

Sermon October 13, 2013

Prayer

There is a saying attributed to St. Francis, of Assisi, "Preach the gospel; when necessary use words." I have experienced the truth of that, and I'm sure you have too. A person who brings the gospel to mind, in fact who brings it to life for you, is not the person who talks about her faith but the one who feeds the hungry, who listens to the brokenhearted, who comforts the afflicted.

Yet what propels those acts is prayer. Prayer, like everything else I can think of, has a trajectory.

It begins in our dawning awareness of God in relationship. We hear it in the poetry of this morning's psalm, and in the stories of God in Hebrew scripture, full of God relating to His people. As Christians we know the reality of God's loving relationship with humanity in the gift of the Son, Jesus, our Lord.

The testimony of the early church and human experience ever since has reinforced the ongoing presence of God in the Holy Spirit as we are awakened and called into God's presence and convicted by God's agenda. All this is propelled by prayer.

We are not the only drivers of our prayer.

A monk of our church who has been very important in my life reminds us of this connection:

"When we pray, we are always responding to God's initiative. Even when we're naming someone or some thing, it is God who has given us this person, these concerns... and when we name them in our prayer we are echoing what we have already heard from God." [Curtis Almquist, SSJE]

Consider our common prayer here at Grace. We gather. We pray. In the presence of the One who calls us beloved we come forward to receive the very substance of Christ into ourselves; all of us welcomed to the same altar, the same source of simple but crucial nourishment that will sustain us till "the next time."

Then, finally, we pray together again, and in praying realize, yes, all this is done to be sent out into the world as signs of God's reconciling love. And we agree to this!

The author Annie Dillard asks, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?...It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews." [Teaching a Stone to Talk, p. 40] The Holy Spirit is a little unruly that way.

It was in this place, shortly after we moved to Galena, that I "heard" -- as in the jump-out-and-touch-me hearing -- the words -- "to do the work you have given us to do" in our post communion prayer. Right! I said to myself, now that I'm retired I can do that!

I'm sure I'm not the first retiree to hear such words afresh in this place. I grant you, it seemed ironic to me, this revelation. Wasn't that what I was already doing all those years as the rector of a parish? Evidently those words had a new meaning now, and unencumbered by institution they hit home, arrow to target. No details mind you, but new work will be revealed. The Holy Spirit, not only unruly but low on details.

Prayer continues to change us. Our common prayer is a great and glorious glue that holds not only us here together, but keeps us in mind of the larger community, the larger table of which we are a part, The Episcopal Church. (And I must say the current Sunday morning series on the Prayer Book is very interesting in this regard. Time and place in your bulletin.)

On Sundays we pray in particular for those whose names come to us, by self nomination or because someone here has asked we pray for a person dear to them. The Prayers of the People is that time.

Did you know that a group within the parish has members each of whom takes on a discipline of praying those names daily? The members of this group are also contacted when there is an emergency need to begin prayers for someone, and it's not a matter that should wait. These Servants Through Prayer, the name of the group, practice what we call intercessory prayer. Not just going through the names. With clear intention, the one praying solemnly places the person being prayed for before God.

Having persons dedicated to that kind of prayer changes a place. This parish is blessed by their prayer discipline.

Underneath this all, under the large community prayer, under the smaller group focus in prayer, is the bedrock. And that bedrock is individual apophatic prayer, prayer without words.

I grant you this is perhaps the ultimate oxymoron; to preach using words about a prayer that is, on purpose, one in which words are not used.

But on I go.

I go on for two reasons. The first is that I believe that whatever time; some hour, some moment, some nano second, even, in which you find yourself in wordless prayer, in meditation in God's presence, ... that time is at the center of all praying, with words or without.

The second reason is that this morning I bring you a special invitation. You are invited to be part of 40 hours of prayerful meditation that will circle the globe, the whole world. Those 40 hours begin tonight at 7 pm. EDT or 6 pm on our time zone, a work of prayer organized by Shalem, and it gives us a very particular opportunity to respond to God's call to us to be in prayer.

Shalem is an Institute in the Maryland area that for 40 years has taught persons centering prayer, has carried out programs of training in spiritual direction, has brought together fine teachers of the spiritual life to engage people in a life of deeper meditation and contemplation of their life in God. Their students, graduates and teachers live all over the world. Shalem's 40th anniversary is the reason for the 40 hours of prayer starting tonight, and it is a special invitation to all people to join in on a globe circling time of quiet attending in the presence of God.

The meditative prayer you may practice is simple. It's simplicity belies its difficulty. All you need do is intend to wait on God. Intend. It is a time to be available. It is a time to be attentive.

You can be inside or out -- if our lovely autumn weather holds -- you can be at home, in the chapel, in the meditation garden, in your car -- preferably when it is not moving. What is most important is your intention to turn your attention to silence, silence in God's presence.

Just as there is an intercessory prayer group at Grace, so too is there a centering prayer group. Carol Poston and I are the conveners, and the group meets in our chapel every Friday morning at 9:00. We know that there are those among us who cannot come on Friday mornings. They pray daily as we do, but the weekly gathering is a move of solidarity with one another, an encouragement to one another (just try doing this every day without encouragement), it happens because it is a deep joy to share this silence with one another.

Here's what we do. We sit.

We sit in a way that we can stay comfortable, awake, and attentive for 20 minutes of quiet.

When you begin this practice you may choose a simple word, like love, or Jesus, or awake, or amen. Don't worry; when you decide to do this, the right word will come to you. It is very simply a reminder of your intent, your intent to remain quietly in the presence of God.

You close your eyes.

When you are distracted-- and you will be -- by all your errand lists, and grocery lists, and any number of unfinished, unrealized, surprising bits of information vying for your attention -- if you remember your word and repeat it, you will remember your intent to be free of these competing noises and make room for God.

Some people prefer to attend to their breath rather than use a word. That works. When you are aware of your breath that too can remind you of your intent to be available to God.

When you have spent some time this way, you open your eyes and gently return yourself to the world in which you most often live; the one of social interaction, of paying bills and running errands, of caring for others and letting them on occasion care for you.

But you have spent time now in the place from which all prayer springs, intentional attention to the presence, the work, the word of God.

I find this quiet seemingly powerless place to be the wellspring of Christian life,

the fuel that even moves us from our pews to the altar rail,

from our lives all about self to a life of self giving,

from being plagued by distraction to being fed by our intention to make ourselves completely available to the Holy One who calls us each by name.

Different levels of prayer. Each with its own strength. I offer you this world encircling orchestration of centering prayer by Shalem to be your reason to try -- today! -- the small, the silent, the life changing, the centering, prayer.

The Reverend Linda Packard

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Propers of the Holy Spirit

Isaiah 61:1-3

Psalms 139:1-11

1 Corinthians 12:4-14

Luke 11:9-13

