

Wesley United Methodist church
Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015
"And When You Pray..."
Matthew 6:1-6

Jesus taught his disciples, saying: And when 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 others may see them. 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. (Matt. 6:5-6)

Prayer, just the word brings forth a wide variety of responses and feelings. Everything from the most pious of responses to the most piteous of excuses, the concept and practice of prayer has evoked much writing and discussion in Christian circles down through the ages. Most of us believe that prayer is important. Most of us have to confess, that we do not pray as we should.

As we begin our Lenten pilgrimage this day, let us begin with prayer. And I mean that both literally and figuratively. Let us begin where Jesus always seemed to begin every task and effort, with prayer. It is one of the Lenten disciplines that is supported by the church for years. But it is more than just a discipline. So let us take some time, as we begin our Lent, to explore what prayer is, or is not.

Part of the problem, about our failure to pray more frequently is our feeling uncomfortable in prayer. We don't seem to know "how to" pray. And because we get all hung up in the "how to" part, feeling inadequate for the task, embarrassed by the act, unable to address God as we feel we should, many of us simply don't pray.

Well, let's lay to rest the "how to" part right away. I found a wonderful poem that will help us put that issue into its right perspective. Listen to "Cyrus Brown's Prayer" by Sam Walter Foss:

"The proper way for man to pray,"
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes,
"And the only proper attitude,
Is down upon his knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,"
Said Reverend Dr. Wise,
"Is standing straight with outstretched arms,
And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no!" said Elder Slow,
"Such posture is too proud;
A man should pray with eyes fast closed,
And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be
Austerely clasped in front.
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground,"
Said Reverend Dr. Blunt.

"Las' year I fell in Hodgkin's well
Head first," said Cyrus Brown.
"With both my heels a-stickin' up,
My head a-pointin' down;

"An' I made a prayer right then an' there
Best prayer I ever said,

The Prayin'est prayer I ever prayed,
A-standin' on my head."

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that we do not live in a praying world. It is a frightened and frightening world, but it is not a world that knows how to pray. It is a world that perhaps would like to pray, but many have given up on the task. It is a world that contains many who prayed once, but have given up on the effort. There are many gifted people in this world, who do the best that can to meet challenges of a troubled world and who seek to become worthwhile people and contributing members to society. But through it all there is a sense of isolation from God and because of that isolation, they feel alone in their struggle.

The real problem is that most of us were never taught about what prayer is and can be. We grew up confusing the God above and our discourse with God and Santa, from whom we asked many gifts and favors. Well-meaning church theologians haven't helped much either. Their definitions and discussions on the matter often leave us cold and confused. I even heard one well-known theologian in a seminar say: "Prayer is basically man in the totality of being stretched out to possess the transcendent, awesome God in the ultimate inwardness of his deepest consciousness." That sure clarifies things and sets our hearts and minds to the task, doesn't it?

No, give me the wisdom of Grandpa Rucker who once said, "Another thang to think on: some folks ain't said pea-turkey to God in years. They don't ast him for nothin' don't specially try to be good, and don't love nobody the way Jesus said to 'cept their own self. But they go'n git jest bout as much or as little in the way a-earthly goods as the rest of us. They go-n have sorrows and joys, failure and good times. And when they come down sick they go-n git well or die, jest same as the prayin' folks. So don't thet tell you something bout prayin'! Ain't the best prayin' jest bein with God and talkin' a while, like He's a good friend, stead a-like he runs a store and you've come in a-hopin to get a bargain?"

Rucker got to the heart of the matter. And that's where I'd like to leave it tonight. Prayer is being in communion with God, not something to be used when needs arise. Prayer is being in relationship so that God can speak to us, more than our pestering God with a grocery list of wants. Prayer is finding peace in the midst of troubles, calm in the midst of calamity, and love in the midst of our loneliness. It is not that we don't know how to pray; it is that we have lost what it means to be in relationship with a loving, hearing, forgiving and gracious God.

Prayer is the only skill the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them. They didn't ask him how to heal, to teach, to ask for money, to run meetings, to do miracles, to manage crowds, or to organize a movement or start a church. They asked him to teach them how to pray. And Jesus said, "When you pray, say "Our Father." Do you hear that? Our Father. Not our God, Lord, commander, master. Our Father. Prayer was the way he began every important step of his life that lead to Jerusalem and the cross. Let us join him and listen to him. Amen.