

“Holy Conversation”
Texts: Psalm 13 and Ephesians 3:14-21
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“I pray that...Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Ephesians 3:16-17

As with almost any profession, it turns out that being an ordained minister comes with wonderful perks. Free parking at most area hospitals is one. But, the extraordinary opportunity to walk with others through some of life’s most significant moments would be at the top of my list. Even though I’ve only been ordained a little over eighteen months, I’ve already been privileged to celebrate births, baptisms, weddings, and other joyful life transitions. I’ve also witnessed the tender and vulnerable moments of grief, pain, and loss. There are many good reasons to follow a call to parish ministry, but the chance to be a witness to God’s presence in the lives of others is the highest peak.

There are, of course, also the valleys. Mostly these are the minor annoyances that don’t make it into the seminary curriculum. I have not seen the opening monologue of Saturday Night Live in over two years. A Sunday tee time is out of the question. There’s the unrelenting regularity of bulletin, newsletters, and Session meetings. And then there is the somewhat awkward topic of prayer before meals. Many of my minister friends tell stories about becoming the designated pray-er in their family the moment they decided to go to seminary. As the son and husband of ordained ministers, I am merely a part of the rotation. But the question of whether and how to pray before meals with friends, relatives, colleagues, church members, and even people I hardly know still challenges me on an almost daily basis. Do I go ahead with a prayer and risk being seen as the pious, overbearing, embarrassing pastor? Or do I skip the prayer and leave people wondering if the minister is in fact a heathen? You can see my quandary!

It’s a minor issue, whether or not to pray before a meal, but I think it is also symptomatic of a widespread discomfort in our churches with the topic of prayer. Many of us are unclear about what exactly prayer is and does. Some have abandoned the practice altogether. Others continue a disciplined prayer life, as Barbara Brown Taylor has written, “just like they brush their teeth—once in the morning and once in the evening as part of a spiritual hygiene program.”ⁱ

In our Adult Sunday school class, we have been studying some of the great prayers of the Old Testament, and I have been surprised by the great diversity of occasions and ways in which our faith ancestors prayed to God. Their reasons for turning to God were as diverse and complex as are ours. They prayed for help and rescue, they prayed for forgiveness and grace, they prayed for the wellbeing of others and themselves, they prayed for their nation and for creation. There are selfish prayers and stunningly noble ones. There are many reasons to pray.

One of the most enlightening of these Old Testament prayers is hardly a prayer at all. It comes from the Israelites who are slaves of Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. The writer of Exodus says that the chosen people groaned under their slavery and cried out. An exhausted, desperate, anguished cry. The writer does not say that the Israelites cried out **to God**. What he does say is that their cry for help rose to God. They cried out, releasing painful words that also contained a seed of hope, and God chose to hear their cries.ⁱⁱ Thus begins a long and intimate conversation between God and humanity. The Bible asserts that we are heirs of and participants in this conversation.

But we live in a time when the dialogue seems to have ceased. Rarely do we have a clear sense that God is speaking to us; and we are more than a little skeptical of those who claim to hear from God regularly. Reading these great stories of prayer in the Bible can leave us feeling disheartened. Why has God stopped speaking? When did the conversation end? It's a question that pastors encounter often, at times when God's silence is deafening.

Every time I consider the seeming silence of God in the contemporary world, I can't help but think of the amount of noise in our culture. If God were indeed speaking, how would we ever hear the words in a society that is flooded with information and babble? Perhaps the sense that God is not speaking is actually an indication that we have stopped listening. Or, as a friend has put it, if you feel a growing distance between yourself and God, who do you think moved?

The practice of prayer, as it is modeled for us in the Bible, is one of active listening and open conversation, in which each party is vulnerable to the other. It is rooted in a deep and intimate relationship with the God who created the world and who knows each of us better than we know ourselves. We pray because we know and love the God to whom we pray, and we pray (like the Israelites in bondage) because we must pray.

The passages we just read from scripture constitute a case in point for the necessity of prayer. For very different compelling reasons, the Psalmist and the writer of Ephesians have both reached a point at which they must cry out to God. Their words illuminate for us the reasons why prayer is the preeminent practice of faithful people.

For both authors, the act of prayer begins with a counter-cultural assertion: the acknowledgement that we are not God. The very act of prayer is a confession of human limits. We pray for ourselves when the complexities and stresses of life are more than we can handle. We pray for others because we know that humans alone cannot heal the brokenness that surrounds us. Our prayers bridge the gaps of distance and time that we cannot cross alone—I'll be praying for you. Prayer is the acknowledgment of who we are in the light of God's power—creatures, not the Creator.

I say that this is a counter-cultural assertion, that humans have limits. I do not need to chronicle for you the impact of ignoring human limitations—each day's news is full of examples. Even our commercials show the tendency. Here's an example: the *PSP 3000* is the latest version of the PlayStation Portable, which is a handheld video game console made by Sony. Lately, Sony has been advertising this product by use of a captivating Internet and television commercial.ⁱⁱⁱ The ad shows two human hands holding the *PSP 3000*, which is then transformed into a number of different fanciful images, each

demonstrating a function of the product. There are vacation pictures from a Europe trip, movie trailers, sporting events, roadmaps, and finally an image of the entire world. Throughout the commercial, a rock band plays a rousing version of a song that I learned in church. The words are slightly altered. The band sings, "you've got the whole world in your hands." Maybe I'm making too much of one advertisement, but I don't think so. Instead, I think this is only one example of the ubiquitous notion that the world belongs to us. It is a direct negation of the Christian belief that God is in control. We do not hold the whole world in our hands, even when we hold a *PSP 3000*. Only God's hands hold the world. Prayer is an acknowledgement of the power and holiness of God.

But prayer is also conversation. God is not only holy and all-powerful; God chooses to be present in our human lives. In the life of Jesus Christ, we see the possibility of human relationship with God. When the author of Ephesians prays for the community, he not only acknowledges God's power and holiness, he also prays "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...that you may know the love that surpasses knowledge" The hope and promise of prayer is that God is available to us, not wholly other, but wholly present.

Two weeks ago, we Presbyterians celebrated the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the founder of our tradition. In honor of the anniversary, Peter Steinfels of the New York Times wrote a fascinating column on the impact of Calvin. He writes, "Calvin's legacy has been traced in everything from modern marriage and modern science to modern liberal government and of course modern capitalism. By many accounts, he is a major source of modernity's very understanding of the self."^{iv} Steinfels is right about Calvin's impact and his emphasis on understanding the self, but he should have gone one step further. In his massive work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes extensively about self-knowledge, it's true. But for Calvin, knowledge of the self is always and inevitably rooted in knowledge of God. As one Calvin scholar has written, "it is a knowledge that entails **loving** that which is known, and in the act of loving God people are transformed and come to know themselves differently."^v No wonder Calvin believed that prayer is not a stone thrown into the darkness, but rather an intimate holy conversation between God and humans.

The most stirring examples of these conversations are found in the Psalms. Take Psalm 13, for example: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? The prayer begins with doubt and anger. And yet, through that anger, the Psalmist testifies to a deep and abiding relationship with God. As Joanna proclaimed last week, you can only reach the deepest levels of frustration with those whom you love the most. This is unmistakably the case in the relationship between God and the chosen people in the Old Testament. The question, "How long?" contains within it the expectation that suffering is coming to an end. It bears the trust that only results from a long and complicated relationship, full of ups and downs. It is this trust that emerges at the end of the Psalm, when the writer can sing to the Lord and rejoice in a salvation he has yet to experience. That is trust. That is hope. That is holy conversation.

Bill Moyers, before he was a PBS journalist, served as Special Assistant to President Lyndon Johnson. One Sunday he was invited to the White House for dinner. Since Moyers is an ordained Baptist minister, the President asked him to bless the meal. As he was praying, the President could not hear him and said to Moyers, "Bill, I can't hear you. Speak up man, speak up!" Moyers responded, "Mr. President, I am not speaking to you." And with

that there was a very long pause. The President was silent then lowered his head for the rest of the prayer.^{vi} (I think I'll share that one with my colleagues in ministry).

Why do we pray? Because the conversation changes us, deepens our relationship with God, and brings us closer to one another.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, author Anne Lamott writes about why she makes her son go to church every Sunday against his six-year old will. She writes, "The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, who practice their faith. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful."^{vii}

I pray because the women and men whose faith in God I admire most are people of deep prayer. One of these people is a man named Ted Purcell, a retired Baptist minister in North Carolina. Ted summed up his lifelong journey with the meaning of pray in this way, "I used to think that monks and nuns took the easy way out by joining intentional communities and spending all their time in prayer. Fifty years later, I am absolutely convinced that those prayers hold the world together." I pray because I believe that the church at prayer is the church in action. I believe, with Karl Barth, that to clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of this world, and of our lives.

The act of prayer deepens our relationship with God and gives us space to hear God's call. Regular practices of prayer compel Christian action and deepen Christian devotion.

Another preacher puts it this way: the pinnacle of Christian worship and its most challenging moment, is that risky, countercultural, against-our-natural-inclination moment when someone stands amid the congregation and says, "Let us pray."^{viii} At that moment, the powers of sin and death at work in the world are put on alert that their days are numbered. We are transformed into willing servants of an almighty and holy God who is also a conversation partner.

So, Let **us** pray. Let us go regularly to the wellsprings of prayer that nourish our souls and compel us to serve a world in need. Let **us** pray, and so become a congregation deeply attuned to God's will. Let **us** pray. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, Cowley Publications, 1999, p. 202.

ⁱⁱ See Exodus 2:23-25

ⁱⁱⁱ See the commercial at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFH94lsE_g

^{iv} Peter Steinfelds, "Man of Contradictions, Shaper of Modernity. Age? 500 Next Week." In *The New York Times*, July 4, 2009.

^v George W. Stroup, *Before God*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, pp.156-159.

^{vi} One account of this conversation can be found in an article by Richard Mouw at <http://www.faithandleadership.com/blog/03-31-2009/richard-mouw-prayer-beijing>

^{vii} Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anchor Books, 2000, p. 100

^{viii} See William H. Willimon. Blogging toward Sunday on "Theolog: the Blog of the Christian Century." The Christian Century Foundation. Luke 11:1-13, July 2007. www.theolog.org.