

“Prayer for a People Who Can’t Sit Still”

1 Kings 3: 5-12

Romans 8: 26-30

I’ve got a theory about people who drive down the street talking to themselves. Because my observation predates Bluetooth, I’m pretty sure my theory is true. People who drive down the street talking to themselves are really praying. They’re praying about how the guy better stop swerving into their lane and learn how to drive. They’re praying how they love the sunset and the clear blue skies. They’re praying how they wish it wouldn’t rain in torrents again. They’re praying that something they need goes on sale. They’re praying that their bosses – or one they hope will hire them - will get a clue. More often than not, they’re praying how much they need a break.

If you’d like to test my theory, follow one of these alone-in-his-car “pray-ers” into the parking lot at the grocery store or a hardware store. You’ll see a parking space open up just as they’re ready to turn the corner. That’s prayer answered. Voila. Still not convinced? Take a walk with a friend and quietly count the number of times you hear, “Thank God” coming out of their lips about the most random things. If that’s not prayer, what is?

We pray constantly. It’s just that sometimes we don’t know it.

Listen for yourself in some of these ways we pray: Just yesterday, a lot of us said aloud how we were glad for the first break from heat in nearly a month. Since you and I know that God makes the sun to shine, the clouds to scatter and the rain to fall, I’m gonna suggest that that was a Prayer of Thanksgiving. “I feel so bad! Why in the world did I do that?” Let’s chalk that up as a Prayer of Confession. “OMG” at the beginning or end of a text, e-mail, phone conversation or corner chat between high school girls? There’s a Prayer of Adoration or, I suppose, it could be for Supplication. “Heaven help us all?” There’s your prayer for Intercession. “Lord, have mercy?” You get the idea. We pray constantly! It’s just that sometimes we just don’t know it.

Yet you still might wonder if these sayings of exasperation, exuberance, or just plain anger, regret or sadness about something we’ve said or done or seen or heard “count” as prayers at all. I sincerely *do* believe that lending voice – aloud or in our heads – to our feelings is a way that the Holy Spirit can be helping us to search our hearts, recognize that we need to acknowledge something as bigger than ourselves, and offer that up in our own feeble way to the will and to the glory of God.

Maybe I *am* giving us a little too much credit. However, it is within God’s power that in God’s own way, by the workings of the Holy Spirit, that which could otherwise be left as an inadequate or unintended or even *lazy* response to something big can become in a certain way a meaningful impression on the universe if only because we’ve acknowledged the basic truth that you and I are not in this life alone.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, whose books are stacked on my shelves if you care to read more, would say that we pray - constantly - because we have a natural inclination for prayer. He calls

prayer our “native tendency.”¹ We invoke the name of the Lord with regularity and predictability, calling on God to fix this or that or maybe simply to be a part of some situation or another out of frustration, out of fear, out of gratitude, admiration, or hope whether we realize it or not because sometimes we think have no where else to go. In this respect, Fosdick wrote, prayer is a practice like breathing or eating in which people engage because we are human. Then afterward we argue about it as best that we can. Especially those who wonder aloud or to themselves whether or not we *need* to pray (or want to pray or even ever *have* prayed.)

I can just hear the skeptics, or the contrarians, or the down on their luck, “If our God is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, why pray at all?” If our God knows everything, is everywhere and controls everything, why in the world would we need to, or want to, feel the privilege to or even want to acknowledge that we’ve asked for or lifted up any prayer concerns at all? Fortunately, the Holy Spirit hears us in our weakness. The Holy Spirit interprets our weak thoughts and translates them from common words into prayers brimming with hope and possibility. Then, in God’s own way, our sort-of prayers bring us comfort and peace and resignation and joy which might be why we might immediately say when something good follows something bad that it must be a sign or an answer to our prayers that we hadn’t really thought about offering in the first place.

We live busy lives and prayer is sometimes something we feel like we don’t have time to squeeze in, so we squeeze it in naturally and constantly as we’re driving or walking or working or making supper out of a natural inclination to communicate with our creator, redeemer, sustainer and friend... and out of a deep rooted desire to be in community and help to form that community through our prayers if through no other mechanism. Because we have a natural inclination to not want to be alone and we have a natural, Christian compassion that motivates us to not leave anyone else along, either. Our congregation is testimony to this vitally important truth.

You see, prayer has the radical effect of holding the world together. Kathleen Norris wrote of this in her lovely book, *Amazing Grace*. While prayer may originate in our own desires, it quickly moves beyond them, into our life with others and toward a greater society. Norris tells us about Dorotheus of Gaza, a 6th century monk, who imagined our world “as a circle, with God at the center and our lives as lines drawn from the circumference toward the center. The closer the lines crowd in toward God, the closer they are to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.”² (This is worth repeating.) In this way, our simplistic prayers asking for this or that to benefit our lives or the immediate world around us move beyond privatized prayer that can function like a kind of pietistic agenda for one’s soul to become a profound, all-encompassing gratitude for what God has given us, including the trials and tribulations of our stark reality. In this way, our prayers ground us in a profound, all-encompassing gratitude for everything that God has given *to the community* in which we live with as a church and with our God. One prayer joins with another prayer joins with another prayer for someone in our midst or in the deep recesses of our hearts so that our prayers eventually converge upon one another and touch each other in a profound and life changing way. ...so that really, no one ever is alone. Our prayers bring us together constantly, but we just don’t seem to sit still long enough with that voice emerging from within to recognize it.

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962). p 1.

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). pp 58-61.

Too many people think that the “why” of prayer is results. What we can also, *otherwise* realize is that “results” are merely an ancillary benefit of all of our conversations with God which are themselves manifestations of our natural relationship with God. All of our conversations with God, whether they’re asking for this or that or bemoaning one truth over another - all of these prayers - are wonderfully authentic because they’re centered in our relationship with God and not an intended result from God.

For all of us who pray constantly, whether we realize it or not, I ask this of us today. In our conversations with God, in all of our off the cuff, while we’re rounding the bend, side street musings and street corner rants with God, in all of our soul-searching, pleading, thanksgiving and confessions to God may we allow ourselves one more moment to pray, and in that time, I ask that we sit still for only a moment of respect, and deliberately pray again if not for the first time. In so doing, we will demonstrate to ourselves and to others, if not to our God who knows anyway, that we respect as well as appreciate and honor and hope for and with the one who is at the heart of all things. I think this will lead each of us to even deeper sense of comfort and peace and resignation and joy - a deeper relationship with God and one another - knowing that we have participated with God in so much that’s happening in the world (Our own small little corner of the world and the larger world filled with others in so much need).

Because we are not alone! We are together with our church family and our Lord who helps us in our weakness for we know not how to pray. But the Spirit, with sighs too deep for words, connects our thoughts with our God and with all the saints to be a part of one large family created and sustained to glorify God and serve the Lord forever. Together. Because no one wants to be alone and so we pray. Thanks be to God.