

Prayer as a Way of Listening
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Fairfield Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Stephen J. Brachlow
Isaiah 55: 1-3, Matthew 6: 5-8, Romans 6: 26-28

Francis Wicks tells a story about an American businessman traveling in the Middle East. One day, he found himself in a crowded, noisy market place, where he came upon the maker of some beautiful brass bowls. Seeing these finely crafted bowls, he immediately thought of his wife back in the States who ran an expensive little gift shop, and he thought how well these bowls would sell in his wife's shop. So he asked the craftsman, through his interpreter, how much it would cost for one of the bowls he particularly liked. "Two dinars," the old craftsman replied.

It was a very reasonable price, and he thought of the handsome profit his wife could make on such a bowl. So he asked how much the craftsman would charge for each bowl if he bought fifty of them just like that one. The old craftsman thought for a while and said, "In that case, four dinars each."

"But that's twice as much!" complained the American. "Tell the man that they must cost less per bowl, not more, if I buy so many." To which the old craftsman replied: "Tell the kind gentleman they will each cost more for fifty bowls, because if I make so many, it will become a wearisome task, and then when I am finished, I shall have to go away and rest in order to renew my spirit."

There are days, I believe, that almost all of us have when we can fully understand the strange business logic of this old craftsman. Many of us live very busy lives in this production-oriented world of ours. Our days are filled with things to do: the house to keep up, bills to pay; groceries to buy; food to prepare; the dishes to do, gutters to clean, lawns to mow, perhaps kids to attend to or chauffeur from place to place, letters and cards to write, emails to answer, friends and relatives to visit, cars to keep up, . . . and on and on the list goes! And we find there is simply too much for any one of us to do in any given day. Our lives are filled to capacity with things to do.

Now, the tragedy is that while our outer lives are in this way very full, we sometimes experience our inner lives as being very empty. And we may find ourselves wondering from time to time, where is the payoff for all this busy-ness? Where is the fulfillment? Where is there any true contentment? And if you are like me, you may occasionally find yourself longing to have your life filled with something other than working more, doing more and buying more.

The text from Isaiah 55:1-3 speaks to this condition of ours, in which we find ourselves often feeling overwhelmed by the many demands of life in society. The prophet could just as well have been writing to any one of us when he said, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and labor so hard for that which does not satisfy?” Why, the prophet asks, are we chasing after these many things that do not bring any genuine contentment? The text is saying that if we find ourselves hungering for life that is fulfilling, if we find ourselves dried up inside like a withered plant thirsting for something that will truly satisfy, then come, it’s all here. And, what’s more, it’s all free. “Come,” Isaiah says in verse 1, “buy wine and milk without money and without price.” In other words, that which truly satisfied in life is not something we can lay hold of by working for it or by trying harder, even at our praying.

Prayer--especially prayer as a way of listening--invites us to let go. Become quiet. Adopt the posture of the listener, not the intense, driven posture of one who is always striving to achieve. “Incline your ear and come to me, listen, so that you may live.” In this sense, prayer begins not always with our words, but often in our silence, that sacred silence of a waiting, humble, listening heart. This is why Jesus urges us to make some quiet, holy space in our busy lives for prayer. “Whenever you pray,” Jesus says, “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.”

Now, to understand prayer as a way of listening, we need to acknowledge two fundamental things about prayer:

1) First, **prayer is ultimately not our work, but the work of the Holy Spirit in us.** The Apostle Paul says as much in that passage from Romans 8:26: “For we do not know how to pray as we ought . . . [so] the Spirit intercedes” for us.

This is to recognize a powerful truth about prayer, which is that when we find ourselves really praying, we sometimes realize that we have not so much *moved*

ourselves in prayer as *we have been moved* by the Spirit of God. In other words, prayer itself is a gift of grace given to us by God.

For this reason, I suspect that prayer as a way of listening is not something we are likely to find when we are full of words, when we have a lot to say to God. Rather, prayer as a way of listening may perhaps be at its best when we have nothing to say, when we “do not know how to pray,” when prayer begins with our emptiness and brokenness, even with our lack of motivation to pray.

When we have nothing to offer God, except an inner life that may be worn out, or a heart that has grown cold and hard from disappointments and lost dreams, despair or depression, or too much work and too many responsibilities, so that all we can do is wait for God to speak to us, that is often when prayer by the mystery of God’s grace really begins.

This is what C. S. Lewis had in mind in his little poem simply entitled “Prayer.” It goes like this:

Master, they say that when I seem
 To be in speech with you,
Since you make no reply, it’s all a dream
 One talker aping two.

They are half right, but not as they
 Imagine; rather, I
Seek in myself the things I meant to say,
 And lo! The wells are dry.
Then, seeing me empty, you forsake
 The listener’s role, and through
My dead lips breath and into utterance wake
 The thoughts I never knew.

So, prayer ultimately is not our work, but the work of the Spirit in us.

2) The second thing we may learn from prayer as a way of listening is that **prayer does not have to take the form of words that we either speak or think. It can be as much the yearning of our hearts as our speaking of words.**

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who worked with the poor and the dying in India, had a habit of rising early in the morning to pray in silence before the day began. In an interview with a journalist, she was once asked what she said to God when she prayed. She replied, “Oh, I don’t *say* anything. I listen to God.” The journalist then asked the next, most obvious question: “What does God say to you?” Mother Teresa answered: “Oh, God doesn’t *say* anything. I listen to God, and God listens to me—and if you can’t understand that, then I can’t explain it.”

Prayer does not have to take the form of words that we either speak or think. It can be as much the yearning of our hearts as our speaking of words. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8 talks about those sighs and groans deep within us, so deep that we cannot find the words to express them, which the Holy Spirit conveys to God on our behalf according to the will of God.

This is something of the point of a charming old Jewish Hasidic tale. The story is about a very simple elderly man who came to worship in the synagogue. During most of the service he just sat and listened. He had difficulty reading and could not recite the beautiful prayers of the Hebrew prayer book. He was sad and even ashamed of his inability to pray. Finally he stood up and did the only thing he could think of doing; he raised his hands to the heavens and began to recite out loud the Hebrew alphabet over and over. Finally, he said, “O God, I am not good with words. Please, take these letters of the alphabet and make them into a beautiful prayer for yourself.”

So prayer as a way of listening may be deeper than our ability to put things into words. It may come from somewhere deep within ourselves where, as it says in Psalm 42, “deep calls out unto deep.”

This is the kind of prayer that begins by inclining the ear and listening, listening for the One who has come to dwell deep within our hearts through Christ Jesus. “Incline your ear and come to me,” says the Lord. “Listen, so that your soul may live.”