

PRAYER

[PRAYER THEME: 2 CHRONICLES 20:1-17, PSALM 121, EPHESIANS 6:10-20 & MATTHEW 6:5-15]

Introduction:

There is the story about the person who asked the following question of a wise teacher: “Sir, what do you and your monks practice?” the wise man replied: “we sit, we walk, we eat.” The questioner continued: “but sir, everyone sits, walks and eats,” and the wise man told him, “When we sit, we *know* we are sitting. When we walk, we *know* we are walking. When we eat, we *know* we are eating.”

Mindfulness:

Paul instructs the Ephesians to “Pray at all times in the spirit”. Most of the time we are lost in the past or carried away by future projects and concerns. Most of us are plagued by what a friend of mine refers to as, destination syndrome. We say, “Wait until I finish school and get my degree, and then I will be really alive.” But when we obtain it, we say, “I have to wait until I have a job to be really alive.” After the job, we need a car, a house. We are not capable of being alive in the present moment. Perhaps we try to live vicariously through our children, convincing ourselves that when our children have ‘made’ it, then we can be truly alive.

We always postpone being alive to the future, we don’t know exactly when. It’s possible we will never be truly alive in our entire life. This kind of living in past and future is often characterized by worry and fear. Two of the most crippling emotions. Perhaps we need to listen to these emotional voices, but not at the expense of the present moment! John Wesley felt so strongly that worry should not be part of the Christian’s life that he frequently refers to worry as a sin for which we should repent! So how do we move from being worried about past and future, to a place where we are mindful of the present and in a place of praying continually?

Discipline:

I think Paul gives us a clue in the imagery he uses when he writes to the Ephesians. Paul uses the image of a Roman soldier to illustrate his metaphor of the armor of God. I am sure that many of us will know that *discipline* was one of the major secrets to the Roman army's success in battle. So what implications does discipline have for prayer?

Henri Nouwen asserts that: "The paradox of prayer is that it asks for serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either." Philip Yancey recounts the struggles of a missionary doctor in Ecuador. The doctor said that even after three years he still makes childish mistakes in grammar and can only express haltingly what his brain processes fluently. Yes, he has made progress, but continues to struggle with the nuances of meaning. If the doctor or anybody else wants fluency in another language, we must set aside time, and keep working at it despite the awkward feelings of a beginner. Nearly everything worthwhile – learning a sport, mastering the guitar, improving your computer skills, developing our prayer lives – involves the same process.

I take cold comfort from the disciples who, after following Jesus for months, had no clue and had to ask, "Teach us to pray". It is interesting that we generally use the Lord's Prayer in public settings. Yet in the gospel reading today, Jesus instructs the disciples to pray the prayer he teaches on their own in their bedrooms behind closed doors. I am not going to give a piece by piece commentary on the Lord's Prayer, there isn't time for that.

However, I do want to encourage us to use set forms of prayer as a daily discipline! Ron Nicholson in his sermon last week highlighted the central place of the Eucharist in Anglican Worship. He went on to say that some of the consequences of this central role of the Eucharist result in fewer people praying the offices of Morning and Evening prayer. When last did you come and join us on a Wednesday evening for prayer or pray through the office by yourself? Coming from a Methodist background, I have found set forms of prayer both enriching and comforting. Enriching in that they have developed my prayer vocabulary! Comforting in that when I run out of words or know not what to say I can rest in the prayers of others!

Conclusion:

Perhaps you struggle with set forms of prayer. Maybe you feel that our prayers for Sunday worship do not come close to helping you express what you are feeling. Consider the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel to the members of his synagogue who complained that the words of the liturgy did not express what they felt. He told them that it was not that the liturgy should express what they feel, but rather that they should learn to feel what the liturgy expressed. Recited faithfully, great thoughts put into great words can do that for us. Memorization can be to our hunger for God what practicing a musical instrument is for performance. It can be singing the scales of the soul.

Whether you choose to use the prayer offices in the APB or not, I encourage you to become or continue to be disciplined in your prayer life. “The greatest battle we face in our lives as Christians is our daily appointment with God, if we fail there, we tend to fail everywhere.”