

“The heart of God”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
February 9, 2020

Matthew 5:13-16 and 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

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One day, three friends decided to go for a hike. Joe, Bob, and Dave trekked deep into the wilderness, until eventually they ran up against a huge river. It was the rainy season, so the river was in full force, raging and violent. Their campsite was far beyond the other side of the river, so there was no turning back; they had to cross the river. They just had no idea how. But not to worry: these were men of faith, so Joe prayed to God, saying, “Please God, give me the strength to cross this river.”

Poof! God gave him big arms and strong legs; muscles rippled across his body. He swam to the other side. Admittedly, it took him two hours, and he almost drowned several times, but he made it.

Seeing this, Dave prayed to God, with a little addition, saying, “Please God, give me the strength *and the tools* to cross this river.” Poof! God gave him a rowboat, and he was able to row across the river in about an hour. Of course his boat almost capsized a couple times, but he made it.

Bob had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he made his own addition to the prayer, saying, “Please God, give me the strength and the tools, *and the intelligence*, to cross this river.” Poof! God turned Bob into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple hundred yards, and walked across the bridge. Dry as could be.¹

Though I have yet to see prayer answered in any of these ways, this is often how prayer is imagined in the popular consciousness. Prayer is like... a genie. It gives you things. All you have to do is be worthy.

It makes sense. We live in a world in which everything is for sale. So why would God be any different? Prayer becomes a bartering system. We list what we want: good health, a successful surgery, friends, wealth, happiness, safety for our children, a vacation to Hawaii. We submit this list to God, who becomes our friendly errand boy. If we pay him right (with faithfulness, with the right words), he'll bring us what we ask for.

When we don't get what we want, it must be our fault: we didn't believe enough, pray enough, tithe at church enough. Or, the even scarier conclusion: our errand boy has quit; we've been lied to; there is no God.

That may be why a lot of folks don't pray. Sometimes we just don't know how; we've never found the right words that release the genie from his lamp. Or, we get distracted; we didn't mean

¹ jokes.christiansunite.com

not to pray; we just got caught up in other stuff and forgot. Or, as is so often the case, prayer just doesn't seem to "work".

We all want to be... whole... one with the ground of our being. We put so much effort into trying to find God in our lives, when God has given us such a simple way to be in God's presence: prayer. It is, however, a different kind of prayer that brings us to the heart of God.

William Barclay once said, "Prayer is not a way of making use of God; prayer is a way of offering ourselves to God in order that [God] should be able to make use of us. It may be that one of our great faults in prayer is that we talk too much and listen too little. When prayer is at its highest, we wait in silence for God's voice to us."

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, says that the wisdom we seek is not ours but God's. It is a wisdom beyond our understanding, our language, our experience. So we're not going to get it from our own ideas, or wishes, or chatter. To discover God's truth, we must let God give it to us.

Elsewhere, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (8:26).

There's a truth here that we really need: We do not pray. We listen as God prays.

We open ourselves to the prayer of God within us.

In the heart of God, there is a conversation taking place, a constant exchange of creation and love and power. That is why we speak of God as Trinity, because God is not static, but always relational: Creator, Savior, Spirit; Father, Son, Holy Ghost; Mother, Daughter, Wisdom. God is talking to God's self. You were born from that speech. It is the source of everything true and good in you. Maybe it's time we did a little more eavesdropping—time we tuned in and listened.

What a different concept of prayer. The onus is not on us to be or do anything. It's a gift, a grace. It's there, always, just beneath the surface of life: the heart of God singing. All we have to do is open our hearts to it.

One kind of prayer that helps us do that is called contemplative prayer. It's a rich tradition, similar to meditation, dating to the early centuries of Christianity. It began when desert monks memorized and repeated verses of Scripture, not to study them but to empty themselves of everything but them, to become the word of God. Sometimes they would just repeat the name of Christ over and over.

It takes daily practice. It can be done alone or with others. It's a way of emptying oneself, so that there's room for God. It's like becoming a child again, when Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). It is a state of wonder, and honesty, and listening.

It's not about how it makes you feel; there may be no extraordinary peace or enlightenment that comes of it. That's more of our culture talking, and its obsession with results. This is just about being—resting—in God.

I remember one particularly hard day in high school. I was furious. I remember sitting in my bed, so upset, raging. And then I heard it: the soft song of a bird outside my window. I can't explain it, but as I listened to its song, everything else became silent: my interior monologue, my wounded pride, my anger. There was only the song of that bird. It felt timeless, perfect, a life and beauty that carried on, bigger than me, and yet including me.

That is prayer. It's less something we find, and more something that finds us. Sings to us, revealing the larger perspective of God.

We can hear that prayer of God's heart right now.

I invite you to sit comfortably, back straight, feet on the floor. Breathe deeply—in and out. Close your eyes. Now consider a word or phrase that speaks to God's presence. It could be a verse of Scripture, a quote. It could be the Aramaic *mar-an-a-tha*, "Come, Lord". It could be a name for God: God, Jesus, Father, Abba, Mother, Spirit, Creator. It could be a word: love, peace, joy, yes, open.

Once you've chosen your word, speak it silently, in your heart, over and over. If thoughts come to mind, let them pass and return to the word. Become the word.

Now, come back. Open your eyes. This is something you can do every day, in the same place, every morning and evening. You might use the same word or phrase for years. It will become a part of you. It will become a friend. It will become your heart. And in it, God will pray, from God's heart to yours. **Amen.**