

"A Praying Congregation: Questions and Beliefs"
Matthew 6:1-8

I love this little story in Jane Vennard's book *A Praying Congregation*. She tells of a conversation about prayer. She had asked this person to share about his prayer life and the church's ministry of prayer. She says, "He talked about becoming involved in a program of intercessory prayer as well as meeting weekly with a small group for Scripture study and prayer. He told us how his personal prayer life had deepened through these experiences in community and how grateful he was to his praying congregation. I asked him how his life had changed since he became more involved in prayer. 'Oh, my life has gotten much worse,' he said. 'I lost my job and my health insurance. My wife is not well, and my daughter's marriage is breaking up.' He paused, and then he smiled. 'But,' he said, 'I have the courage to face these difficulties, because I know, without a doubt, that God is with me. God does not make our lives easy or good. God gives us the strength to live our lives faithfully.'"

This story challenges many of the common assumptions about prayer, especially the notion that when we pray for something or someone, we would get what we asked for. Someone astutely asked last week through the prayer box this question, "what would have happened if Damar had died? Would the people have been convinced that prayer is useless?" Powerful question! Many people would have lost faith as we often associate answered prayer with getting what we want.

That is why today, I would like to invite you to journey with Jesus on the path of challenging common assumptions about prayer and to dig deeply into what we believe about prayer so that we may open anew to God's presence in our lives.

Jesus lived in a particular culture at a particular time where people had their own assumptions, beliefs, and methods, especially when it came to prayer. In the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew we hear Jesus challenging some of the misuses or misunderstandings of prayer.

The people would have been familiar with the practices of public prayers that heaped praise and power on the emperor and the leaders. Prayer was used as part of the patronage system of glorifying the patrons of the city and those who fund the public works. In a way, God was also seen as the ultimate patron. That is how many people in the ancient world saw God. The Roman Empire of the first century had the belief system of *quid pro quo* prayer, where one asks God for a favor and then would offer something to the gods. The deity needed sacrifices and praise in order to dispense favors. Those who fell on hard times were seen as cursed by God. Prayer became a tool for the human ego to show or seek God's favor.

Jesus knew about the temptations of people to use prayer to get what they wanted, whether from society or from God. Jesus knew about the patronage system and how it was used to control people and to maintain the power of the elite. Jesus challenged these ways of thinking by telling his followers that God was not a heavenly benefactor who

needed praise and adoration in order to bestow favors. The human systems of power and esteem have no place in the Kingdom of God. God was the opposite of that kind of system. Prayer is to be about a transformative relationship that turns our world of fear and anger upside down for the sake of healing and peace. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed a vision where doing God's work in the world is the motivation without the rewards that appeal to our egos and social systems that oppress and abuse the needy. The main remedy which Jesus offers to the social ills of the systems of domination in our world is the practice of spirituality in secret. This is not about being modest in prayer or not talking about one's faith in public. It is about really connecting with God. Let's listen to Jesus' words according to Matthew 6:1-8

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Only when we learn to surrender are we able to allow God into our lives to heal them. Jesus' actions and teachings followed the same pattern. He did not seek social status or power according to the ways of the empires of his time. In fact, he was willing to face death instead of using the means of violence and control to spread his message. The followers of Jesus are invited to follow in his footsteps to let go of the pressures to find happiness in security, control, success, and power.

In order to get to the heart of prayer in the way of Jesus, we are invited to revisit our assumptions and beliefs about prayer. Think of the first time someone introduced you to prayer. What was it like? Were you instructed in positive nurturing ways or was a fear-based experience? Were you given a specific format that still dominates your prayer life today?

Two thoughts that really speak to me about prayer today. One is from St. Teresa of Avila from the 16th Century, who wrote that the greatest difficulty in prayer is that people do not believe God is with them. We may think that God is up in heaven or that we are separate from God or that we are on our own. The second thought about prayer is from Jane Vennard who notes that, "If we believe that prayer is our natural, primary language, then we do not have to learn how to pray. Instead, we have to remember how to pray...I believe

that anything we do that honors, strengthens, or deepens our relationship to God can become a form of prayer... To fashion our actions into prayers, we need to examine our intention for the activity and God's intention for us. I believe that God intends for us to live according to God's desire that everyone participate in bringing about the reign of God –a world where justice and peace prevail. Therefore, a person swimming as part of her rehabilitation from surgery can turn that action into prayer when she honors God's desire for her wholeness and healing and responds by offering the period of exercise to God...With the intention to honor God, we can make everything we do a prayer if our actions contribute in some way to a just and peaceful world." Imagine if we looked at prayer as a remembering of our inner language of divine love. It is inscribed on our hearts and deep within our souls. This would allow us to see art, music, movement, silence, nature, scriptures, stories, conversations, acts of service, and all of life as opportunities to connect with God.

I find the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Teresa of Avila and Vennard to be so freeing because they open the doors wide open for prayer. Aligning our intentions with God's intentions of love and justice become the center of our daily life of prayer. One of the things I learned early on in the practice of Centering Prayer was to focus on my intention and my desire to spend time with God. Even if I could not let go of my busy mind or felt agitated, the invitation was to focus on the intention as it is the key to our connection to God. There is great spiritual wisdom in this as prayer can expand beyond our fears and judgments.

I invite you today to pray with me the prayer which Jesus taught the disciples, and which is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew and has become known to us as the Lord's Prayer. We will use a version of it from the Anglican Church of New Zealand. Prepare your heart for prayer. Center yourself. Allow an intention to emerge in you about your desire to deepen your connection to God.

The New Zealand Anglican Lord's Prayer

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.
Amen.