

## **Prayer: Its Problems and Possibilities**

### **3. Seeking God's Face**

*Psalm 27; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church  
Greensboro, North Carolina

March 17, 2019

*"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

If you are a particularly observant worshiper and if you are one of those people (May their tribe increase!) who looks for thematic and linguistic connections in the various parts of the worship service, then you might just notice this morning repeated references in our call to worship, in our scripture lessons, and in our hymns to the "face of God." In biblical usage the "face of God" is an idiom for the presence of God — so older translations of the Bible encouraging us to "seek God's face" are actually encouraging us to seek out and celebrate God's very presence with us. Newer versions of the Bible sometimes makes this change in translation.

This morning as we continue our sermon series for Lent on prayer, I want to emphasize prayer as seeking and celebrating God's presence and proximity. Ordinarily this is not how prayer is commonly understood and this is one of the problems in enabling people to develop a more vital life of prayer. To the contrary, believers and non-believers alike often think that to pray is to make a verbal or silent request of God or, as Webster puts it, to address God in adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. The editors of Webster must have attended Sunday school in their earlier days where they learned this ancient rubric of A.C.T.S. as a way of remembering the elements of prayer — adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. But this conception of prayer, while not incorrect, is certainly far from complete. If the first purpose of prayer is to know God, as I suggested last week, then our knowledge is not likely to improve if we do all of the talking. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication certainly have their place in prayer, but prayer is also about investing our time and focusing our attention on the one who is the object of our desire, the one we long better to know. Consequently, silence, meditation and listening are, therefore, as essential as speaking, so let us ask, how much listening do you do in prayer? How much focused attention is there on God, on God's purposes and his presence?

Back in the 1980's Dan Rather, the CBS News correspondent, was doing an interview with Mother Teresa. He asked her at one point something, "What do you say to God when you pray?" Her simple answer was, "I don't say anything, I just listen." After Rather regained his composure and cleared his throat he pressed on, "Well, what does God say to you when you

pray?" "Oh, he doesn't say anything either. He just listens. And if you don't understand this I can't explain it to you."

Prayer, you see, is not a monologue. If it is to be a mutual exchange and a reciprocal communion that leads to a greater knowledge of God, and a deeper communion and fellowship with God then it needs to be a sacred dialogue, a dialogue of love and attention and companionship where words may have only limited importance.

One reason why I think so many people struggle with prayer and resist the practice of prayer privately and publicly is because they fear that they simply do not have the right words for such a task, as if it is the words that matter. I love the quote from George Buttrick's book on prayer which I included in today's bulletin.

*"Moses once heard a shepherd praying, "O God, show me where Thou art, that I may become thy servant. I will clean thy shoes, and comb thy hair, and sew thy clothes and fetch thee milk." Moses rebuked him: "God is a spirit, and needs not such gross ministrations..." Thereupon the shepherd rent his clothes in dismay and fled to the desert. Then Moses heard a voice form heaven, "O Moses, wherefore have you driven away my servant?...I regard not the words that are spoken, but the heart that offers them."*

—Jalal-uddin Rumi, retold by George Buttrick in *Prayer* —

And yet, we continue to place an inordinate amount of emphasis on the words spoken, even if spoken silently. Yet the actual words are of secondary importance. One ancient definition of prayer is simply "keeping the company with God." You can keep company with someone you know and love and never say a word. In fact the more you know and love and understand the other the more you can resort to the language of the heart. All of this is not to say that our words do not matter, but rather that they may not be as important as we sometimes assume.

To be sure we are of all God's creatures the ones who have been gifted with the capacity to voice our concerns, to articulate our praise, our joys, our fears, and our desires. The gift of language is a holy and precious attribute of humanity. One aspect of our being created in God's image may be that we share with our God the ability to articulate what is in our hearts or on our minds. But remember our speaking to God does not inform God of things that God does not already know, as some people who pray seem to assume. Jesus reminded his disciples that "Your father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6:8) On the other hand our words may help us more than they help our God. They help us to get in touch with and to share what is uppermost in our thoughts and what is primary in our hearts.

In his book Reformed Spirituality Howard Rice speaks of the importance of solitude and quiet as we seek and celebrate God's presence. He even quotes John Calvin who wrote that "the best prayers are sometimes unspoken." Rice goes on to say that the Puritans spoke of both "extraordinary prayer" and "ordinary prayer" — the latter taking place as set times during the

day but the former, the extraordinary variety consisting of meditation and mental focus, not so much through the use of words as through focused attention on God throughout the day.

Now all of this was a new revelation for me as I undertook this study of prayer because most of us in the Reformed tradition, from John Calvin on down through the Puritans to the people like us here today, have emphasized linguistic precision and the beauty of language. We are not very adept ordinarily at spontaneity or intuition or unstructured spirituality. That makes us nervous because we can not control it. We prefer always to be in control and thus we have thus historically focused upon the Word and the words. And yet, John Calvin had some surprising things to say about prayer in his chapter on prayer in his Institutes of the Christian Religion which is one of his longest and most stimulating sections, Calvin also gets at this notion that I am referring to this morning when he writes that “Prayer is none other than an expanding of our heart in the presence of God.” Prayer is not just telling God what we want or wish but it is opening ourselves fully to God’s presence and allowing God’s spirit to flow in us and over us and through us. To be sure this requires a certain amount of boldness, honesty, vulnerability and trust, but only as we do this does our relationship with the Holy One become real and personal and transformational.

And what does it look like when a person reaches this level of prayer, when an individual learns to seek and celebrate God’s face at all time and in all seasons. I don’t think that person becomes some kind of religious or spiritual fanatic, some strange and aloof mystic. I think rather that such a person becomes his or her real and natural and better self. I think we become what God intended us to be. I believe that such a person becomes a friend of God and a co-worker with God. And the image that always comes to my mind of such a person is Rep Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof,” who carries on a continuing companionship and conversation with his Lord. He is not artificially pious but rather delightful and engaging. And in all he does, whether at home, at work, in the synagogue or in the village, he revels in God’s company and companionship — laughing, questioning, arguing, complaining — but most of all delighting in his unseen Lord. Clearly Rep Tevye is God’s friend as well as his servant.

Even as a young child I found myself wondering about the passage I read this morning from 1 Thessalonians where Paul admonishes his readers to “pray without ceasing.” Another passage in Romans exhorts us to “pray constantly.” (Romans 12:12) I thought to myself, how could a person possibly do that? Not only that, why would one even want to do that. If we prayed without ceasing, 24/7, we would never be able to do the things God charges us to do, would we? But you see, I was taking this verse with a kind of wooden literalism. What is more, I conceived of prayer only as our communication to God. The only way we can possibly pray without ceasing is by allowing all of our life to be a prayer, to look for and celebrate God’s presence in all circumstances and situations of life, to keep company with God day by day and moment by moment, and not merely when we speak but when we listen, when we learn, and when we love in God’s company.

A few years ago, I had one of those seeming coincidental moments which later are considered God acting anonymously. June 28, 1776 is recognized and celebrated in South

Carolina, in Charleston, and on Sullivan's Island where we live as Carolina Day. The colonial forces defeated the British who were trying to take the vital port of Charleston which would give them really control of the whole region. The victory at Ft. Moultrie, down the street from our house, occurred six days before the colonist issued the Declaration of Independence. So, for many South Carolinians this date of June 28 is actually their Independence Day.

At any rate, Carolina Day is commemorated with parades, bands playing and patriotic speeches downtown on the battery at White Point Gardens and out at Fort Moultries. One-year Father James Parker, a local (and married!) Catholic priest and personal friend was offering a prayer for the day. I had been researching this subject of prayer in preparation for a study and Father Parker introduced his prayer with these words: "Let us pray. Let us consciously place ourselves in God's presence."

Yes, I thought to myself, that's it. And this is what I had come to believe about prayer, and this is the essence of my message today. Prayer is not just about our speaking, but it is also about consciously placing ourselves in God's presence. When we do this, we journey with God as friend with friend through all the events and circumstances of life. In doing so we do in fact pray without ceasing for we seek and celebrate God's face in all the supposed random events of life.

So, don't worry about your words spoken in prayer. They will come in time because companions on a journey learn soon enough how to communicate if that is what both parties desire. That is for sure God's great desire and hopefully ours as well.

Let me just say in conclusion that perhaps the most helpful and insightful book I have read in my own prayer pilgrimage is a publication by a friend of mine and perhaps of this congregation. Leighton Ford, he has written a provocative and biographical book entitled The Attentive Life (Discovering God's Presence in All Things.) Dr. Ford reveals how God has made his presence and his will known in the various hours of the day and in the seasons of life and in the most unexpected ways, events and people. I hope it will bless your life as it has blessed mine, should you choose to read it. This book has opened my mind in new ways to a deeper understanding of prayer and has inspired me to pay much closer attention to what God might be up to in my life and in the world. I believe that God is always seeking to communicate with us and we need to attune ourselves so that we can hear.

And so, in the coming days I invite and encourage you to pay attention to your life, to what is going on around you day by day. Stop, look and listen for God's lessons. As yourself on a daily basis, whatever your circumstance: what is God teaching me through this experience and how might God use me through this experience. Should you decide to do that I dare to believe that you will be entering into a much closer communion with God and you will be seeking and celebrating God's presence, God's face, if you prefer, in your own life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.