

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2007
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

We just heard Jesus teaching his followers to pray. This is God in human flesh, the image of all that is perfectly human, human as we were created to be, telling us how to be in conversation with God.

Clearly this is something important, deserving our rapt attention. Jesus did not give them a long text, never advocated particular postures, or even particular places, in contrast to the religious culture in which he lived with all its regulations about such things.

Like the prophets for centuries before, Jesus emphasizes the attitude of one's heart. Prayer is not about fancy prayer clothes. It is definitely not about impressing other people with one's faithfulness or spiritual achievements. Prayer is about opening oneself up to God, insistently, persistently.

And what will be the result? According to this passage, we will receive the Holy Spirit. So if we are persistent in prayer, open our whole lives, our hopes, our dreams, our worries, our wonder, our gratitude, our repentance, if we open our whole selves to God, we will receive God's own self in return. The Holy Spirit will be given to us.

And when we are struggling in our prayer lives, when we feel that we cannot express what we need to, when we are unable to open our innermost selves to God, Saint Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us. So our prayer brings us the Spirit who prays for us. Prayer makes prayer possible.

Prayer is something we do when we gather, because that is one of our chief responsibilities as the body of Christ. Prayer is also something we do alone, because each of us is invited into a personal unique relationship with the Divine. Prayer is something we do aloud sometimes, silently sometimes, in song sometimes, in work sometimes.

Saint Paul wrote that we should pray without ceasing, that our every moment should be infused with prayer.

So what do we understand about prayer?

Jesus, Saint Paul, our whole tradition make it clear that prayer is at the heart of our lives as Christian individuals and Christian communities.

In your bulletins you will find a collection of sayings about prayer gathered from centuries of Christian writers by the editors of *Forward Day by Day*. There you will discover people talking about prayer as a state of wonder and gratitude in which we are called to live. Prayer as our response to God speaking to us. Prayer as our journey into God. Prayer the place where we meet God. Prayer as God's voice within us. And so much more.

Prayer is not what those with no experience of it often seem to think. It is not us sending God laundry lists of requests. God is not Santa Claus. Prayer is not petulant children demanding. Prayer is much more about listening than demanding. As one of my favorite quotes in the collection says, "Prayer is not a way of getting what we want from God, but a way of becoming what God wants us to be."

Jesus gave us a model prayer and so it has been Christian tradition since the beginning to always pray that prayer whenever we pray. It is included in every liturgy in our Prayer Book, so that whether we are gathered as now for the Eucharist, or for a wedding, or for a funeral, or for daily prayer, or for any occasion, we always include 'the words our saviour taught us.' They are our pattern and focus of prayer – but not our only prayer.

When we say or sing the Gloria, "Glory be to God on High and on earth peace" that is prayer. When we thank God after communion, acknowledging the wonder of the sacrament and its inherent challenge to go out into the world strengthened and fed, ready to be God's workers, that is prayer. The Great Thanksgiving, the words said by the priest thanking God for all things, particularly for the work of Christ, and by the thanking blessing the bread and wine to be Christ's Body and Blood for us, is prayer. All our worship is prayer.

We begin each Eucharist with a prayer that is utterly identified with the Anglican tradition, which we call the Collect for Purity. In medieval England it was part of the prayers said quietly, or even silently, by the presiding priest before the service began. (one of the so-called the 'prayers in secret') So this was part of the priest getting ready to preside and asking God to help the whole congregation be

ready to worship. In the very first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 this prayer moved from something only a priest would have known or heard, to one that the priest read at the start of the liturgy for all to hear. You will notice in the Prayer Book that it still says, "The priest may say". It is not listed as something to be said by everyone, but has become something for everyone to say in many congregations including this one.

This is a development which further acknowledges that we are all in this together, all praying together. So what do we ask of the Lord to make us ready for worship? We begin by acknowledging that there is nothing unknown to God, nothing hidden from God. So just showing up with those long fringes Jesus talked about would not fool God into thinking we are faithful, if our hearts are set on greed and malice. God knows our hearts and God can also set our hearts right. The Holy Spirit, which Jesus promises as the gift that comes in prayer, will cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, will help us to cast aside what makes us unworthy to worship. So that we may perfectly love God and worthily praise God. That is what worship is; that is why we have gathered.

So part of prayer is laying ourselves out for the cleaning, offering ourselves to be made whole and pure, so that we can be in this wonderful relationship with God, which is prayer.

The Collect for Purity is one of many distinctive Anglican prayer traditions. One that has bound us together from our beginnings is the tradition of Common Prayer. That means that the priest does not pray secret things or random idiosyncratic things, that our prayers are printed in books for all to see and share. Whether the priest is saying the Eucharistic Prayer, or the Lay Reader is leading the Prayers of the People, or we are all saying the Confession or Thanksgiving together, the prayer is in common, it belongs to all of us.

Part of this tradition of Common Prayer is that our prayers are carefully crafted to be beautiful and succinct. One member of this congregation recently commented to me that she could find a prayer to meet any occasion in the Prayer Book. Our Prayer Book is indeed a treasure trove of prayer.

Another part of our Anglican tradition is the expectation that people pray every day, whether alone or together, so that there is a community of prayer happening all the time. The Prayer Book has liturgies and lectionaries to facilitate that.

Within the structure and organization of our Anglican traditions there is still much room for variety. For some people prayer is largely a silent thing, opening the heart to God and basking in the divine presence. For others, the structures of the Prayer Book encompass the vast majority of their prayer lives. Some people only feel that they are really connected in prayer when they are praying in a room with others, some people only in a sanctified space like this church. Other people do their best praying among the trees.

For me devotional reading is essential. I can spend hours reading collections of prayers or other spiritual reflections and that tends to be my best prayer time. So I have an ever-growing library of such collections. That is my way to open my heart to God, and to walk further down my pilgrim path.

A week ago Friday Norm Franzen invited people to join him in meditating with Mozart, another path of prayer.

My week of study convinced me of the critical importance of intentional prayer for the life and leadership of the Church. So I have decided to declare a year of Prayer for Saint James. I have made a commitment to pray every day with greater focus and intention and invite you to join me in this adventure.

I hope that we will share activities, prayer practices, books, whatever enlivens our prayer lives. We will soon inaugurate a parish email prayer chain. Whether you pray with Cursillo reunion groups, with us at the church daily at noon, with home prayer groups, in the yard, in the forest, by the seashore, in bed – wherever and however you pray, I invite you to be part of this community of prayer and to keep the parish community in your hearts as you do. Again I encourage you to think about the idea of an Anam Cara, a Soul Friend, a companion in your journey of prayer.

Let us each and all open our hearts to God so that the Holy Spirit may fill us and guide us, as we uphold in prayer our community, its mission, its neighbors, its members. Amen.

