

“Thresholds of Prayer”

Rev. David Gregory

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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost



First reading

Luke 11:1-4, 9-13 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

One day he was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, “Master, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.” So he said, “When you pray, say ‘Father, reveal who you are. Set the world right. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.’”

Here’s what I’m saying: ‘Ask and you’ll get; seek and you’ll find; knock and the door will open.’ Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we’re in. If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing—you’re at least decent to your own children. And don’t you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask?”

Second reading

David Whyte in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

It may be that the ability to know the necessity for help; to know how to look for that help and then most importantly, how to ask for it, is one of the primary transformative dynamics that allows us to emancipate ourselves into each new epoch of our lives. . . . Our greatest vulnerability is the very door through which we must pass in order to open the next horizon of our lives.

Every human epoch has its own blessings and its challenges. In periodic fits of nostalgia, we’re often tempted to refer to the past as the “good old days.” Remember when you could go to the corner store and buy a cookie for a nickel? Those were the days. Well, that was also when you could die of an abscessed tooth, when your race determined which bathroom you could use, and when a woman’s place was in the home obeying her husband. It’s easy for us these days to talk about what’s wrong with the post-modern world. We are rightly focused on things like climate change, the evils of racism, justice for migrating peoples, and the condition of our public discourse. There is plenty for us to be concerned about and plenty of work to be done for change. Technology has taken us over, and some of it is good and some of it is bad.

One of the really good things about the times in which we're living is information. When you want to know something, you type a few words into a Google box and off you go. So in preparation for today's message I wanted to know how many people pray, and not just any people. I wanted to know how many mainline Protestants in the United States pray. The answer to that question is that 54% of mainline Protestants say that they pray daily. Another 23% say that they pray weekly. These numbers aren't a lot different from the statistics for the population in general. Evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics and Mormons all pray more than we do. The unaffiliated pray far less. So as we sit here in our sanctuary this morning we could say that statistically, where prayer is concerned, we are about average. But the real question for me isn't how much or how often we pray, but how and why we pray. When we use the word *pray*, what do we mean? Does it include written prayers that we say together? Does it include meditation? Are we talking about the words we say, or does sitting in silence count?

The truth is, prayer means different things to different people. One of the things that Jesus's followers recognized in him was his deep practice of prayer. Apparently, it was such an intense focus that they were extremely curious, and they wanted him to teach them how; so today's gospel reading is one of those episodes where he taught them. The Lord's Prayer, as we are used to thinking of it, was never intended as a ceremonial prayer to be recited together. The gospels don't agree on the exact wording anyhow. As a kid, I couldn't help but notice that the Methodists said "trespasses," the Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ said "debts," the Catholics stopped at "deliver us from evil," and the Baptists and the Quakers didn't say the prayer at all. Some have called the Lord's Prayer the "model prayer." In other words, "do it something like this."

In the earliest times after the crucifixion, when many followers fled to the Egyptian deserts to escape the hand of Empire, the early monastics, the ascetics, and the Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced forms of prayer that were experiential. There were no rote theological formulas, no trinitarian prescriptions—just a non-dual communion with the divine. This was prayer before systematic theology, before there was a thing called "church," before that church got married to Empire. Once that happened, at least in the West, all bets were off. So, as suspicious as we are of Empire here at Community Congregational Church, as trepidatious as we are about systematic theology or church practice and traditional liturgies, and as steeped as we are in the practices of many spiritual paths, it would stand to reason that for us, prayer can mean many things.

It would include silence. It would include meditation of many styles. It would include clear expressions of gratitude and concern, which is reflected in the rhythm of our Sunday practices. On Mondays in the Seminar Room it is "Love and Healing" for individuals whose names are collected in a book and in our consciousness each week. It would include the kind of centering that goes on in some of our Thursday meditations. It would include practices around the labyrinth. For me it includes the thoughts and sometimes the words that come to me on morning walks or hikes, or even when I'm driving down the highway (with my eyes open!). This might be the time for you to simply ask yourself, "What is prayer for me?" To which we might hear Jesus say "That's good. Do it that way." Just do it. Not as a "should" or "ought." Not as a churchy thing. Not as something to check off your daily "to do" list, but rather like breathing—just the rhythm of prolonged contact with the divine, the kind that leaves me more connected than when I started, the kind that ultimately changes my life, alters my course, heals me and those around me, and ultimately heals the world.

Prayer in whatever form it takes is as natural as breathing. I would imagine that a hundred percent of us in this room today are breathing. But we may not all be praying. Sometimes we pray consciously, much like when we do conscious breathing in yoga. Other times, like when we let the breath return to its normal involuntary patterns, we can let the prayer do the same. The biggest issue in prayer is not whether we understand it, or whether we do it, but rather whether we are willing to remove the biggest post-modern block to its practice. The doorway to prayer, according to David Whyte, is *vulnerability*. He says “. . . the necessity for help; to know how to look for that help and then most importantly the ability to ask for it, is one of the primary transformative dynamics” that allows us to move across every threshold of our lives “in order to open the next horizon of our lives.” Self-sufficiency is baked into our American Protestant ethic. Identity, self-awareness, and self-esteem rely on our ability to "stand on our own two feet." And yet, as contemplative people, we can often sense places of great need within our souls and bodies, and we are usually ill prepared to admit to those needs.

There is no community without vulnerability. If we think we are without need, then community has no role in our lives. So together, in community, each time we gather, and even when we don't, we bring our vulnerabilities, and we learn to entrust them to each other, knowing that love will always answer in a way that is just right for us. “Teach us to pray,” is really another way of saying “teach us to be vulnerable.” When we are vulnerable, we move past the prayers of Empire, out into the desert where we wait, and listen, and cry out when we need to. We can take the words of the Apostle when he says “Pray without ceasing.” What he's really saying is *never cease to be vulnerable*. In this very moment, what is it that you need? If you can articulate that, you are praying. *We are praying.*

