

February 5, 2012
Ellicott City Parish, Bethany UMC campus
David W. Simpson

Sermon: "Movement in the Practice of Prayer: Moving Inward"
Scriptures: John 1:1-4, 14-16
Key Verse: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Welcome to week 2 of our series on *Movement in the Practice of Prayer*. We are taking this time to explore what Richard Foster calls, "the many-splendored heart of God." Our hope is that in our time together we will, all of us, discover that through prayer we may gain access to the heavenly throne. Our intent is not to belabor definitions of prayer, or terminology for prayer, or arguments about prayer (though all those have their place). This series is not about methods and techniques so much as it is about a love relationship...a growing, continuing, enduring relationship with the Creator of the universe. And love invites a response. That response is grounded in prayer.



Let me remind you of some things Pastors Vitek and Brooks said in their sermons last week concerning the basic outline of our series. Although we should probably not press the analogy too far, it is helpful to see the practice of prayer has three movements that are Trinitarian in character. The movement inward, which we examine today, is prayer to God the Son, Jesus Christ, which corresponds to his role as Savior and Teacher among us. Next week we will examine the movement upward which is prayer to God the Father, which corresponds to his role as sovereign King and eternal Lover among us. In the outward movement prayer is to God the Holy Spirit, which corresponds to his role as Empowerer and Evangelist among us. Foster reminds us the inward movement comes first simply because God has revealed himself to us most fully and most clearly in Jesus Christ and because "*without interior transformation the movement up into God's glory would overwhelm us and the movement out into ministry would destroy us.*" We are grateful to Foster's genius as our guide in this journey.

It may seem a bit strange to use as a text for today the opening words of the Gospel of John as we continue our examination of the movement of prayer. After all, in that whole chapter, there is not a single word about prayer. It starts simply by saying "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth.

Let me explain the connection. The unit of speech that is translated as *Word* in John's Gospel is from the Greek word *logos*, which traditionally means, thought, principle, or speech. It is therefore an expression of self and the primary way in which we know one another. In the New Testament, the phrase "Word (Logos) of God," found in John 1:1 and elsewhere, shows God's desire and ability to "speak" to the human, which is to say,

to reveal God's self to us. The Christian expression of this communication is evidenced in the Christ, who is the "Word become flesh." In these three biblical words, Christianity points to the possibility of union between the human and the divine. Since we are made in the image of God it follows that in our thought, principle and speech to God, we also reveal ourselves to him and thereby grant him permission to begin a transformation in us.

In his book, *"Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home"*, considered by many to be the best modern work ever written on Christian prayer, Richard Foster puts it this way. ***"To pray is to change. This is great grace. How good of God to provide a path whereby our lives can be taken over by love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control"*** (these are the fruit of the Holy Spirit).

Today the heart of God is open for loving relationships that have the power to transform us into the likeness of Christ. He grieves that we, like prodigal children, have gone afar and are preoccupied with lesser things. His heart is wounded that we do not come home to him and he longs for us to be present with him. And, he is inviting you and me to come home; to come home where we belong, to come home for the very thing for which we were created. The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.

I am aware that some folks are ready to say humbug! And, it's been a long time since the name of the Creator crossed your lips in anything but a ritualistic or profane manner. It doesn't matter! You need to at least consider and, hopefully come to know that the Father's heart is open and you are welcome to come in.

Maybe you don't even believe in the wonder working power of prayer. Maybe you tried to pray and felt nothing or got no results or the wrong results. Maybe you your faith is weak or dead. It doesn't matter! The Father's heart is open.

I know some folks are too bitter, or battered or broken to feel like praying. They avoid prayer because they feel unworthy, distant or defiled. If that is how you feel, listen to me! It doesn't matter. The Father's heart is open and you are welcome to come in.

It is also possible, and hopefully the case for some, that prayer is the delight and mainstay of your life. You have lived in that loving relationship for some time and can attest to its goodness but you long for more: more power, more love, more of God. Trust me, the Father's heart is open and inviting you to go deeper.



God knows that we are finite, flawed creatures who have no right of access to the throne of God. So, he has graciously granted us a means of entrance, Jesus! Jesus the Christ who lived a perfect life, died in our place, and rose victoriously so that we might live through him. We are no longer relegated to remain distant and apart, separated from God by our rebellion. The Father's heart is open and we may enter the through the door of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Prayer is the key to that door.

Most of us are like the disciples who knew that the key to becoming more like Jesus was to learn to pray like Jesus. Most of us would like to pray more, or more effectively and we are not really sure what holds us back. There are actually a lot of things that hold us back and we will discuss some of them later on. But for now, there is one thing that needs our attention. It is the notion that we have to have everything “just right” in order to pray. We think we need to get ourselves together, learn more about prayer, get the verbiage right, assume the right posture or find the right time and place.

The truth of the matter is that we need to come to prayer just as we are. We don’t need to wait the get purer, or more eloquent, or even with the right motives. That’s what grace is all about...we are invited to come just as we are.

Jesus reminds us that prayer is a little like children coming to their parents. They come with the craziest requests sometimes and we are often upset by their selfishness or meanness (“Make her give it to me.” “I don’t want a new brother.” “Play with me right now!”). We may be upset at their requests but we would be more upset if they never came to us even with their mixed motives and selfishness. We are simply glad they come to us.



Sometimes we grant their request. Sometimes we say “no!” Sometimes we give them something they didn’t ask for or use their request as a time of correction. Sometimes we just hold them and let them know we are there, even if the situation can’t be changed. But through it all, because they come, we are able to guide, nurture, protect and love them as they are transformed into increasingly mature human persons.

That is precisely the way it is with prayer. We will never have pure enough motives, or be good enough, or know enough in order to pray perfectly. We simply put all these things aside and begin praying. In fact, it is in the very act of prayer itself...the intimate ongoing conversation with God... that these matters will in due time be corrected and cared for as we are being transformed.

In the same way that a child cannot draw a bad picture or bring you an ugly handmade craft, so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer. That means we start with simple prayer. In simple prayer we bring ourselves before God just as we are. Like children before a loving parent we open our hearts and make our requests. We don’t try to sort things out or separate the good from the bad. We just tell God what is going on, how we feel, what we want. We ask for good food, good weather and good health.

By in large, *we are the focus of simple prayer.* It’s about our needs, our wants, our concerns. Our prayers may reflect our own egocentricity even alongside our better moments of generosity and unselfishness. We promise God to do better and then we sin again but each time we get up and begin again and pray again and try to follow God again. The cycle repeats and we do it again. Don’t be defeated! We confess and begin again, and again, and again.



Simple prayer is the most common form of prayer in the Bible. It involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate Father. There is no pretense in simple prayer. We don't pretend to be who we are not and we don't try to sort out our motives. We simply pour out our hearts before God.

When we pray, genuinely pray, the real condition of our heart is revealed, as it should be. And this is when God truly begins to work in us to change us into the likeness of Christ.

So that is where we start, with simple prayer, beginning prayer. We begin right where we are with our daily lives; our families, our work, our play, our neighbors and friends. It may sound trivial, simplistic and self-serving but in truth it is the most profound truth we will ever learn about coming to know God. God is perfectly capable of handling our frustrations, anger, disappointments, failures, and spiritual immaturity. C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Narnia Chronicles, said we should “lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”

We must never believe the lie that the details of our lives are not the proper content of prayer. God wants to enter our space, be a part of our conversation and has made it possible through Jesus Christ, who is the Word made flesh that dwells among us. So I urge you: carry on a conversation with God about the daily stuff of life. Share your hurts, your sorrows, your joys...freely and openly. God listens in compassion and love, just like we do when our children come to us. He delights in our presence and we will discover that by praying we learn to pray and something happens in us.

As we close this session of our prayer adventure I have just couple of quick suggestions for you. First, let me remind you that prayer is nothing more and nothing less than an ongoing and growing love relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is especially true of simple prayer. This prayer experience, which begins selfishly and simply, has as its end, a total submission of love to the Lord.

Secondly, as we begin, we must never be discouraged by our lack of prayer. Even in our prayerlessness we can hunger for God. The hunger itself is a prayer. In time the desire will lead to practice and increasing desire that will lead us to God.

Next, and this may sound strange: Let go of trying to pray too hard. There is a principle of progression in prayer and the spiritual life. You don't take an occasional runner and put them in a marathon race. Start with what you can do, even if it is only moments of prayer and put your energy into that. When you have had enough, tell God that. “I am tired now. I will talk to you later.”

In the beginning, our prayer life may be faltering, infrequent, ineloquent and self-centered: it doesn't matter. The Father's heart is open and you are welcome to come in and go deeper. In time, slowly, maybe almost unnoticed, there is a shift in our center of gravity. We move from thinking of God as part of our life to the realization that we are part of his life. A conversion of the heart takes place. This is the work of Divine Grace. Let us pray, as we are as we are able..... Amen.