

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday July 25, 2010

Proper 12C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” It is a request spiritual leaders of all times and traditions get asked. When we see someone who is far more accomplished than we and able to do what we would like to emulate, we ask for instruction. As we continue reading Luke’s Gospel, you will notice that Jesus is frequently in prayer. In fact, before every major decision or action Jesus is usually found praying. Now Jesus’ disciples were all good Jews. They knew the Jewish prayers. They certainly knew how John’s disciples prayed. But they saw Jesus in prayer and they knew that when He prayed there was something special about His prayer. “Teach us the way to pray”, they asked.

The Church and many of us are burdened by centuries of preaching and techniques concerning the “right way” to pray. If you go to Barnes & Noble, you’ll find shelves of books instructing us in prayer. If you read enough on the subject, you would be tempted to give up. Many, I think have given up - thinking our efforts are flawed and doomed to failure. That’s why Jesus’ answer is so wonderfully simple. For over two thousand years, it is the one prayer that all Christians remember. When I make visits to old age homes and the patients seem nonresponsive, the two things that bring them into the present are the Lord’s Prayer and Communion. So, let’s examine why this prayer is so simple yet so powerful.

First, Jesus tells his disciples that it is a conversation – so know and acknowledge with whom you are speaking. Yes, Jesus tells us that God is transcendent (Who art in Heaven) and beyond our knowledge and understanding (Holy is your Name). Jesus’ prayer names that and

when we say it we recognize the unique holiness of God. But that is only part of it! What about the “Our Father”, the “Dad/Papa” part? Jesus’ prayer asks us to acknowledge the relationship we and God have with one another. That God, however different and transcendent God may be, is the Biblical God who wants to pitch his tent with us, who is always with us just as we are always inseparable from God.

For many people today, that is the hard part. As we became more and more in control of our world and lives (or at least think we are!), God, it seems, got pushed further and further “out there somewhere” – at least in our own minds. When I was growing up in the 50s and early 60s I often heard people say, “Well, I may not attend any particular church, but that doesn’t mean I am not religious.” In the intervening forty years, that has morphed into, “I may not be religious but that doesn’t mean I am not spiritual.” I am not criticizing anyone. People really feel and believe that and I honor others’ feelings and beliefs. I am just stating a reality that I think has an enormous effect on how we approach prayer. However, Jesus tells us that when we pray we should be aware of our close and eternal connectedness with our Creator, our Father. Nothing could be more biblical than that!

Next, Jesus asks us to be aware of and acknowledge that God is in control and it is what God wants that is important (“Your Kingdom come”). This may be the hardest part for many people today. It is hard for me also. Our culture tells us that not only are we in control, but that our wishes should determine the outcome of everything. Praying these words brings God’s kingdom and primacy into our thoughts. That pours some cold water on the current practice of praying to God as if God were room service.

Now Jesus gets right to it with the asking: “Give us...; forgive us...;lead us...”; deliver us...” Jesus tells us to be really direct about this. You notice that there isn’t any flowery buttering up of God. There’s no “Dear Lord”; no “good and gracious God”; no “Blessed Sweet Jesus”. We are not usually so direct when we converse with one another. But Jesus tells us to go

for it! God knows our needs. God knows who we are and how we can hurt and harm one another and be hurt. God knows we live in a perilous world where things can get so bad it tests our faith. God knows that the world is not perfect and that when injustice and evil rain down upon us God is our sole hope and refuge.

But as we pray these words, we also have to listen and to see ourselves as we are; dependent, guilty - capable of hurt and injustice, easily lost or led astray, and vulnerable.

Jesus continues instructing his disciples through parables. He tells them to be insistent in prayer. He tells us to shameless ask, knock and seek. God is a loving parent who will give us what we need as we come to realize the difference between our needs and wants. God discerns what is best and will care for us even if we fail to understand it. God knows us better than we know ourselves and in prayer will send the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness with sighs too deep for words.

It is impossible to sugar coat our reading from Hosea. It is scandalous. I noticed our layreader's eyes got really big when she read the opening sentences. If we have any doubts about whether God listens to us and cares about us we can read Hosea's description of the relationship between God and Israel. It was written during a time when the people were chasing after foreign Gods and relying on their own schemes and military alliances and power for their security. It was a time when justice and mercy took back seat to wealth and power. Listen to God's cry to Hosea. This is not a God who is "out there" somewhere. This is a God who is vulnerable in God's own love for us. A God who tells Hosea, "You want to know how I feel? Go marry a whore and parent children with her and then you'll find out!" Yes, it is shocking and patriarchal, but underneath it is the cry of a lover. This not a God "out there", but a God as deeply wounded as a betrayed faithful lover.

When I was training at St. Bart's in New Your City and working with the 20s-30s group, I did a Bible study that included a young French woman. We were studying the Book of Amos

– another tough book where God really lets us know what God thinks and feels. When people commented that God really had an attitude, she was upset. It was frightening to her. I think a lot of people may feel that way. But I have to wonder what would the alternative be to a God who has no attitude? Who would want to be in relationship with another who has no emotional connection with us. Who would want connection with another where the relationship has no affect on him or her or his or her life and being?

For better or worse, God knows us and our needs and still wants to pitch God's tent with us.

Let us pray: Dear God in You we live and move and have our being. Make us aware of this reality and that you give us all we need to be and to grow into our fullest selves. Make us mindful we are always vulnerable yet always in your care; always imperfect, yet always fully loved; always distracted; yet always led by you. Help us to hear your voice. Amen.