

The Basic Ingredients of Prayer

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – February 15, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Matthew 6:5-18

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.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This week, we continue our six-week series on prayer:

A Life of Prayer. Today, we consider some of the essentials in our prayers and our prayer life.

The basics?

Sermon series are planned well in advance. Weekly themes are drafted and reviewed. Scripture passages are selected. Usually, these background studies end up pretty close to what I originally envisioned they would be. But this series on prayer is different. Perhaps it is because prayer is so personal. Perhaps prayer simply resists over-analysis. Perhaps God is working hard on me, pointing me in directions I would never have headed on my own. Whatever the reason, today’s study is a case in point.

When I began work on this study, I was going to take the Lord’s Prayer as a model for our own prayers and then look at some other models or patterns of prayer, such as ACTS (A**d**oration, C**o**nfession, T**h**anksgiving, S**u**pplication). Such models are helpful, but as I read and re-read Jesus’ warnings about hypocrisy and “empty phrases,” I came to focus on a deeper meaning of “basic ingredients.” What must be basic to all prayer and why?

John Calvin

‘going to work’

My God, Father and Savior, since you have commanded us to work in order to meet our needs, sanctify our labor that it may bring nourishment to our souls as well as to our bodies. Make us constantly aware that our efforts are worthless unless guided by your light and by your hand. Make us faithful to the particular tasks for which you have bestowed upon us the necessary gifts, taking from us any envy or jealousy at the vocations of others.

Give us a good heart to supply the needs of the poor, saving us from any desire to exalt ourselves over those who receive our bounty. And if you should call us into greater poverty than we humanly desire, save us from any spirit of defiance or resentment, but rather let us graciously and humbly receive the bounty of others. Above all, may every temporal grace be matched by spiritual grace, that in both body and soul we may live to your glory.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was one the great Protestant reformers. This prayer is from a collection of everyday prayers Calvin wrote for the people of Geneva, Switzerland. These prayers reflect his conviction that our spiritual faith must be matched by our practical application.

Building a trusting relationship

Today's passage is taken from the Sermon on the Mount.¹ Jesus has retreated from the crowds and has gathered his disciples around him. In the very center of this long block of teaching, Jesus turns to the subject of prayer. But before teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus warns them about the basics. They are not to be hypocrites. They are not to pray so that everyone can see what good "prayers" they are. When they fast, they ought not to look they are fasting! They are not to pile up a bunch of empty phrases in their prayers. In all this, Jesus is pushing his disciples toward prayer that is grounded in sincerity and honesty, humility and forgiveness - these are the basic ingredients of prayer that is grounded in true faith! Why?

In the Bible, trust is a good synonym for faith. When we say that we have faith in Jesus Christ, we mean that we trust Jesus - completely and utterly. Now, all of us are experienced at building trusting relationships with others, or at least trying to. We know that building trust is not easy. It takes time. We risk trusting a person in small matters so that we might come to trust them in large matters. We know that trust is fragile. Trust takes a long time to build but it can disintegrate in a moment of betrayal. We know that trust must be cherished and protected. And . . . we know that hypocrisy and empty talk are not the way to build trust!

Prayer is conversation with God; conversation that is to be grounded upon trust. So, just as we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don't hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don't hesitate; they trust God!

Indeed, with God, this is all much easier than it is with any other person we might seek to know and trust. My wife, Patti, knows me well; we trust each other as much as two people can. But she can't read my mind (though I wonder at times!). But God our Father knows what we need before we ask him (v. 8). God's Spirit lifts to God our deepest prayers, so deep that we can't even find the words (Romans 8:26-27).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor who publicly opposed the Nazis from 1933 until his execution. In 1943 he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was jailed by the Nazis and later hung.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

'condemned to death'

O Lord God,
Great is the misery that has come upon me.
My cares overwhelm me: I am at a loss.
O God, comfort and help me.
Give me strength to bear what you send,
And do not let fear rule over me.
As a loving Father, take care of my loved ones,
My wife and children.

O merciful God,
Forgive all the sins I have committed
Against you and against my fellow men.
I put my trust in your grace,
And commit my life wholly into your hands.
Do with me as is best for you,
For that will be best for me too.
Whether I live or die, I am with you,
And you are with me.
Lord, I wait for your salvation
And for your kingdom.

Prayers built upon trust

It is in the context of this deep, abiding trust in God that Jesus' teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. He points them toward God's kingdom and teaches them to rely completely upon God, even for the bread they eat. The disciples are to trust in God's forgiveness, even as they forgive others. Condemned by the Nazis, a modern-day disciple, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would pray, "I put my trust in your grace and commit my life wholly in your hands."

Whether we are praising God or thanking him. Whether we are confessing or asking. Whether we come to God with a peaceful heart or an angry one. In all this, we trust that God loves us and hears us and answers us. The basic ingredients of prayer are the ingredients that build trust between two persons: honesty, sincerity, caring, thanking, appreciating, loving, serving . . . add to this list yourself. And in the end, pray with a trusting heart. Amen.

¹Last August's sermon series was on the Sermon on the Mount. The Background Study for August 24, 2003, focused on the Lord's Prayer and is available on-line at www.standrewcl.org. Simply click on "Sermon Background Studies" and you'll be taken to the archive for all the studies, going back to 2002!

Daily Bible Readings

(passages about trusting in God)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Jeremiah 17:7-8 "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord"</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 22 Abraham trusts God so much that he is willing to do the unthinkable!</p>
<p>Day 3 Romans 4 This can be a little difficult to understand, but Paul is saying that Abraham's trust in God (his faith/ his belief in God) is what made him right with God (Abraham's righteousness)</p>	<p>Day 4 Psalm 115 "Trust in the LORD"</p>
<p>Day 5 Micah 7:18-20 "Who is a God like you?" The LORD is faithful and trustworthy. He is compassionate and will cast away our sins.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at

www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Spend some time reflecting on the process of building trust. How do we go about it? What really helps to move the process along? What are some pitfalls? Do you have stories of trust or break-downs in trust that you would be willing to share with others? How do your conversations with those whom you trust deeply differ from conversations with others?
2. How can our experiences at building trust guide our prayer life? Why do you think Jesus focused on hypocrisy in prayers? I've met many non-Christians who want to throw at us something about all those "hypocrites in the pews." What do you think Jesus meant by hypocrisy? How would we begin to eliminate hypocrisy from our conversations with God?
3. In reflecting on the Lord's Prayer, Eugene Boring notes that our prayer language is not "informational." How could it be? What can you tell God that he doesn't already know? Jesus teaches his disciples that prayer language is "confessional." By this we don't mean merely the listing of all our sins. Instead, by "confessional" we mean language that expresses our deepest faith and convictions. Boring calls it the "insider language of the community of faith." We don't pray for our "daily bread" because we think God doesn't know this or even to persuade him to provide it. Jesus taught us to pray this way so that we might confess to God our need of and dependence upon him. Discuss what you think Boring means by "confessional language." Does this perspective help to free you from some of the hesitations you might have about prayer? How might this perspective reshape your prayers?