

The First Baptist Church, Midland
May 15, 2011
Matthew 6:5-15

When You Are Praying...
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Prayer

Fourteen years ago, I had a wonderful experience with an organization called AWOL. No, they weren't *absent without leave*. They were pursuing *a way of life*. It was a marvelous support group made up of people with all kinds of challenges in their lives, and they had invited me to share with them a few of my perspectives related to prayer. It was a thoroughly engaging evening and I have to tell you, I took away much more from the experience than I ever contributed. For even though these folks came from many different faith perspectives, it quickly became clear that we were of one heart when it came to our common affirmation related to the intimacy of prayer. And I've never forgotten the story one man shared on that night.

It came out of an experience which took place in the Pacific Ocean during the second world war, and was focused upon a pilot who found himself and his crew in deep danger. I hope I can do his story justice because it really is amazing.

This pilot was a friend of the man telling the story. He had been assigned to an aircraft carrier and as I recall they were making their way toward Japan. The seas were very heavy but the decision was made to pursue air operations anyway. I guess the planes did a kind of reconnaissance of the area since they were nearing hostile shores. Anyway, this pilot had the last flight of the day and after an uneventful couple of hours he and his crew were ordered to return to the ship because the seas were getting worse. And that's when the trouble started.

As they approached their targeted landing strip in the middle of the ocean, they found it pitching up and down and rolling from side to side. From the air, their target looked like a postage stamp and with the heavy seas it was often obliterated. The pilot said there were times when the carrier was completely lost from view. So not only was it a moving target, it was also an invisible target. And the man telling the story said his friend had tried to land six times. Unfortunately, they were ordered to abort their attempt on each of those attempts because their trajectory in those rolling seas was simply off course. Can you imagine what he and his crew were feeling?

Now just in case this wasn't frightening enough by itself, a quick look at the gauge showed that the plane was running low on fuel. Could things get any worse? They attempted two more landings but were unsuccessful. So now the pilot was faced with this dilemma. He could either climb into a parachute altitude and the crew could jump into the raging waters or they could make one more attempt to land before their fuel ran out. What would you have done?

Together they chose an attempted landing one more time. And as he was preparing for the final approach, the pilot shared that he was praying out loud into his oxygen mask. Others in the crew were no doubt doing the same. They realized that on their own they were helpless. Yet

with the confidence of God's presence they knew they were not hopeless. And then it happened. The pilot said his anxiety lifted, his fear went away. And even though his hands were on the controls, he said he was sure a far better pilot was flying the plane.

Obviously they landed safely because he was alive to share his story. And he added one more detail to make this whole event even more remarkable. He said the aircraft line chief later told him that the jet fuel tank was bone dry when he landed. There was no way this aircraft should have arrived safely at its destination.

I have to confess that these kinds of stories leave me standing in awe, and I have a hunch they probably do the same for you. To be honest, I've never experienced anything quite so dramatic in my life but I can identify critical moments when I have experienced the intimacy of God's presence.

No, this isn't to say that God is my genie in a bottle to whom I turn only in the moment of crisis. I think this distorts the whole purpose and intention of prayer. But it is to say that prayer is one of the most powerful resources in the world. It draws us into the presence of the Almighty.

Let's be honest! Prayer is a human response. But I think it has been built into our DNA by the One who created us. To be sure, we all don't pray using the same words and we don't even all pray to the same God. And yes, we are free to make the decision to pray or not to pray. But the desire to pray is universal and can be found in one way or another in every culture. It is part of our spiritual framework. God places within us this natural inclination to turn to the source of our being. And that's what was happening to this pilot and his crew. In fact, perhaps this harrowing experience is really a parable about life.

We all find ourselves sometimes faltering in the rocky seas of life, don't we, struggling to find a base of stability upon which to land and discover our security. We all find ourselves pushed against the wall occasionally only to finally turn to the Lord. And that's okay because our spiritual foundations never leave us. Sure, we may go through those periods when we feel some distance in our relationship with God. We may occasionally have a tough time seeing the target of our invocations. But deep down we never completely sever those ties which bind us to the source of our prayers, do we. And when the moment of truth dawns, we fall gracefully and gratefully before God standing in the need of prayer.

Yes, prayer! I wonder! In your mind and in your heart how do you conceive it. Personally, I define prayer simply as *intimacy with God*. Through prayer I believe we are drawn into the presence of our Creator, we stand face to face with our Sustainer, and we kneel humbly before our Savior. At least, this is our Christian perspective. Prayer is that connecting link which enables us to know we are never alone.

If we look to the Bible, we see that prayer is the shawl with which even Jesus covers himself. Time and again, we have the example of the Holy One bowing in the presence of his Father. Sometimes Jesus is alone in prayer. For example, there is the Garden of Gethsemane on

the night of betrayal. He walks deep within the garden to be by himself to lift the burden of the cold, dark night.

Then there are the times when Jesus draws away with his disciples so the intimacy of their friendship can forge the setting for their prayers. In fact, it is in one such moment that the twelve ask Jesus for the only instruction they ever requested. **“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples”** they plea (Luke 11:1) So yes, the New Testament is filled with examples of, requests for, and directions for prayer. And of course there are the lilting words themselves which flow from the lips of Jesusí

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*

How about ití do these words touch you? Do they instruct you? Do they embolden you? Iðl say it againí Without a doubt, prayer is intimacy with God. *Our Father, who art in heaven...* Itø not about speaking the perfect word. Nor is it about unrolling a laundry list of needs before some cosmic benefactor. It is a quiet, soulful connection with the source of our being opening the door to an intimate relationship with the One who invites us eternally home. Like the little boy who kept following his mother everywhere she went because he just wanted to be where she was, prayer is a profound desire to simply follow God that we might be where He is.

I like the way Kathleen Norris phrases it in her book, Amazing Grace. öPrayer is not doing, but being. It is not words but the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself. It is an invitation to recognize holiness, and to utter simple words - "Holy, Holy, Holy" - in responseö. (Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 350)

*O Gracious God... Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.*

American Quaker, John Greenleaf Whittier

Amen and AMEN!