

Praying on My Mind
Second Sunday after Epiphany - Year A - 01/19/2020
Psalm Reading: 40
1st Reading: Isaiah 49:1-7, 2nd: 1 Tim. 2:1-8

You know, I am always talking about how we are in relationship with each other and with God. But what I have really not talked much about is how we keep this relationship with God going. Well, I am sure you have heard any number of times that relationships are all about communication. And it is in communicating with God through prayer that we move closer to our Lord.

Paul, the great evangelist of that first century of the Christian Era, understood that prayer is the means by which we maintain our relationship with God. He often wrote about prayer. In our reading, Paul's first letter to Timothy, in chapter 2 verse 1, he outlines some of the kinds of praying we should be doing. He tells us that we should "first of all" come to God with "petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving."

Prayer is, by nature, a conversation between ourselves and God. And it might seem like we are the ones doing all the talking. But this certainly is not the case. God speaks to us in many ways: through the Word, that is the Bible; through God's activity in the world; but more immediately, in the feelings and thoughts that we have when we pray.

(Golfing Story)¹

I think this story is a perfect illustration that God answers our prayers, just not always in the way we would like...

¹<https://www.funnycleanjokes.com/the-power-of-prayer/>

Now, I don't think God very often speaks to us in a booming voice, in the same way that our friend the golfer in the story hears God. But I do think there is a sense of knowing God's will for us that comes through to us when we pray. In my own life I have felt this. In fact it came to me one day in a moment of tribulation and anxiety...I will refrain from talking about the specific circumstance, but I will tell you that at one point I dropped to my knees and while one hand gripped the other I let out a groan, a groan I could hardly explain, but that communication to God of my feelings at that moment, though not verbalized in any coherent way, were just what I needed at that moment. And God cleared away the heavy feeling in my chest and the mist from my mind.

It was only a few minutes later when perusing the Bible, looking for validation, that I found a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans (8:26), "*the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans.*" You may remember that last winter, these words were the ones I put on the sign out by the road. They meant so much to me that I hoped they would be read by someone else and taken to heart.

So, just how do we talk to God? Well, believe it or not, John Calvin, one of the early theologians of our reformed faith in his famous work, "Institutes of the Christian Religion" has a section in Book III called "The rules of right prayer".² Yeah, John Calvin was that kind of guy. He wrote down his thoughts and ideas in intricate detail, amounting to thousands of pages. The institutes alone are over 1500 pages, and he wrote

² Calvin's Institutes III,XX,4-16

commentaries, thousands of sermons, and stacks of letters as well. Yet I think all that writing and all that thinking produced some pretty profound stuff. And a lot of common sense flowed from his logic...

His first rule of prayer (out of four rules) is to pray with “reverence”. Calvin’s exact words are “that we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversation with God.” Which I think means that we should arrange it so that we treat God with at least the same respect that we would give to anyone we would be in conversation with. We should be composed and thoughtful, that is, if we can be. Because he does make allowances for dire circumstances. He says, in his quaint way, “I do not require the mind to be so detached as never to be pricked or gnawed by vexations, since on the contrary, great anxiety should kindle in us the desire to pray. Thus we see that God’s saintly servants give proof of huge torments, not to say vexations, when they speak of uttering the plaintive cry to the Lord from the deep abyss, and from the very jaws of death.” Yeah, those circumstances definitely seem to me to be a good time to be praying.

What he is really saying is that prayer should not be undisciplined or irreverent. We should not be allowing our minds to wander. And if we are making petitions, we should not be asking for “any more than God allows.” Which means we should not be asking for things that hurt others, or that are profane, or play into our vices, or that require a golf ball to go over a large body of water.

Calvin’s second rule of prayer is that “we pray from a sincere sense of want, and with penitence.” We must

understand what it is that we are lacking and that this thing must be necessary to us spiritually, that we need it with all our minds, hearts and souls and we must know that in an ultimate sense that it is only God who can provide this thing for us. And I think this goes equally for our prayers for others that we need to desire God's help for those who surround us. Calvin is not about perfunctory prayer, meaning just for the sake of saying that we have prayed. This has to be a real conversation with God.

Here I would disagree, in a matter of degree, with our friend Calvin, I believe that we should pray to God whether or not we feel devout or holy, or whether we feel a specific need, because praying in any case forms habits in our minds and can be a conversation starter with God that can lead us to places we never dreamed to go, in fact I think it can lead to a self-realization of what we actually are lacking and how we may have sinned, which can bring on that intensity that Calvin advocates.

The Third Rule of Prayer is that we realize that all power resides in God. God is the glorious one. Not us! We are mere sinners and when we pray, God is the one who will provide. **And this goes especially for forgiveness.** And this brings up something that has been bugging me lately. In our prayer of confession we pray about specific corporate sins, and private sins, and as I am listening to the lay reader, it is like I am looking at a checklist and ticking off the little check boxes, "Yup, I didn't do that. Nope, didn't do that. And yeah, I might have thought about doing that, but no big deal, I didn't actually do it." And then we take time for our private sins, and I have about fifteen

seconds to come up with something I did or did not do this week, but since I didn't prepare in advance, I am only just forming out a possible sin in my mind before we are asking God's forgiveness. And then I realize that I may have just sinned due to the swelling pride I felt in my chest thinking what a good person I have been this week, and have just attributed everything wrong in the world to everyone else. "It wasn't me, Oh God." I am elevating myself above others.

It is important that we understand our own sinfulness, so that we can bring these things to God. Yes, God gives us forgiveness, but this is also a time for us to lean on God, to rely on God to help us to act in a more righteous manner.

Finally, Calvin's fourth rule of prayer is that we should "pray with confident hope and faith." You often have heard it said that God answers our prayers...just not always in the way we might hope. And there is truth in that. But we should also remember that God only wants what is best for us. So our hope and confidence is not in expecting exactly what we are asking for, but rather that God will hear us and respond.

Notice that we also pray in faith. Now, Calvin is not saying that God will not answer the prayer of someone whose faith is not perfect, but rather that it is good for us to come to an understanding of what we believe, and this understanding can help inform our prayer / conversation with God. Isn't it nice to come to know people with whom we choose to converse with? And where do we get this information from? From studying the Bible. From coming to church, to paying a little attention to the liturgy. And as Paul told the Thessalonians, "pray without ceasing." We should be in an endless conversation with God.

You know, there are all kinds of ways to pray. When I was in seminary we were required to read a book on ten different ways to pray. So there is really no right or wrong way to pray to God. But I think all of them benefited from Calvin's insightful four rules:

1. Pray with reverence.
2. Pray from need, knowing God provides us with everything.
3. Know that all power is with God.
4. Pray with Confident Hope and Faith.

So, whether you are in the throws of depression, or are driving your car on some treacherous road in the deep winter, your knuckles white and your body tense, or are standing on the edge of a pond looking to hit a golf ball on to a green, you might want to strike up a conversation with God. Remember, God is a good listener. There is not likely to be a mid-sentence interruption. And God will answer, just remember to do a little listening yourself once in a while.

Let us pray...

Almighty God we come to you with open and reverent hearts. We know that we need you. We need the life you give us, the food that sustains us, the fellowship that makes this life worthwhile, but most of all we need your forgiveness. Lord we have faith and confidence that you will lift us up and keep us in the palm of your hand.

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