

HOW DO WE PRAY?

July 28, 2013

Luke 11: 1-13

For the dedication service today, I was going to talk about building your house on a rock or something that seemed all tightly intertwined with the notion of the timbers and glass and pews themselves. But the gospel reading that the lectionary called for was about Jesus telling his disciples how to pray, and that is, after all much of what we do in this building, so it seemed like a good idea to talk about prayer.

This building is wonderful - an iconic country church, spare, simple, no extras. There's no basement for suppers or club meetings; there's no bathroom or kitchen, so there is very little else that we can do but have church services. That limitation is, well, limiting, but it is a wonderful device for focusing the attention. We in the congregation and the community have worked hard to preserve the building and its historical character; and we know also that as important and meaningful as that is, it's what happens within the building and what we take away from it that is important and meaningful too.

People want to talk about prayer, it seems to me, more than about almost any other matter having to do with religious faith. What is prayer and what does it mean to pray? I think that most people, though probably not all, have gone beyond thinking of prayer as wishing for something nice for their birthday present. And many people have the sense of prayer when they are keeping others in their thoughts at times of illness or impending death. We say, "I'll pray for you, I'll keep you in my prayers." But what are those prayers? What do we mean when we say that we pray? We know that prayer means much beyond those particular occasions and often we have the sense that we don't know how to do it. It's as though we needed a manual - Yoga or French in 30 Days ... Prayer for Dummies.

Of course, this is our nature. We are stuck half way between spirit and earth in an anxious-making place and it is difficult for us to find an inner balancing point that provides an orientation in our life. We, as humans, don't really know our way about, or at least, perhaps have lost it as we have evolved to develop other traits. We find ourselves confounded by the ability of animals to guide themselves over long distances. Indeed it is spatial memory, a sense of where something happened, where something belongs, where danger lurks, that allows us and animals to keep our life in tact. When the volcano at Pompeii erupted in ancient days, one of the only survivors was an artist who was able to recreate who was present at the last royal dinner by remembering where at the table they were seated. The problem is, of course, that as the world changes, we lose these guidelines. The places are no longer the same, and we don't know what to do. So a dog, who once could have found its way home through a woods, when confronted with a shopping center, is totally lost. There are too many changes.

That's why the disciple asks Jesus for a model, for signposts for prayer. He knows that prayer is important to Jesus because he sees Jesus doing it all the time, but he does not really know what it is that Jesus is doing. Is there something that I can recognize that I can follow, something that will give me guidance?

And so the scripture tells us the disciple asked Jesus, who "was praying in a certain place,... 'Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples."

And Jesus does give him something very like a road map for prayer, which is very like the Lord's prayer that appears earlier in the Gospels in Matthew and that we said together earlier this morning. It is giving us landmarks and telling us that we must keep trying. First, he tells us to say "Father", for that word gives us a familiar figure, a familiar relationship, a sense of belonging.

Then he tells us “Your kingdom come.” Because the kingdom is “coming”, it is not an unknown order that must be obeyed but something that you are going to find your way into through intention and commitment, something that will be arriving, something in the future, something to be expected.

Then Jesus tells us “Give us each day our daily bread.” For us, this is a big deal because it puts moderation upon prayer when everyone is asking for more and more. I do not really know what it is that sends people to prayer and what fills their minds and hearts when they pray. We do know, however, from statistics, that most people are not contented with their lot, whatever that may be, that most people whatever they have, want more. Tolstoy has said, that mankind strives and strives to get more, and then they die without realizing that they have ever lived.* So, to focus on our daily bread, is a very good guidepost indeed.

Then Jesus says “Forgive us as we forgive.” There is the real revolution of learning how to pray, is it not? It is that insight that tells us that as we learn to forgive another, we can also learn to forgive ourselves. And perhaps it is not even learning to forgive another person, but to forgive our own missteps when we have not recognized the way. For we are still novices at this. We learn to forgive ourselves for not knowing how to pray, and then we go back and we try again.

The final sign post that Jesus gives us and the disciple, leads us to the notion of trusting ourselves to make the right choices. He says, “Which of your fathers, if your sons asks for a fish, will give a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?” Well, really, we trust our selves right, not to be handing out those snakes and scorpions? So then, Jesus goes on to ask, “How much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

So there we have it, really. He's given us a little bit of a map, and a little bit of encouragement that nothing bad is going to happen to us even if we blunder about a bit.

But the main thing does seem to be to practice a lot. He uses the example

*Walker, Rev. Dr. Graham in "Fish and Eggs, Snakes and Scorpions"

of the householder who suddenly has guests and needs some extra bread.

This happened a lot in the days before fast transportation and instant communication, and the role of host was mandatory when a wayfarer came by. If you go knocking on your neighbor's door for bread, and your neighbor has just put the kids to sleep and doesn't want to bother with you, well, just knock again says Jesus, and again. Soon enough, they'll give you some bread just to get rid of you.

But really, it seems more like getting used to the activity of praying. It can't be that God wants to get rid of you so much as that we are not used to what the feeling of being in prayer is like. Or maybe it is that our prayers are unanswered. I cannot let this go by without reminding you of Harry Nilsson's song, *I Guess The Lord Must Be In New York City* :

I say goodbye to all my sorrows
 And by tomorrow I'll be on my way
 I guess the Lord must be in New York City

I'm so tired of getting nowhere
 Seein' my prayers going unanswered
 I guess the Lord must be in New York City

Well, here I am Lord, knocking at your back door.

And that's the thing. Jesus says that if you ask, you shall receive. He says everyone who asks shall receive. "Ask and it will be given you. Search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus just does not tell us what we will receive or find or see on the other side of the door and probably sometimes those things are not recognized by us as what we might have prayed for.

Remember that what he is promising us is the Holy Spirit and that is something that often we are not very well equipped to recognize. We don't have those landmarks, after all. Jesus says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

What Jesus tells us that we will get is the Holy Spirit. That is, that if we practice long enough, keep remembering those guideposts - Father; your kingdom come; daily bread; forgiveness; trust in yourself. I think that when we learn to pray, we come to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit, or at least we come to feel at a good place in the conversation, much as one feels flexible in yoga, or fluent in a language. As we get closer to that presence in prayer, we begin to change, our needs change, and our understandings change. So, in a way, what we are praying for changes. We have perhaps more openness in our mind and our heart and there is more room to include, therefore, the sense of Holy Spirit.

We began this talk about prayer by saying that we needed navigational aids and that Jesus was helping his disciples and us in this way. Today, in this dedication service I think that we are providing a navigational aid to prayer. This simple white church has been here in the Beaverkill community since 1883. When we come on Sunday and pray together, we are participating in one kind of conversation with God. When we are

at home or in other places, we might keep it in our mind as a focus when we summon thoughts of prayer, when we say Father, or daily bread, or any of these words, or no words at all. The feeling of this church inside or outside can bring a sense of peace and concentration and the envelopment of love that can put us in the right place for prayer.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for this church, for the place to be together, to talk to and of you. Keep us ever grateful. Amen.