

“Can We Talk?”
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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Psalm 42:1-11

When I was in North Carolina three weeks ago for my Aunt’s funeral, I had the pleasure of reconnecting with family friends and relatives I had not seen in many years. Even in the midst of our loss, we laughed and celebrated as we caught up on each other’s lives in the intervening time period. I found myself remembering conversations with my Aunt and wishing I could go back and have those conversations again – from the time before she got sick; hearing again those words that nurtured and encouraged me as I grew up. We could have sat and talked for days and never run out of uplifting stories of conversations and good times from long ago. There is just something about sharing with someone who is close and someone who really understands. I think that gets at the essence of what our prayer life with God should be like.

Prayer is at the heart of the Christian life. It is certainly one of the greatest privileges we have as Christians. You may or may not have had a meal yet today. But before the end of the day, you will have eaten something. You may have had only a cup of coffee or tea so far. You will drink water or tea or Coke later today. Eating and drinking is natural and necessary. Like eating and drinking, prayer is not something foreign to our human nature. Prayer is perhaps the deepest impulse of the human soul.

Samuel Johnson was once asked what was the strongest argument for prayer. He replied, “There is no argument for prayer.” He did not mean that prayer is irrational or that there are not convincing arguments for the practice of it, but that prayer is natural and universal. Prayer is related to our search for meaning, our longing for relationship, and our need to grow. Prayer is an expression of our hunger for God. This hunger is a part of who we are. Augustine’s words are more than a pious cliché: “For thee were we made, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

Prayer Is An Expression of Our Hunger and Thirst for God

Prayer is born of hunger. It is a hunger to experience meaning, to know that life has purpose. It is a restless yearning to probe beneath the surface of our being, to penetrate the depth of ourselves and understand those feelings and notions and intuitions that are real but have no apparent source. It is a baffling astonishment at the spontaneous bursting forth of insight. It is a growing pain that occurs, without warning, when we violate our own or another’s integrity.

Prayer is something deep within us calling to something deeper yet, making us restless, unsettled, even confused because we are vaguely aware that we are not being and doing what we were meant to be and do. As Edward Farrell puts it: “Prayer is like a journey, a journey which we can never cease making. It is like thinking for each day a man thinks again, never knowing when he may turn a corner in his thought and find himself in a world he had never perceived before. Each day a man loves, but he never loves today exactly as he did yesterday nor will he love tomorrow in the same way he loved today” (*Prayer is a Hunger*, p. 11).

Prayer is the expression of a hunger for God. Thomas Merton asked, “Who am I?” and responded, “I am myself a word spoken by God.” So, Augustine’s word is everlastingly true: “For thee were we made, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.”

The truth is, we will always be restless, always know the hunger, because our resting in God is always of limited duration. We are sinners who too often prefer our way to God's way. Our pride does not allow us to be totally dependent on God. We move in and out of a trusting relationship with God. Even though we experience "rest" and meaning, purpose and joy in times of yielding to God's will and way for our life, something within us, our bent to sin and self-reliance, keeps pulling us away from that state of "yieldedness" and trusting relationship with God. That is the reason a big part of prayer is dealing with our prideful self.

The first beatitude of Jesus (Matthew 5:3) in the Sermon on the Mount speaks to this issue. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is the traditional translation of this word. "How blest are those who know their need of God" is the way the New English Bible renders it. To know our hunger, our hunger for God, is the condition for entering the Kingdom, and for praying. The psalmist spoke the truth in unforgettable language. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (42:1-2).

Prayer is also a confidence, a confidence rooted in the belief that we are not alone in the world, that there is help beyond our human resources, that the hunger within us will be satisfied. It is the confidence that God made us for Himself, and that our hearts will always be restless until we rest in Him.

When we pray, we are longing for relationship - longing for the hunger, thirst, and emptiness to be satisfied. That is the attitude of prayer even though the work of prayer remains a mystery to us. We must begin in faith that the mystery is a mystery to us but not to God. When we approach prayer like we understand all there is, or in a ritualistic rather than a relational way, we are handling holy things with dirty and clumsy hands.

Prayer Brings Us Into Relationship and Fellowship With God

The first epistle of John provides a marvelous description of who we are in relation to God. Phillips' Modern English Translation makes it even more lively. "Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called "children of God" – and that is not just what we are called, but who we are,...Here and now, my dear friends, we are God's children. We don't know what we shall become in the future. We only know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see him as He is!" (1 John 3:1-2).

John had been with Jesus in the Upper Room. He had heard Jesus say, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends...No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:13-15).

In the context of this understanding of a God who loves us and dies for us, and who wishes for us who are his friends to be his children, we accept the simplest, most straight forward definition of prayer. Prayer is fellowship with God. We are persons in relationship. The uniqueness of being human is that we can enter into relationship with our environment, with other persons, and with God. The quality and depth of our personal relationship determines the richness of our personal lives. The highest and deepest and most meaningful relationship possible to humans is fellowship with God. Our relationship to others and to our environment can never be completely satisfying, right and whole, unless we also have fellowship with God.

The surest sign of fellowship, and that which builds relationship, is conversation – talking and listening to another. Prayer is not easy. There is a difference between the tendency to pray and the practice of prayer. We have the tendency to pray – the reflexive crying out in the face of pain or trouble; the spontaneous shout of joy in the presence of beauty, accomplishment, or fulfillment. We give expression to it sporadically according to the moods and circumstances of our life.

To live a life of prayer is something else. To pray consistently is not easy. It requires commitment and discipline. Don't condemn yourself if you find praying difficult. Most of us do. Even those whom we call saints found or find praying difficult. Read their journals and confessions, and you will find them struggling.

The disciples didn't find it easy. "And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them " My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. And he came the third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come; the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand." (Matthew 26:36-46). Discipline, then, is a part of the life of prayer. The purpose of discipline, however is to enhance and increase the spontaneous dimension of praying.

God is good, and you and I can communicate with God. "O taste and see that the Lord is good." God is good and wants to give good gifts to us. This is a primary assumption in prayer. A second assumption is that communication with God is possible. That seems so simple and so obvious, but is it? This can be one of the greatest difficulties in life – to believe that we could actually talk with God, and that God would hear and listen and respond to us. This is an enormous assumption that needs to be fixed firmly in our minds.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus helps us get our concerns into perspective. "Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:25-26).

God is like a shepherd who misses even one lost sheep from the flock, like a housewife who sweeps a house clean to find one lost coin, like a father who grieves for one prodigal son who has left home (Luke 15). "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).

Prayer Is a Privilege Through Which We Experience God

Prayer Is a privilege, not a duty. Discipline can take the spontaneity out of prayer. Many of us see prayer as a discipline, as a duty, something we must do. We've been taught

that we ought to pray, and when we don't, we feel guilty. We will take a giant step forward in our adventure when we no longer see prayer as a duty and begin to look upon it as a privilege. As a privilege, the discipline of praying becomes a creative freedom, not a bondage to duty.

Consider these words from Sir Wilfred Grenfell: "The privilege of prayer to me is one of the most cherished possessions, because faith and experience alike convince me that God sees and answers, and his answers I never venture to criticize. It is only my part to ask. It is entirely his to give or withhold, as he knows best. If it were otherwise, I would not dare to pray at all. In the quiet of home in the heat of life and strife, in the face of death, the privilege of speech with God is inestimable. I value it more because it calls for nothing that the wayfaring man, though a fool, cannot give – that is, the simplest expression to his simplest desire. When I can neither see, nor hear, nor speak, still I can pray so that God can hear. When I finally pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I expect to pass through it in conversation with him."

There is a lot in this. Put that testimony of a great Christian disciple alongside the word from the psalmist in Psalm 63 whose words we shared earlier in the service. The first sentence of Psalm 63 is a great personal claim: "God, thou art my God." The heart of prayer is communion. Communion means being with, in union, sharing. Nothing is real in our experience except those things which we deal with routinely. Persons say that they do not pray because God is not real to them. A truer statement would be that God is not real because they do not pray.

Harry Emerson Fosdick puts this graphically: The practice of prayer is necessary to make God not merely an idea held in the mind but a presence recognized in the life. In an exclamation that came from the heart of personal religion, the psalmist cried, "O God, thou art my God" (Psalm 63:1). To stand afar off and say "O God" is neither difficult nor searching... but it is an inward and searching matter to say, "O God, though art my God." The first is theology, the second is religion; the first involves only opinion, the second involves vital experience; the first can be reached by thought, the second must be reached by prayer; the first leaves God afar off, the second alone makes him real. To be sure, all Christian service where we consciously align ourselves with God's purpose, and all insight into history where we see God's providence at work, help to make God real to us; but there is an inward certainty of God that can come only from personal communication with God.

Is this a new thought to you? Have you failed to pray consistently because God did not seem real to you? God does not seem real because we do not pray. Do you see the implication of that? If we want to realize God, we must pray. How does it fit into your experience of God?

It may be that we will never learn to pray, never have any ongoing, creatively disciplined prayer life until our desire for communion with God is so great that we will be driven to prayer. Consider that thought for a few minutes. How great is your hunger for communion with God? Can you identify with these words?

"As The Deer" – Rob Frank (Words on Page 5)

Prayer

End Notes:

The prayer language of the psalmist is worth contemplating as we consider prayer:

“My soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee” (Psalm 63:1).

“For God alone my soul waits in silence” (Psalm 62:5).

“O thou my help, hasten to my aid!” (Psalm 22:19)

The psalmist poured out his soul to God – cried, even screamed, from the depths of his being. He was confident that his soul’s hunger could be satisfied only but the Lord. This confidence is dramatically demonstrated in the Prayer language of the psalmist:

“My God in His steadfast love will meet me” (Psalm 59:10).

“I call upon God; and the Lord will save me” (Psalm 55:16).

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

“For thou, O God, art my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love”
(Psalm 59:17).

Psalm 63:1-8:

O God, thou art my God, I seek thee,
my soul thirsts for thee;
my flesh faintst for thee,
as in a dry and weary land
where no water is.
So, I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary,
beholding thy power and glory.
Because thy steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise thee.
So, I will bless thee as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on thy name.
My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat,
and my mouth praises thee with joyful lips,
when I think of thee upon my bed,
and meditate on thee in the watches of the night;
for thou has been my help,
and in the shadow of thy wings
I sing for joy.
My soul clings to thee;
thy right hand upholds me.

As the Deer

As the deer panteth for the water
So my soul longeth after Thee.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship Thee.

You alone are my strength, my shield,
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship Thee.

(Continued on Page 6)

You're my friend and you are my brother
Even though You are a King.
I love You more than any other,
So much more than anything.

You alone are my strength, my shield,
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship Thee.

I want You more than gold or silver
Only You can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy giver
And the apple of my eye.

You alone are my strength, my shield,
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship Thee.

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