

5 October 2014

More Than Words: Prayer in Community

Matthew 6:5-13

Matthew 6:5-13. *'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

When I began this sermon series on prayer I asked people about their questions or comments on the subject. Several of you have spoken with me, but the one question I've heard the most has to do with the Lord's Prayer. Everyone likes the prayer – which I'm sure is a relief; Jesus was worried – but people wonder about our repetition of the prayer every Sunday. When it becomes a routine, is it really a prayer? What *is* the point of saying group prayers aloud? Doesn't it just become mere rote repetition? Mere words? After all, Jesus says in the passage we heard earlier, "When you pray, do not heap up empty words?" and, let's face it, any time we say this prayer together, at least half of us are thinking about something else. Yes, that includes me, a lot of the time. So is it really praying?

It's a valid question. If you're running through the Lord's Prayer with your mouth while your mind is calculating how many touchdowns Peyton Manning needs to throw in order to boost your fantasy football team's record – well, that's probably not doing you much good. And you can extend that to any prayer that is read from a page. What about the Prayer of Dedication that we read after the offering? The Communion prayers? For that matter, what about the eloquent Pastoral Prayer that I read aloud from a manuscript most Sunday mornings? Once again, doesn't Jesus comment on that in Matthew 6, when he talks about the hypocrites praying long prayers in public to be seen? How is my pastoral prayer different from that? Even assuming it was a genuine prayer when I composed it several days before, isn't my reading it church just an exercise in oral interpretation? In fact, with so many possible pitfalls to group prayers, can't we say they're all just the form of a prayer without any substance?

Maybe not. Throughout this series, I've been stressing that prayer is not restricted to words. We've talked about the prayer of maintaining a daily awareness of God through your normal life (the prayer without ceasing) and about contemplative prayer, which may use just one word or none at all. One contemplative defined prayer as "simply the reverent, conscious openness to God" (*Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 98). If prayer can be expressed in activity or silence, then we should be careful about rejecting prayer just because some aren't paying attention to the words. Maybe something more is going on.

I think there is. And that "something more" is community. So far in this series, I've only talked about individual prayer – prayer as *you* go about *your* life, prayer as *you* sit in silence, prayer expressing *your* anger – but we aren't just individuals. If our lives are worth living at all, they are lived at least partly in community. And if a significant part of our lives is communal life, then a part of our

prayer should also be in the company of others. I've defined prayer as communication with God in relationship, but it is not an exclusive relationship. Sometimes we go off by ourselves to pray; other times we come together to pray. Every method of prayer – prayers of service, prayers of silence, and prayers of words – may be practiced either alone or with others. And when you pray with others in words, how are you to do that unless you are praying from memory or reading together?

Last week, I noted that we Protestants are terrible at contemplation. We got all rational and logical and practical during the Age of Reason and forgot about silence. Well, we're also pretty bad at prayer in community. The Age of Reason also inaugurated the Age of Individualism, and we Protestants are the consummate individualists. Some of that's good. We don't need a priest to pray for us; we can pray directly to God, all by ourselves. But too often, we tossed out all community prayer. As I was growing up, a Southern Baptist, we didn't even say the Lord's Prayer in worship. Reading a prayer was, by definition, suspicious, and we didn't do any of that Catholic high church liturgical mumbo jumbo. (I'd so love to send my childhood churches a copy of this Sunday's bulletin. "Hey, look what I'm doing now!")

But, individual responsibility aside, there is genuine power in shared prayer. If prayer is "openness to God" then the moment when a group of believers humbly bow their heads before God, side by side, seeking God together and lifting their voices as one has got to be one of most powerful ways to kick open that door and allow God inside. So what if you aren't always entirely focused on each word? The point is not always the sense of what is being said but the experience of saying it together. Sometimes you don't *want* prayer to be an act of intense concentration. C. S. Lewis writes that he loves praying the written prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* simply for that reason – because he knows them. When he prays the prayers of the church, sifted and refined over generations, he doesn't have to stop and think about whether they are appropriate or not, whether he agrees with their underlying theology or not. He can just say them in community with God's saints, and in that experience, he encounters God.

Now I'm not saying that we should not pay attention to the words. We should. Take the Lord's Prayer, which we read earlier from Matthew and will say together in a few minutes. It is a perfect prayer, and it will reward as many hours of contemplation as you care to give it. It begins with praise, seeks first God's will, asks for our material needs, asks for forgiveness – and promises that we will grant the same forgiveness to others – seeks help on our faith journey, and closes with praise. It's worth focusing on every word, because every word is gold. I would love for every one of us to pay attention to every word every time we said it. All I'm saying is today that if we don't, that does not mean that prayer is not happening. Prayer is like Communion. Sometimes we partake of Communion with our minds elsewhere, too. Does that mean that Christ is not present at the breaking of the bread? That Christ is not in fellowship with us as we share the bread and cup with each other and offer it to strangers? No, Christ is here in this fellowship when we celebrate Communion, and Christ responds to our deepest needs when we raise our voices together in prayer. God is present in our experience as well as in our words and thoughts, and when a community prays, God is there.

Children's Sermon: [Take a globe] *Know what I'm going to do next month? I'm going to fly to Singapore, all the way on the other side of the world, to visit my daughter Grace. But on the way, I'm going to stop in New Zealand, to visit some friends. And you know what my friends in New Zealand have planned for me? I'm going to preach twice and lead a conference on storytelling for school chaplains. The same stuff sort of stuff I do here! Can you remember that? Everywhere you go, anywhere in the world, God is there.*