



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Calvary Episcopal Church  
October 20, 2019

In the name of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

When I first read the gospel for today, I relaxed and thought, “This will be a quick and easy one. Say a few pious words about praying and the importance of not losing heart and call it a day.” Best laid plans. It hasn’t worked out that way exactly—for, you see, in fact, there is nothing particularly easy about praying (always or rarely); nor do I always avoid losing heart. As a professional and all, even a retired one, it’s a bit annoying that I am not a better practitioner than I am, but there it is. It turns out that “knowing” a good bit about praying goes only as far as it goes, which in the practice of prayer is not terribly far. When strangers say to me, as they sometimes do, particularly when I’m in my outfit, “Padre, say a prayer for me: yours get higher than mine,” I smile beatifically. I mean do they really want a treatise. But on the inside, I’m thinking, “Are you nuts? I’m just hanging on like the rest of us.” I also know more than a little about losing heart. Who doesn’t? For all who are relatively awake and even remotely sentient, occasionally losing heart in our culture today is a sure bet. Though each side gets revved up and is momentarily joyous in our righteous indignation, the dark and ugly underbelly of the discourse, if it can be called that, nags at our hearts. I can’t go there this morning—except to say that continually praying right now seems like a really good idea.

The gospel begins with the claim that Jesus told this parable because the disciples needed to pray always and not to lose heart. I’m glad he told them what he wanted them to get out of the story before he told it—for the parable leaves me with some questions. As it is recorded, it makes it sound like God is similar to the grumpy judge, who only gave in because the pushy widow worried the daylights out of him; it also seems to say that God answers when we “cry to him day and night” as though that is a guaranteed formula. For me that has not always been true—to which some would say, and indeed some have said, “Then you didn’t cry to him day and night enough.” Maybe they are right, and maybe they also are right that if we get our prayers on enough prayer lists, said by enough people, that that we will get good results. I hope it is not true that God chooses to intervene on the basis of how many we get on our prayer team, like the number of names on a petition. That doesn’t seem right.

So, I’ve continued to ponder and have read a lot of books about praying. There are almost as many books on praying as there are on dieting, and in each case doing it (praying or dieting) is better than reading about it. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he told them to say what we know as “The Lord’s Prayer.” After all these years, it is still a pretty good place to start—and maybe to end. If saying it seems rote and automatic, that is all the better. Deep inside us, these words operate in a way that is beyond words; and when we know them deeply in our souls, they will never fail us no matter how dark the clouds.

The best thing about this parable is that it invites us to think and pray about our praying, about what prayer means. If asked, each of us would say that his or her prayer life could stand some improvement. It may be that our dis-ease about prayer is a definitional problem. The Catechism that hardly anyone, including me, hardly ever reads gives a perfect and utterly simple (on the surface) definition of prayer:

prayer is “responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.” Understood that way, prayer goes to the deepest truth and purpose of our spiritual journey: the desire to find and know God. We don’t pray in order to be in compliance with the rules or to be good; we don’t pray to *get* anything other than to “get to be in communion with God.” When all else is said and done, when our thinking, speculating, and pontificating come to an end, praying is what remains about our search for God. In whatever package it presents itself—contemplation, meditation, conversation—prayer is our willing submission to a great cloud of unknowing, into which we project our small voices in search of a connection with an immense God. We do it in faith that our communion with God changes us in ways we sometimes recognize and about which we can speak but more often than not in ways we can barely perceive or understand.

And then, my dear friends, this parable about the Grumpy Judge God requires that we say a word about the thorniest issue of all, petitionary prayer (a request for something we want) and intercessory prayer (a request on behalf of another). Such prayer is inevitable; it is bred in our bones. When life crashes for us and for those whom we love, we cry out to God in raw anguish, pleading. Of course, we do. Why wouldn’t we? But hear me carefully: if prayer is purely that we will be delivered from whatever misery surrounds us, if that is what prayer ultimately is for us, at best we will be disappointed and lose heart, and at worse we will become apostate. Though prayer inevitably changes us, sometimes helping us change our circumstances, prayer is not a magic get-out-of-jail card that we pull out just in the nick of time. Bad things happen to people who pray and to people who do not. We must get this if we are going to live mature lives of faith. Paul, the church’s first great theologian, helps us. He didn’t get everything right, but what he got right was big right. He said that when the deepest prayers of our hearts are too deep for words, too deep for us even with all our volubility to be able to voice, the Spirit will pray for us. That is why there is so much silence in prayer: we don’t know what to say, and the Spirit speaks very softly. *And* Paul went on to say, when the circumstances we so desperately want to change do not change, as they often do not, but even worsen, nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. That is, I believe, the deepest truth of our faith; and if we know only that, it will be enough.

And, yet, even knowing that, on occasion we lose heart. We have; we do; and we will again lose heart. But if our understanding of this fundamental truth about prayer deepens, we won’t lose our faith as well, not permanently. We may be sad and quite lost for a while, maybe for a long time. But that is not the whole story; the presence of God in our lives and in the world means that losing heart will not be the last chapter. It is never God’s desire that we lose heart; and when we do, God is there to give it back to us. Each time we find our heart again, it is more awakened, more breakable, wiser, and more filled with love. The process of reclaiming heart happens through this thing we call prayer. Every time during the day when we feel the inclination, no matter how fleeting, to say, “God, help me” or “thank you, God,” in that moment we are reclaiming a principle truth: our hearts flourish in the love of and communion with God. In this passage Jesus is telling his disciples that the way back from a lost heart is a prayerful one. Praying will not keep us from losing heart, but it will show us the way back when we do.

What God promises us is God’s self—nothing more and nothing less. For the record, there is nothing more than that but there is a whole lot less. We must pray until our hearts break and then pray some more—not to get what we want, as though grabbing this desired thing or another, but to be with and in and through God in whatever comes. We will not languish for we are and will be *with* God.

In the name and hope of God: AMEN.