

“Prayer”

Sermon for Sunday, July 25th, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

(Note: Major sections of this sermon are taken from the book: *Made for Goodness*, by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu. Harper One, 2010.)

Prayer (I), by George Herbert:

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth

Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

“One of Jesus' disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”
(Luke 11:1)

I really believe that God's spirit lives in us and is trying to lead us into a new way of being human: a way of being human that leads us to be in better relationship with each other and with ourselves and with the environment, a way of being human that is less fearful and more loving. It is a transformation that seems essential, at this point in history. Prayer is the way we connect with God's spirit within us, so that it becomes one of the keys as to whether we are going to undergo this kind of individual and collective transformation.

“Lord, teach us to pray”

While we are being called to make this kind of evolution forward, in terms of our humanity, simultaneously, we are in a period where it is easy to lose the humanity we have. Fear eats the soul. Fear drives every kind of harm and sin: treating others like objects, greed, domination, exploitation, addiction, neglect. There is a continual battle going on between love and fear for control of our hearts. At the heart of our being, is God's spirit going to have dominion, is love going to reign? Or, is fear going to rule our lives and our relationships? In the last ten years I've seen such striking examples of people succumbing to fear, people I would never have imagined it could happen to. It's made me realize how vulnerable we all are. Prayer now seems

a front and center issue, because it can make the difference between whether someone survives or not, or is able to show up for their lives and be there for themselves and/or their partners and/or their children. As Suu Kyi, the Noble Peace Prize Winner from Burma, has said, “The only real prison is fear. The only real freedom is freedom from fear.” Prayer is at the heart of whether we will ever know that freedom.

“Lord, teach us to pray”

Prayer is about resting in God’s presence. Ultimately, it is a receptive act. As Desmond and Mpho Tutu write: “When we listen to the voice of God in prayer, we don’t hear the carping of a dissatisfied parent who is constantly correcting us. We hear the voice of one who sees and loves the already of us. We hear the voice of one who knows and loves the not yet of our being. God loves who we are. God sees and loves who we are becoming.” (Made for Goodness P. 197.)

“Lord, teach us to pray”

In prayer we learn to see as God sees, we learn to see through the eyes of God’s desire. As the Tutus’ write:”

“We begin to see ourselves as we truly are.”

In God’s vision, sin is not the essential and foundational truth about us. Goodness is. We are originally the crowning achievement of creation. We are those created in the image and likeness of god. We are created out of the abundance of God’s love. We are created for God’s joy. And we have choices...

.....we are constantly called to experience the truth about us: that we are beloved of God.... As we allow ourselves to accept God’s acceptance, we begin to accept our own goodness and beauty. With each glimpse of our own beauty, we begin to see the goodness and beauty of others.”

Why does this seeing matter? What difference does it make? It makes all the difference in the world. How would it be to turn with God’s loving gaze and see those we name as enemies? How would we treat them? What of the people we love so imperfectly? If we could see as God sees, what would we see? Would we see anyone who should fall outside the reach of our care? The pimps, prostitutes, and prisoners, the drug-dealers, the race baiters, the homophobes and haters--all are held in God’s loving gaze. God’s love overshadows us all. That drug addict on skid row, that street person smelling to high heaven--if we really had the eyes to see, they would give us a glimpse of God. God camouflages the divine glory, which would be blinding. But if we truly look, we can see.

With God’s eyes we see our enemies as they are--a bundle of incomprehensible hurts and hatreds, anger, sheathed in human form. And we see them as they truly are--people made in

God's own image, with hopes, loves, laughter, blood, and tears like our ours. With God's eyes we see our children as they are--a pimply jumble of faults and failings, forgotten homework and skipped chores. And we see them as they truly are--gifts to us of grace and wonder, treasurers of divine imagination, teachers who point us to God. With God's eyes we can see ourselves as we are, with all our pride, with every lack, all our limitations, and each prejudice. As we can see ourselves as we truly are--not sinners in need of saving but saints in need of seeing. And all of us are good. No, not just good, but very good. We are precious to God; the crown of creation, beautiful beyond compare. Very, very good." (Made for Goodness, p. 197-199)

"Lord, teach us to pray"

Prayer begins with our turning away from what our psalm today calls "dumb idols"--the things we glorify and put our trust in: money, power, status, work, ideologies--because we are afraid. True prayer begins with turning towards the living God and the true glory, the true glory which leaves us in awe at creation and the wonders of existence. The glory that is hard for us to take in for more than a moment. The wonders which, when we experience them, leave our hearts filled with gladness more than any thing can give. Psalm 4 suggests that it is in experiencing the true glory that is all around us that we are empowered to "cease from sin," to stop striving for less than what can be.

"Lord, teach us to pray"

In the story of Sodom today we hear that, for the sake of ten righteous men, that is people seeking right relationship, God will not destroy the city. Ten men is the number of people required to start a synagogue. I don't think that's a coincidence. There is power in praying together. Even small communities can listen and discern God's word in a way that individuals cannot. Again and again, salvation has come through such small communities, as they have been like leaven in the loaf of the broader community, infusing it, helping others to see something it couldn't see before.

"Lord, teach us to pray"

Jesus makes it simple. Let your prayer be about thankfulness and awe: "Hallowed be thy name." Let it be about opening up our lives to God's desire in us: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Let it be about trust: "Give us this day our daily bread." Let it be about reconciliation and living the life of the beloved: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us." Let it be about a humble awareness of our own limitations: "Save us from the time of trial."

"Lord, teach us to pray"

We worry about whether we're praying right, but it doesn't matter. As Paul writes in Romans, "We do not know how to pray as we ought," but "the Spirit helps us in our weakness... and

intercedes with us with sighs too deep for words.” So even though we are probably not doing it “right”, when we pray, we are doing it well enough.” (Made for Goodness, p. 166.)

What is important in our prayer is insistence and persistence: “Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened for you.” The posture of prayer for early Christians was that of standing. Why? Because standing was the posture of a free people. Kneeling was the posture of slaves. As the letter to the Colossians says today, we are not to debase ourselves, we are not to be intimidated by those who would try to lord it over us. Christians are called to be in an adult relationship with the God who calls us friends and is calling us into freedom.

“Lord, teach us to pray”

“Child, do you not know my voice?

It bubbles up on happy laughter:

Listen to your children’s play.

It echoes in the songs of nature:

Stop and listen.

I speak as the fresh rain on parched ground,

I speak as the summer breeze that caresses the long grass,

I speak as the gurgle of the river over the rocks,

I speak as the warm smiles of welcome,

I speak in the tender touch of comfort,

I speak in the tears of joy,

I speak as unquenchable hope.

I speak in the voices of those who challenge you,

Mine are the words of loving rebuke.

I speak in the voices of those who take pride in you,

Mine are the words of honest praise.

My voice is the happy hum in your heart

When you know you have done what is right.

My voice is that churning in your spirit

When temptation seems ready to overwhelm you.

My voice whispers “courage”

When the path you must choose seems too long and too hard.

It is I who say, “Be still a while,”

When the frenzy wants to overtake you.

Have you not heard me yet?

I am very near.

I breathe in your breath,
I pray in your prayers,
Have you not heard me yet?

Stop and see.
Look, listen.

Yes,
That is me.

(Made for Goodness p. 178)

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.