

LESSONS IN LIVING

Does Prayer Still Make Sense to the Modern Mind?

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
October 2, 2011

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:5-8 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

As you know, if you've come to St. Andrew's for a while, we try to look at theology in new terms that will make sense to children a hundred years from now. We try to look at what are the implications of evolution and materialist discoveries, relativity – those kinds of things. And in some ways, the external work is the easiest to do – like getting that with your mind. Your life starts getting less crazy. You take responsibility for your decisions, you don't think there are little invisible beings that are going to make your decisions for you, and the external world gets clear pretty quickly.

The problem is that there is an inner life as well, and sometimes that becomes a desert, at first. We're going to look, for about two months, at what prayer means to the modern mind. So, once we grasp, scientifically, the reality of the world, how do we get back that sense of mystical joy and unity with other beings, that is always the point of religion? That is what makes religion worth doing. If we don't have the scientific piece, life gets crazy in one direction. If we don't have the inner life – the emotional life – then we may know a lot of facts, but life doesn't have much meaning. So, what we're trying to do is figure out how to bring those together, and for the next two months, we're going to look at some of the questions that occur to you after you stop believing in the Santa Claus God. Who are you talking to?...what are you doing when you do a prayer?

Now, the section we're looking at today is right before Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray. I sometimes think of it as the “warning label” to prayer. Jesus is going to say a lot of negative things, in a row, about prayer. Usually what that means is the teacher is teaching awareness. When Jesus (or Buddha) has a string of really negative teachings, check and see if what's really at stake is your own awareness, because often what religious teachers do is teach you to think another person's thoughts – to see through another person's world. Many people, well, most of us, are born into somebody else's religion. You look around, you see your parents doing very strange things and you want to adapt to that. You want to be accepted. And so, really, from the outside in, you start doing a pantomime of what religion is supposed to be. And the point, of course, is then to get approval at the end of it. But there's a hollowness there, and I think when Jesus talked about people who have “eyes that can't see – ears that can't hear” he wasn't just saying people are dumb, he was saying that sometimes we lose the ability to “see with our own eyes.” We see the world we're supposed to see. Sometimes we can't “hear with our own ears.”

So, prayer, in a nutshell – I'm hoping we'll be looking at this for two months, from different angles, so it will be worth your time. But to move from prayer as something spoken to prayer as something that you listen for. In other words, it's what in the East is normally called meditation, but we're putting it into words for communal purposes. We can share deep awareness; we can share our meditation if we put it into words, into symbols. But what we're really talking about is that deep sense of connectedness that you can't really put into words.

I've tried to say over the years that I think the crime of organized religion, basically, is that we've tried to say that we're giving people the flame. You were born with the flame. The flame is awareness, but for most of us, that flame blows out pretty easily. It's hard to have a practice by yourself, for yourself. In fact, there's something almost contradictory in having this awareness that's universal just in your own personal life. So what happens in community as you begin to open that up and take it "bigger"?

Now as I said, Jesus is going to give us a bunch of negatives, but consider that clearing the rubble, so that you can come to your fullness. He says, "don't babble like the Gentiles", and a lot of you Gentiles that are here... (*laughter*) I think Jesus didn't really get PC early in his ministry, and it's good for those of us who are Gentiles to realize that he had to learn inclusivity as he went, but early on he said things like this: "don't be like the Gentiles" – "the nations" is a literal translation of that word – who just babble, who make it all words. And it's not outsiders. Unless we consciously try to reclaim it, religion falls into just words, actions, rules, because that's what's easiest for human beings. People blame that on religion, but it's human nature to be more comfortable believing than thinking...to be more comfortable with rules than with principles. It's human nature. We seek that because we don't like the tension of awareness.

So Jesus talks about being hypocrites, and that word is not as mean as it sounds. It's the mask that an actor would wear in the ancient world. Back in ancient times, the casts were all men. (You can't have women doing something as important as acting) (*laughter*) It freaks me out now to look at these and realize that some of these great romance things were all men, but they wore masks. So the guy would wear a female mask, or a god mask, a happy mask or a sad mask. And the point is that when you're in a big amphitheater, you need to amplify the face. So it wasn't really a bad thing that they had a mask, but what Jesus was saying was sometimes we learn religion like that, from the outside in. You're in a room, everybody else is nodding like it makes sense. It doesn't make any sense to you, but what do you do? You pretend that you agree. And when the church tells you to say *creeds* as a child and to believe them...to say "this is what I believe" and then they don't make sense, they are crazy things – somebody was born of a virgin? See, you don't realize it's a poem, it's a symbol of something very deep and profound. But you're taught to say things that you don't even know as your own belief, and what happens is *the light behind your eyes goes out and you no longer see with your own eyes, no longer feel with your own heart*. That's why when you go on television – I've done the challenge before and I don't know if anybody's ever done it – but, go to your television set, turn the sound down and go channel to channel. Stop when you see a really insincere person and turn the sound up and I bet you're on a religious station. (*laughter*) Now, infomercials have made that more complicated. (*laughter*) But you know what I'm talking about. You know about that insincere smile that you see in religious people that you don't see anywhere else. It's people that are living from the outside in. It's people trying to be who other people want them to be – not bad people at all – frightened little children who are trying to please the adults. So when Jesus says they love to be seen by other people, he's not really putting them down. He's trying to rescue them. You don't need that approval. You have your own wisdom. You were born with it. You have to learn the vocabulary and expression of it, you have to test it. You have to learn all of those things. *But the word was born in you*. The Bible gives witness to that word, but it doesn't give you the word. Religion does not give you the light. You were born with that.

Have you ever tried to water a plant on the leaves? The leaves can't take in the water. That has to go into the roots. What Jesus is saying is when you try to live an external life – external religion – when you try to believe what other people tell you, when you try to do what other people tell you, your heart goes unfed. So what we see around us in this particular religious climate, across the nation, are thirsty, dying hearts...[thirsty] for that nurture that comes from finding your roots that go down into the earth, into life, to knowing who you really are and experiencing your life as an expression of that depth. That's what Jesus is teaching with prayer and it's going to look different on every person. In Yoga, they talk about all

these different types of Yoga. There's a work Yoga, there's all kinds of Yoga, but Patanjali said the essence of all of them is *stilling the mind*...awareness.

So Jesus says "go to your closet." That's an interesting phrase. If you're as messy as I am, that's not possible for you. (*laughter*) So I'm sure there will be some kind of exemption, I hope, for people like me. But isn't that interesting? Get away from the religious people...until you can hear your own voice. Now we were made for living in community. I'm not saying that it's going to blossom if you stay away from other people, but I am saying that what you have to share with other people is something you were born with, something that comes out through you.

So when [you] stop to pray - I would encourage you to explore what is the difference when you stop speaking and consider that listening, a prayer. I'm not talking about listening for a human voice. I'm talking about listening to the wisdom, the intelligence in your body, the wisdom intelligence in the Nature around you, in the life around you, settling deep into your roots. Henri Nouwen put it in a very personal form, and most of the traditional Christian writers put it in very personified form. The point is to get past the symbols to what the symbol refers to. This is how he says it:

"To pray is to listen to the One who calls you my beloved daughter, my beloved son, my beloved child. To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being and let that voice resound in your whole being."

When Jesus says, "God already knows what you want," he's trying to change gear. Have you ever been doing a prayer when you were young, and you realize you're giving advice to the Architect of the Universe? There might be something wrong with that. "Oh God, here's something you missed". The Intelligence to which you are orienting yourself already knows. You are aligning yourself to that Intelligence so you will know. It's a great inversion. It's *metanoia*, it's repentance. It's sort of turning inside out, to stop grasping for the sacred and begin to live out of the sacred. To stop having God be an object for you that you clutch after, and be the Source and Ground of your being. I think that's what Jesus means when he says "prayer."

John Bunyan said it's better to have a heart without the words than words without the heart. In other words, when you realize what you're doing, you don't need to have fancy words. That's what Jesus is talking about here. Have you ever been to a funeral where everybody said things really eloquent, and then somebody got up and just cried, and you're thinking, "Yeah, that's it?" That's the most eloquent speaker here and they can't say anything. Or [the same thing happens] at a wedding, or [you] have a lot of people give you advice, and another friend just is there with you? That's what we're talking about - depth, depth, not complexity.

Thomas Merton has a prayer that spread all over the world. It's just kind of a groping, clumsy prayer. But, he was a great spiritual mystic, and in it, we realize that everybody can feel clumsy. This is his prayer. It's translated in every language in the world now:

"My God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean I actually am doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever

with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Paul said that sometimes his prayers began as groans, as sighs that were too deep to put into words. But most spiritual masters say ultimately you move to silence. That’s what Patanjali is saying. Whatever yoga, whatever spiritual practice you have will lead you to a small, still place within you. It’s not the kind of peace that pulls back from what’s happening in the world, but it’s a stillness that you take out into the storm. It’s the eye of the hurricane out of which you live and breathe and have your being. There was an early Christian mystic who said that you use words in your prayers early on, but as soon as you find God, you don’t need the words anymore. I think most people that pray long enough and deep enough have something of that experience.

Well, we’re about to begin a new series: What is prayer? What difference does it make? What does it mean?...all of that. It will be a process, and different for every one of us here. The question I hope will haunt you during this time is this: Once you leave the Santa Claus God behind, what do you do with that beautiful, joyful place inside of you that feels connected to every other being. I would suggest that prayer is whatever it is that gives you that stillness. For some of you, it’s gardening...there was a guy named Brother Lawrence who was a mystic, who hated church – would not go to church. He liked doing things in the kitchen (a real derelict). He liked cooking for other people, preparing for and cleaning for other people. That was his prayer.

Realize that you don’t have to live in clothes that your parents made for you. You don’t have to see through eyes that they gave you. “Thank you for the beginning, our beloved parents...I’ll take it from here.” What does the world look like through *your* eyes? What do voices sound like through *your* ears? Jesus will begin with nothing but warnings, and the purpose of that, remember, is to lead you to awareness. It’s not this, it’s not that, but when you’re there, you know it, and Jesus is trying to get us to trust that. There is no way to awareness, Jesus is saying...awareness *is the way*.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew’s Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,

Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,

Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:

believers and agnostics,
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
women and men,
those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
those of all races and cultures,
those of all classes and abilities,
those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;

Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,

Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,

Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,

Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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