

Sermon
Pentecost 12
Year C

[Genesis 18:20-32](#)
[Psalm 138](#)
[Colossians 2:6-15, \(16-19\)](#)
[Luke 11:1-13](#)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, blessed Trinity, + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I would first like to thank Jim and Mary for entrusting the pulpit to me today. May you not regret it.

It is particularly meaningful to be invited to preach today. All Saints' is something of a spiritual home for me. I visited for the first time on Christmas Eve in 2006...my first time in an Episcopal Church. On Nov. 4th, 2007 (All Saints day), I was confirmed on these steps. On June 21st, 2008, Laura and I were married in this sanctuary. Laura and I are now halfway through our drive to New Haven, CT, where I will begin attending seminary at Yale Divinity School. In three years—God willing and with the consent of the Bishop of Arizona— I will be ordained priest. Many who are here have been instrumental and affirming of where the discernment process has led me. For that, I offer my sincere thanks.

I am a member of a neo-monastic community that seeks to live out the values of the monastery in the world. The members of the community take vows in which we devote ourselves to prayer, to serve God, and to serve all people according to the Rule of St. Benedict. In terms of the rule, Benedictine monks strive to “receive all who enter as Christ.”

But a greater part of my desire to join the community is my own sense of inadequacy when it comes to prayer. How do you define prayer? What is it appropriate to pray for? How do I know if I am praying correctly? I identify quite regularly with Jesus's disciples. “Will someone teach me how to pray!”

In some sense, it is easy to pray. We pray first and foremost to praise God and to thank God; that's called worship. We ask God to pay attention. We ask God to intercede on our behalf and on behalf of others. All of these are appropriate ways to pray.

But prayer can also be used in awkward ways; years ago I noticed this as I came to realize that we tend to be very short-sighted and selfish in our prayers. “We ask God to intervene on behalf of those in need, but then we turn around and ask God for favors that will benefit us at another person's expense. We thank God for our blessings, but we rarely ask for wisdom in using those blessings for the sake of God's kingdom, since we already have other plans.”¹ Our *own* plans.

¹ <http://www.progressivetheology.org/SNT/SNT-2007.07.29.html>

In short, sometimes we may forget that God is not a vending machine. And to view God in such a way takes us into spiritually harmful territory. In the first place, it is demonstrably untrue that God can be expected to perform as a genie in a bottle. If one were to base one's faith on such a view of God, the person will surely be disappointed. Sadly, some Christians promise this vision to those who would seek our loving God ... a mirage of a God who can make hardship immediately go away, who answers their prayers with lavish materialism. This road tends to lead to disappointment. Second, a consequence of expecting God to give us whatever we ask for is resentment, or at the very least a questioning of God's love for us, when we do not get our way. Some may be led to feel deserted by the God who promised to love them. The truth is that they are indeed loved. However, our relationship with God is not based on an exchange of goods or services...praise for ease...but based on love and communion.

In Luke, Jesus is asked by his disciples to provide them with instruction on how and what to pray. John the Baptist had done the same with his own disciples and it was probably common practice for rabbis and teachers to give their own instruction on praying and their own list of petitions. Luke offers the shorter version of what we commonly refer to as the Lord's Prayer. The longer, more familiar, version is in Matthew. Much ink has been spilled on the profundity of the prayer, and rightfully so. We pray to God, familiar to us in the way a family member would be...that we would see and welcome the coming of the renewal of creation, the coming of the Kingdom. We pray that immediate needs are met...that we may be forgiven by the same measure we forgive others...and that we may avoid temptation and trial.

Then Jesus gives us an illustration of persistence in prayer: to knock, and knock, and continue knocking until the door is answered. Essentially, we are to attempt to make ourselves a nuisance to God. For what purpose, I'll come to in a moment.

And then we are given the familiar words, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." And the reward for our effort, our persistence, our presumption and utter shamelessness in addressing God, *is the Holy Spirit*.

It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of this gift. The Holy Spirit... wisdom and knowledge herself... the mind of God... and the aspect of the Trinity that *unites* the Creator to Creation. This is the proper object and goal of our prayers. But this comes with some implications, particularly about method of prayer.

There is a temptation to treat prayer as a one-way communication. We will pray for something, end the prayer and then go about our lives while waiting to see if the prayer is answered or not. We sometimes act as though we are happy to simply get our 'yes' or 'no' from God in the bustle of life. If I may, I'd like to suggest that we should instead be intentional about treating our personal prayer life as a venue for conversation. As Jim Flowers says, "prayer is the art (or the act) of paying attention." In my own

prayer life, I've been led to wonder how I will ever hear the Spirit speak when I keep throwing so many words at God. Whatever your prayer practices, I commend holy listening, and as much as possible, intentional silence. Allow God the space to speak after you... allow yourself *to pay attention to what the Spirit may say after you!*

It is no small thing to add silence and listening to prayer; it is difficult to do. We are already uncomfortable with silence. Witness how, in a lull in conversation, people will become uncomfortable, and someone will rush to fill the empty space...and then we inwardly thank them for saving us from silence. Notice also how the strongest relationships are between those who are comfortable with silence: no need to justify oneself... no need to prove oneself. Perhaps that is why we are so quick to end our prayers after we've made our point. We cannot bear the silence. It is best to work with silence in steps. Do not try for 15 solid minutes of silence at first. Instead, devote three. Maybe five. Work up as you feel comfortable.

Howard Thurman was an African-American Baptist theologian, whose work influenced the theology of Martin Luther King Jr. Indeed the methods of non-violent resistance in the civil rights era were mostly theological and owed much to Thurman's writing. Thurman was also a mystic; and he offers some advice on silence, particularly what to expect during silence. If we were to try silence in prayer, we may discover that the discomfort we feel are the dark parts of our soul rising to consciousness. Our failings, our senses of inadequacy, our regrets come to the fore because we have deliberately chosen to no longer drown them out. It is difficult to sit with these thoughts for long, almost unhealthy to do so. But in a context of prayer, we hold ourselves up for our own introspection and we also hold ourselves up to God. These are aspects of our human condition that we would rather hide from God, from others, and from ourselves. Yet it is better to acknowledge realities, and *in the presence* of a God and Spirit who is willing to follow us into the depths of our being, the very core of our soul. We *will* find God forgiving and understanding. Once we get past our discomfort with ourselves and learn to rest in the love and presence of God, the conversation can begin.

In this time devoted to communion with God, allow yourself to accept the Spirit...if it comes. There are no guarantees in mysticism. Perhaps focus on a reading for the day to re-center your mind when it starts to wander to your lists of other things to do. *Allow Spirit and scripture to intertwine in your soul.*

In time, these practices pay off. Prayer, as *paying attention*, becomes easier. The poignancy of life's events will be more moving. What is more, we intuit God's will as informed by our tradition. Prayer shapes belief, and we will find that prayer deep enough to penetrate into the core of one's being will conform us to its patterns... especially as informed by Scripture and the Prayer Book. More importantly, prayer shapes actions, and meditation on the will of God moves us to the work of God. In a time in which our neighbors are unknown to us, where we create walls (or in Arizona, borders) that separate us, the Spirit will fetch us... and it's too late to ignore that call to the work of God since

we began to listen to the Spirit. God will strongly suggest that we no longer pass over the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the sick, or those imprisoned. We discover that those whom we avoided as an inconvenience rightly have a claim on us; and the pull to the work of God becomes stronger. We may realize then, that we aren't fighting inconvenience or discomfort, but the pull of God. God and neighbor squarely put the ball in our court, how will we respond?

What I'm suggesting can be frightening. It is certainly uncomfortable. These types of prayerfulness— in which *we* are quiet!— mean we go beyond our basic intercessions and requests, as proper as they are, and prepare to enter into conversation with God. It means a commitment to changes that we may not fully understand... for we are not promised relaxed steadiness. Are we ready to search the silence to find the voice of God? Are we ready to ask for uncertainty, and to receive the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

Are we ready to knock at *that* door?