewish context in which Jesus was raised. I see prayer somewhat differently; to understand it as not a means of getting what we want but more as a constant connection and relationship between God and ourselves. No matter what the outcome, we can learn and grow in our understanding of ourselves and God. We often think of our prayers as effecting or changing God's actions in our lives, when in fact prayer is meant to effect us by helping us to see where we are and where we are heading.

The Shema is a very famous and important part of the prayers of the Jewish people. It is said to be the first words they hear and learn as an infant and the last words to pass their lips before they die. We recognize the Shema from the time when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment and he responded with the words of the Shema based on Deuteronomy 6. "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words

that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

When a Jewish man prays he puts on his prayer shawl and binds little boxes with the words of the scripture inside by leather straps on his hands and forehead. Typically there are three times of Jewish prayer a day. Again, if we think as prayer in the Jewish understanding of the soul yearning to define what truly matters, then to be praying is a daily task and one that is necessary if we want to avoid being misled or distracted by less essential things. Is it any surprise then that when we have crisis in our lives, that even if we are not accustomed to prayer that we do in fact pray? Yet how important it is that we do pray regularly so that we might in fact live our lives in truth and according to the ways we are called by God to live. And what better way to be mindful of God’s presence at work in our lives than to be in consistent and regular communication with God.

One book that I read on prayer suggested that a good discipline for daily prayer is to focus on one prayer or scripture and repeat it daily for a month.