

Maybe you've heard the story of a man looking out of his upper-story apartment window one autumn night down onto the street below. His attention is drawn to a man on his hands and knees apparently shuffling thru great piles of leaves which the winds have deposited in the gutter of the street. The man on the ground keeps at this for some time until finally the man observing him from the window above can no longer contain his curiosity. He goes downstairs and walks across the street to the man pawing thru the piles of leaves under the streetlight.

"Friend, I've been noticing you digging thru these leaves. May I ask what you're doing?"

"I'm looking for my car keys."

"But you've been at this for some time. Are you sure you dropped your car keys right here?"

"No. Actually I dropped my keys at the end of the block, way down there. But it's dark down there, and I can see a lot better here under the streetlight."

That guy was taking action, but I'm afraid a lot of our action looks pretty silly from above. I'm afraid prayer—the first of the spiritual disciplines we emphasize in this church—feels to most people a lot like looking for his car keys feels to that man. We know that without a sense of the abiding presence of God our lives are likely to spin out of control, that the rat race will eventually wear us down, that we will find ourselves pursuing our own agendas which will only leave us hollow in the end. We know, instinctively, that whatever is not from God, renewed and redeemed by God, is going to die. We know prayer is important—yet most people spend about 99% of their time and energy on doing more, working more, playing more, entertaining more, buying more, self-improving and self-medicating all the more. We keep spending our best energies where we know, deep down, we will not find fulfillment—but the familiar, seductive streetlights of pop culture and familiarity and comfort keep bringing us back to keep trying. We want to take charge, take action, do something!

Ninety percent of Americans say we pray regularly; three-quarters of us say we pray every day. (That's more than those who will exercise, go to work, or drive a car today.) We hear with admiration that George Muller in Bristol would pray for hours every morning that God might meet the needs of his hundreds, thousands of orphans, that Martin Luther would pray two hours or three every morning before he pursued the actions which changed the face of Europe, that Jonathan Edwards and other saints most powerfully used by God were likewise giants in prayer.

That's all fine, but it's a different question when it comes to how is our own prayer life. Most of us, I suspect, feel ambivalent about prayer: we know we ought to, we know it's good for us, sometimes we keep our good prayer habits, but other times we lapse or we may feel passive-aggressive toward God. We probably get frustrated. But we hesitate to get angry. We feel guilty for not praying more, or with a better attitude, or that it just isn't working very well—and people conclude they can't live very well with God—prayer is hard—but we can't live at all without God.

[In his marvelous book Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference Philip Yancey cites a relationship with God which no doubts captures the reality for too many. Jonathan Aitken, a former member of Parliament in Great Britain, writes of how he once viewed God as divine Bank Manager: “I spoke with Him politely, visited His premises intermittently, occasionally asked Him for a small favour or overdraft to get myself out of difficulty, thanked Him condescendingly for His assistance, kept up the appearance of being one of His reasonably reliable customers, and maintained superficial contact with Him on the grounds that one of these days He might come in useful.” [p 46] (Once Aitken was sentenced to prison, things changed—and he learned a much better basis for his life, including a much better basis for his approach to prayer.)]

You and I know God’s solution to the problem of a shallow life, a shallow prayer life. Bottom line, above and beyond and before all else (this would be the extremely concise version of the sermon!) the best answer to the question “Why pray?” is “Because Jesus did.” And because Jesus tells us to.

It would be nice if it were so simple; if we were such disciples that Jesus’ telling us made it so. But for most of us still hanging around down here, it is not so easily so. (As one theologian [Daniel Hawk] has observed, “The basic human problem is that everyone believes there is a God and I am it.” All the way back to the Garden: “I want to be able to decide to eat what I want, and Nobody can tell me otherwise...” And prayer becomes a constant lifeline back into the reality that there is a God, and I am not It, not He. “Pray without ceasing...” and live in reality.)

We all have our ups and downs with prayer. (After all, we live somewhere between the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem.) Jesus perfectly models the life of prayer to which He calls us. We may learn from Him.

1 Jesus reminds us prayer is not a duty, but a loving relationship. Prayer is not a striving, not a grim responsibility—but is meant to be first a loving relationship. Jesus has taught His disciples uniquely. Maybe you have seen photos of prayer wheels on which devout Buddhists in Nepal inscribe their prayers, hoping that with each revolution of these wheels, dotting the fences and landscape like a sea of miniature windmills, their prayers goes up to heaven. (At one time these prayer propellers were individual, people-powered, hand-cranked, then wind-powered. Some enterprising priests spin giant versions of these propellers all day long in front of gold-domed temples, sending up prayers to the heavens not one at a time but as a veritable assembly line of prayers. Now high-tech Buddhists download prayers onto their hard-drives, which spin at 5400 rpms with all those prayers being propelled upward. Before we laugh or chide, however—we remember that apart from what Jesus has shown us, such practices are not self-evidently ridiculous. Why would more not be better?)

Jesus had to confront and correct a different understanding about prayer in His own tradition. There was in place, in His day, a robust system of prayer and temple sacrifice machinery, operated generally according to the Scriptures. Imagine their indignation when Jesus made fun of the officials’ elaborate, professional-sounding words and phrases and habits. “Pray like this—it’s as simple as saying, “Our Father who art in Heaven...Our divine Daddy, the One who lives in heaven...”—(although it’s an irony

that Jesus intended this to be a general format for our spontaneous, personal prayer rather than a matter of repetition.)

It's almost impossible for us to imagine how iconoclastic it was when Jesus called the Almighty God, the Transcendent One before whom heaven and nature bowed low, "Abba," or "Daddy." Not one time in the entire Old Testament does anyone address Yahweh, God the Father, as "Father." Way too familiar, too disrespectful, too presumptuous. Yet Jesus is recorded in the four gospels alone as referring to the heavenly "Father" 170 times in this way, and as far as scholars know He was the radical; He was the One who burst thru centuries of sacred convention and tradition to Himself call, and invite His disciples to call God His Father, our Father.

We do not need to cringe before the all-powerful holy God. Jesus assures me I may offer to God, in genuine relationship, who and what I am this moment—not who and what I wish I were, or who and what I used to be. Prayer is a real-time conversation, between real, sentient, persons. (I keep reminding myself that those whose lives Jesus kept making new were not those religious experts who put on such a good outer show, but those unwilling any longer to keep up the pretexts: the prostitutes, the woman with the hemorrhage, the lepers, the crooked tax-gatherer, the outcasts.) Many of us do not feel like outcasts, by God's grace—but we must each enter into God's presence, into trusting conversation with the One who loves us, in humility. Jesus invites us to come before God with open and trusting hearts as a little girl comes to sit in the lap of her favorite grandmother.

[Remember Jesus' parable of the "scum of the earth" publican and the "most righteous of all" Pharisee who both went in to pray. Contrary to all religious convention, it was the humble sinner who went home justified, made right before God, invited into living communion and lifelong connection; it was the Pharisee, so sure he was superior to those around him, whose attitude continued to lock him away from the grace of God. "Apart from Me you can do nothing," Jesus reminded his disciples. When I forget that, I forget how to pray.]

2 It's equally impossible for us to imagine how iconoclastic it was for Jesus to enjoy, and to offer His disciples, free access for conversation with the Holy One: "ushering us before the throne of God," the King James imagery might put it. If you are each one of you in Christ an adopted child of the King, then you are granted free access to the King.

[[This privilege of access is hard for us to comprehend: an oriental king in those times could have his heavily armed guards execute on the spot anyone coming into his courtyard who displeased him, even though it was impossible for anyone not invited to come into his courtyard. (Or imagine the Imperial Palace, called the "Forbidden City" in Beijing in which the Emperor lived: ten thousand rooms, all behind walls, and the public never had access to any of them. Only on very rare official occasions could any commoner ever see the Emperor. There was no TV, no press coverage, no paparazzi, no documentaries—the Emperor was above, or behind, meeting with or being seen by the public.) Jesus changed all that: He offered you and me access to the Emperor of the Universe. We know that we take advantage of this access every time we pray.]]

Picture in our time a CEO of a huge-multinational corporation in luxurious offices at the top of a skyscraper. (When I was in corporate sales I never called on anyone of

such stature. But even mid-level managers I would call on in New York were protected behind a guard at the entrance into the building to verify my appointment with a phone call and issue me an ID badge or a pass, perhaps another who needed to see my ID badge before I could get onto the elevator, then another receptionist who would also act as gatekeeper to check who I was as I got off at the proper floor, and then probably a secretary to further insulate the person I wanted to see from people they didn't want to see. That's four different security personnel protecting people even at my level—imagine what security in those offices must be like now, post-September 11, for the really big-shots.)

And imagine you're the little child of that CEO. All those salespeople, and influence-peddlers, all the press, all the curious wanting to meet with the head decision-maker—blocked by multiple layers of security—technical and human. But imagine her child. By the authority of the CEO, her child is given automatic access and walks right into the penthouse level, past all those security persons, met with smiles and welcomes right on up and into her mommy's office at the top.

Jesus has come to bring us access to the Father. By His authority we are ushered past “security” into the access of the Most High God. It is not an innate right, but a God-given privilege which I do not often enough exercise or even remember to acknowledge. (The Father was never opposed against us—but apart from the invitation of Jesus we humans would never have known exactly how God is predisposed toward us. Nature is quite severe and capricious, when you think about it. (It's easy to forget how unusual is Jesus' approach to the Divine: Jews did not enjoy this access; Canaanites and Aztecs and Africans, who thought they needed to sacrifice the lives of their own to gain favor with the gods, did not; Muslims do not enjoy this access; Hindus do not enjoy this access.)

We disciples of Jesus are given this access because He assures us the Father loves us and wants relationship with us—but also because the CEO over all the universe is looking for people whom He can use, thru whom He can employ His Holy Spirit. We just celebrated Pentecost! God offers each one of us the infinite power of His Holy Spirit, ready and eager to be used naturally and supernaturally thru whomever God may trust absolutely to do His will. (One reason Jesus accomplished such mighty deeds of healing and transforming the lives of others: He absolutely obeyed the Father (“I have come to do the will of Him who sent Me”) and therefore could be absolutely trusted with the Spirit of God and the power of Almighty God. Jesus modeled a basic attitude of prayer: “Anything You make clear to me, O God, I will do.” End of discussion.

3 Jesus also teaches us the reasons for our praying. We sometimes hear how helpful and therapeutic is the discipline of prayer—an opportunity to work on “my personal relationship” with God. (The “prayer doesn't change God, it changes me” school.) Of course we do value our “personal relationship” with God—there's no other genuine kind. But that sort of prayer (“I pray to check in or to hear what I have to say to God”) is closer to self-help, to perhaps journaling in words. These may be helpful exercises. But prayer involves openness and conversation between two persons.)

Jesus “prayed without ceasing” because He was far more at home with the Father than He seemed to be in this world. He have no indication he wondered whether God existed, or whether it was important to pray. He just prayed. As He prayed, He was able to keep in mind God's reality, God's perspective. He received strength to survive, and

overcome, the poison of His contemporary culture. “How long shall I have to put up with you, you wicked generation?” He asked more than once.) [And anyone not aware how toxic our popular culture has become is not awake!]

Thru prayer Jesus renewed His vision as well as His energy and commitment to live his God-indwelt life in mutual partnership with God here on earth—exactly as Jesus calls us to do. Jesus could never have lasted in His ministry without continually “filling His cup,” “recharging His batteries”—and by praying all the time is how He managed this. (“The Son can do nothing apart from the Father.”)

Jesus says He could do nothing on His own—and I think I can get by without an earnest life of disciplined praying? What I can get without praying—maybe—is the superficial kind of task-oriented, do more, go faster, keep blaming everyone else, pile-up-the-toys-and-the-thrills-before-I die kind of life which is no lasting life at all.

The model and life of Jesus addresses a valid question concerning the way many of us in this church understand the purpose of prayer: what is the right relationship between prayer and action? Yes, we emphasize prayer. Does this mean we do not emphasize action or involvement? Do we embrace prayer as a means to escape?

The text we heard from Luke addresses the role prayer played in the life of Jesus. Jesus is plenty involved. Getting Himself in big trouble, actually for answering not to the rules or officials in a culture gone mad and a religious system gone off the tracks but for answering to the Father. Jesus broke the religious rules: He dared to heal someone on the Sabbath. He was not reticent, not passive, not “playing it safe.” He made them furious with His [un]authorized actions. But “during those days He went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.” [Lk 6:6-12]

Jesus was praying all the time: this is how He was able to stay as focused as He was. Prayer and direct conversation with the Father is how He managed to keep up His nerve, His strength, His vision, His obedience. His praying all the time is what made possible the actions of His life; His actions were courageous and powerful in alliance with the Spirit of God because of His ceaseless prayer.

We continue to pray not so we can feel OK while we withdraw into lives of passivity—I don’t know many of you in danger of that luxury—but to continue to learn how we live in powerful partnership with His Spirit. Praying to God is what frees us to live lives of focus and action and power. Not someone else’s life: your own. Not someone else’s assignment: your own. Not someone else’s ideal: God’s ideal. Prayer, with practice, is how you can know and do what God asks of you.

To live the will of God is no small thing. To live on the side of the angels, to live as Jesus lived, is no small thing. Chairman Mao thought he was right. Stalin thought he was right. Khrushchev thought he was right. Churchill thought he was right. Chamberlain thought he was right. Hitler thought he was right. Milosevic thought he was right. Putin and Achmedinajab and bin Laden think they’re right. Men of action, almost every one. Aristotle, Nietzsche, Kant, Sartre, Camus, Derrida thought they thought they were right. In our present day, Senators Clinton, McCain, and Obama each has a very different vision for the future of our country—and they all think they’re right. To think we’re right and spring into action, apart from Jesus, is a dangerous business.

Even those siding with Jesus and springing into well-intentioned action, apart from prayer and guidance, can create havoc. Imagine the finest Symphony Orchestra,

peopled with the most capable and well-intentioned musicians eager to do their best. But without heeding the Director, even their noble efforts turn into a disaster. The first violin plays in the key he likes, the “second fiddle” in a moving but nonetheless totally different key. The rest choose as they like. The kettle drum player sets the tempo she chooses while the rest of the string section plays at a slower tempo to showcase their lyrical qualities. The horns play loud because they know they sound powerful playing loudly. The harpist is playing an altogether different melody entirely since the harp is so nicely suited for certain pieces. The cymbals player is practicing syncopation—and quite loudly—but seems to be the only one doing so. All doing their best, giving their best effort.

Musicians of this caliber are conscientious and happy to practice. The percussionists showed up to rehearse yesterday at 3 pm, the strings at 5, and the brass at 7:30 last night. Several, getting no word, did not show up at all. They all tried their best.

Imagine the symphony they play.

Action, apart from obedience to the Holy Spirit of God, is not necessarily a virtue. Action, even well-intended, does not necessarily lead to a better world.

Pray without ceasing.

Pray not as a substitute for your living your life. Pray as Jesus prayed, and so live as Jesus lived.

### **1Thessalonians 5:16-18**

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Do not quench the Spirit.

### **Luke 6:6-12**

On another sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched Him to see whether He would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against Him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." The man got up and stood there.

Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" After looking around at all of them, He said to him, "Stretch out your hand." The man did so, and his hand was restored. But the others were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Now during those days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and He spent the night in prayer to God.

