

Sermon, September 18, 2022

1 Timothy 2:1-7  
How Should We Pray?"

In the eleventh chapter of Luke one of the disciples says to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples". The John he is referring to, of course, is John the Baptist. Jesus replies, offering what we call the Lord's Prayer, which contains various elements of prayer, such as, praise, petition, forgiveness, and guidance. In today's reading from 1st Timothy, we can add elements, such as, supplication, intercession, and thanksgiving.

Supplication is really quite the same thing as petition. It is asking God for something. An extreme example would be Janis Joplin's request, "O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." But Jesus suggests something more modest - "Give us this day our daily bread". Clearly, he is asking that our prayers of supplication should focus on the necessities of life - not on things that enhance our wealth. Such necessities of life would include not only our daily bread, i.e., the food we need for our bodies, but also for healing when our bodies don't work the way they are supposed to.

The Lord's Prayer starts with words of praise - "hallowed by thy name". I remember years ago when I was a part of the Charismatic Movement there was great emphasis placed on praise, and it certainly doesn't hurt - the Psalms are chock full of words of praise. But prayers for forgiveness, guidance, and thanksgiving probably take precedence.

Prayers for forgiveness are an essential part of our spirituality and can also be an important part of our mental stability. It helps to release us from the burdens of our past, giving us a clean slate, so to speak. And prayers of forgiveness include not only requests for God to forgive us, but, also, for the strength and the love necessary to forgive others who have hurt us in one way or another.

Which brings us to prayers of intercession- that is, prayers aimed towards the wellbeing of others. We pray for the healing of others, for God's help in meeting their needs, for the strength, the courage, and the faith they need to meet their challenges, or reach their particular goals. Intercessory Prayer has always been a sticking point between us Protestants and Roman Catholics who pray to the saints, as well as the Virgin Mary. The argument is that we have an open channel to God, and don't need the saints to intercede. But personally, I see no harm in doing so. We intercede for others all the time - what can it hurt for those already in heaven to do the same?

Prayers of intercession also include requests for guidance - something we all need from time to time as individuals, families, communities, a nation, and as a church. We ask the Lord, to point us in the directions we need to go, both for our own wellbeing, and for the fulfillment of God's will. It has been said that prayer is the means by which we participate in the ways of God.

Of course, prayers of thanksgiving are an essential part of our spiritual life. In some forms of Native American spirituality there is little emphasis on praise, believing that God's ego is not such that he needs to be constantly told how great he is, but that thanksgiving for all the blessings of this life is paramount.

Obviously, prayer comes in many forms - that there is no one right way to pray. Over the years I've had people come to me and ask how to pray. I always say to just be honest. Pour your heart out to God, even if you are angry with him. Some years ago, in my first congregation, I had a woman come to me who had been the victim of a terrible sexual assault and left for dead in a ditch along a deserted road. In one of our conversations, she broke down and asked - where was God that night? I asked her if she had ever asked God that very question in prayer - if she had ever expressed her anger towards God. She said she could never do such a thing, but a week later she told me she had done just that - that she had unloaded on God with both barrels - and now she felt a certain weight lifted from her shoulders.

If you are angry with God, why hide it. He already knows and wants us to be released from our burdens. Again, the Psalms are full of words of praise, but they are also full of words of lamentation. Be honest with your feelings in prayer.

I've mentioned in the past that prayer is a two-way street. There is the prayer that speaks, and there is the prayer that listens. Soren Kierkegaard once insisted that the ultimate goal of prayer is to become silent before God. You can call it contemplative prayer, centering prayer, or meditation. It requires discipline and learning how to listen not only with the ears and mind, but with the heart as well.

Now, you might ask if there is any one prayer that is most effective, and I would say yes. I once read about a medieval monk who only prayed one prayer in his lifetime but prayed it many times both day and night; and he led a pretty miraculous life. It's the same prayer that Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's a very small prayer - only four words - "Thy - Will - Be - Done"! Perhaps the most powerful expression of faith. Letting go - not trying to tell God when or how to answer the prayer - just placing your trust in him. After all, why would we even bother to pray if we did not trust? Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of love and mercy, we do praise you, and we do offer thanksgiving for the blessings of this life. For friends and family, for this beautiful planet that we live on and all the creatures that inhabit it, for the sun, the moon, and the stars, we thank you for them all. Above all we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ, and for the Church you called into being. Guide us as a congregation that we may fulfill your will for us.

We thank you, Lord, that we can communicate with you, and you with us. Teach us and help us to pray and to listen. Speak to us at the very core of our being that we may know you more deeply, and hear our intercessions for others, especially those in need, and those in need of healing... We remember to you... Amen.