

Prayer

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8th Sunday after Pentecost/C — Proper 11 — July 21 & 22, 2007
Genesis 18:1-14 Psalm 15 Colossians 1:21-29 Luke 10:38-42

Introduction

[Hold up copy of BCP]

What is this? That is a question to which you might reasonably respond, What sort of stupid question is that? It's the Book of Common Prayer, obviously.

And I reply, Yes, that is the name, but what is it?

One thing I know is that it is around so much we take it for granted. It's just part of the environment, always there and, since All Saints started printing the entire service in a leaflet, it is hardly ever picked up or looked at.

So I ask you, take a copy out of the little shelf in front of you and look at it.

Now again I ask, What is this?

Well, the key is in its title.

1. It is a *Book* in a language we understand. **2.** It is *Common*, which is to say it is for ALL of us. **3.** It is *Prayer*

As Episcopalians we are blessed (and maybe cursed) by having the BCP.

Blessed because we don't have to "make it up". There is a legacy of faith and words and practices that are time-tested and true.

Cursed because we can get lazy. It's all there already so we don't have to work at it.

So for today, let's actually work at it.

What Is Prayer?

Now it's time to do some work with the BCP.

Turn to page 845. Voila! An Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism.

How many knew that this existed? [Show of hands.]

Now turn to page 856, and we find the answer to our question

Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

Is this what you thought? Is this how you pray?

Speaking for myself, it's not what I expected to find. My idea of prayer was pretty much established when I was a kid, and was taught "Now I lay me down to sleep...", kneeling at the side of my bed. In short: Prayer is asking God for something, generally quietly and often in a "prayerful posture" and only once a day.

So I am stunned to learn that prayer first of all involves **action** — **responding**. And that action is both *thought* and *deeds*. And even more confounding, it is with and without words! And what are the actions suggested in the BCP?

Lifting, Praising, Offering, Confessing, Asking

What else do we learn? Prayer and Worship are linked! Worship is *corporate*. We do it *together*, uniting with others to pray and celebrate.

Wow, this is a whole lot more than my 5-year old self ever could imagine.

At the very least I am beginning to understand what Robin Williams referred to as Episcopalian calisthenics. We are active when we pray. We kneel; we stand; some of us even reach out! And when it is time for Eucharist, we aren't passive, waiting for the ushers to deliver a little glass of juice and a plate of wafers. We walk forward, and we reach out for the gift of God, a sort of literal rehearsal of how we sensibly live each moment of each day.

As we are told in Acts of the Apostles (17:28): "In (God) we live and move and have our being." And I guess I should point out that the book is about actions. It is, after all the ACTS of the apostles!

So prayer is living with God and in God through each day. Prayer is the fundamental posture of life. It is what we need to do, each hour of each day. I am reminded of something one of the inmates at Longwood Treatment Center said: "I got here because I did what I wanted when I wanted to do it. What I now understand is that it about doing what I need to do when I need to do it." And what we *need to do* is live a prayer-filled life.

So What Does That Mean?

It is obvious that I'm now a long ways away from my 5-year old self, kneeling at bedside. If prayer is about what we DO every moment of every day, how?

Some of you may be familiar with a small book entitled *The Way of a Pilgrim*. It is the story of a person from the Eastern Orthodox tradition who heard Paul's words in his 1st letter to the Thessalonians — *Pray without ceasing* — and determined to do so. He sought advice, and was given the *Jesus Prayer*. "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" The prayer repeats without ceasing, following the natural rhythm of one's heartbeat and breathing. And as with those natural actions, it is so basic that it occurs without needing to "make it happen". The book jacket on the version I have says that the fruits of the *Jesus Prayer* are "detachment from all anxious cares, enlightenment of the intellect, and a heart that bubbles over with love for all creation." What's not to like!

The pilgrim says at one point:

I spent about 5 months in the solitude of this prayerful exercise, enjoying the experiences I described. I became so accustomed to the prayer of the heart that I practice it continuously, until I finally felt that my mind and heart began to act and recite the prayer without any effort on my part.

That I would like. I just don't know that there is a way for me to have 5 months of solitude to get there!

What Are Our "Pilgrim" Options?

I found several books that provide guidance for a prayer journey that occurs in the 21st century world, and in places like Boston, and with people like you and me. They suggest ways of praying by heart, with music, by looking, by moving, by reading, by contemplating, by joining with others and by reaching out. These books identify barriers such as the all-American need to be "in control". Those of us with 12-step group experience know about this. As the summary of the first 3 steps goes:

I Can't: God Can: Let God!

And of course the 12-steps themselves are a guide for prayer, with the 11th step being explicit in the mention of prayer.

The books I looked at talk about stewardship of time. (And yes, every sermon is a stewardship sermon!) They talk about prayer and emotion, such as healthy outlets for anger. They provide exercises, just like my doctor and physical therapist did after my hip replacement. So I learned that just like all the other elements of being a faithful Christian, prayer isn't something that you do 1 hour a week, if in fact you show up at church! Prayer is how we live our faith

Today's Scriptures and their Interpretation

Well, let's shift directions here. This is a sermon, and a sermon is supposed to make at least passing reference to the Scripture readings. So here's a take on today's Scripture in the context of prayer.

Genesis

God comes to us. We recognize God via God's emissaries—here 3 men. We listen, as Sarah did. And we have a sense of humor. And we laugh with God. But we hear what God says — “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Part of the listening and laughing part of prayer is learning what God has in store for us. And what God has in store is indeed wonderful!

Psalms

We are able to “be with God” (dwell in the tabernacle, abide on the hill) by speaking truth, doing right, leading a good life. I'd expect the Pilgrim to tell us these things are possible through prayer. And he would be right.

Colossians

We are truly blessed, because Jesus came among us and made it possible for us “estranged and hostile and evil” folks to be able to offer ourselves to God and be presented to God and be secure. And when we know that (and we reach that knowing through prayer) we will have (as Paul had) the “energy that God powerfully inspires within me.”

Luke

The commentaries I consulted in this passage suggest it is among the most mishandled in the Gospels. It is often referred to as the ‘Mary and Martha’ story, and is so familiar we might better understand it if we make it our own, say the “Caitlin and Melanie” or the “Harold and Candy” or the “you and me” story. The key is Martha. As one commentator says:

“(Martha) earns a gentle reproof from Jesus because she has not yet learned that unselfishness, service, and even sacrifice can be spoiled by self-concern and self-pity, that good works which are not self-forgetful can become a misery to the doer and a tyranny to others.”¹

Sounds like another name for Martha might be spelled T-O-M!

¹ G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p 150.

Of course, if they had HGTV's Candace Olsen from *Divine Design* back then, they might have been able to have done a house as well as a personal transformation. Jesus and Mary would have been able to sit in the kitchen, and Martha could have prepared the meal and listened to Jesus!

Here is a fundamental observation, as the participants at the Friday night Bible study at the prison noted: Martha invited Jesus into her house and then didn't listen to him. How often do we invite Jesus in and then not pay attention to what he has to say.

Prayer is **paying attention**. It is Sarah's sense of humor, and the Psalmist's speaking truth, and Paul's energy. Prayer is listening to God, not wallowing in self-pity. Prayer, like good deeds, is its own reward. And what the Pilgrim teaches us is that the practice of prayer is intrinsically healthy, matching our heartbeat and our breathing with our fundamental inclinations to love and live, acknowledging all the while that all these are gifts of God, amazing gifts, as my favorite hymn teaches us.

With God, in prayer, we live and move and have our being.
It is indeed that simple.
What is it that the Nike slogan says? JUST DO IT!

So please join me, in our concluding *common* prayer, the collect for this day, the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11, on page 231 of the BCP

*Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom,
you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking:
Have compassion on our weakness,
and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not,
and for our blindness we cannot ask;
through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.*