

Prayer

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:26-27

You may have heard of the Templeton Foundation. It was started by John Templeton, who was famous in the world of finance for being a contrarian investor. He was also a faithful Presbyterian layman. He gave a lot of money to Princeton Seminary. The unfortunate thing is that he thought he knew enough about religion to write books and set up a Foundation, giving a prize every year for religion that was larger than a Nobel Prize. His Foundation once funded a multi-year study on prayer. Does it work? Is it effective? They had a control group that was not prayed for and a group that was. It was a totally mistaken project for several reasons. First, sometimes the answer to prayer is "No." Second, how could you be sure that in the control group that was not prayed for someone didn't sneak in prayers anyway from loved ones or friends? They couldn't know for sure. Was the prayer the right prayer? Of course, a lot of people get well anyway. After two to three years the results of the study was that it was inconclusive.

How do we pray, who prays, and how does it work? We know that Muslims pray five times a day. In Hinduism there are about 330 million gods. We may have seen a news report about the ceremony for the elephant god, or the ceremony for the monkey god. A news report may show the Hindus praying, all decked out in special garb.

We don't see as much in Buddhism because it is so much more fractured. You have probably seen or heard about Buddhist prayer wheels driven by wind or water. The prayers are going automatically, and there are a lot of them.

In Judaism, depending on what branch of Judaism, there is that remarkable funeral service where the oldest surviving male relative prays that remarkable prayer, the Kadesh.

A recent survey reported that in this country 58% of people pray every day. That's far more than those who go to church regularly. Another survey says 90% of the people believe in God but 95% of them pray.

What is prayer and how does it work? We recall the famous account in 1 Kings 18:20-40 about the contest between Baal worshipers over against Elijah. The Baal

worshippers circle the altar, beat themselves, cut themselves, and yell out to their god. In contrast the prophet simply says: "Lord, show who you are." That settles it.

We think we have to pray hard and long. We mistakenly think that is the message of that parable in Luke 18:1-8 of the importunate widow. Remember she pounds on the door of the judge. Finally he gives in. That's not the point of the parable but that is what people remember and think it's about. If we turn up the voltage and pray harder and longer, then the Lord will listen. Of course there is a promise in Matt 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." There is something important about praying together. We ask ourselves: How does prayer work?

Today there are all kinds of people who say: "I'm not religious but I have my own spirituality." They don't want to be tied to any system or organization. What they end up doing is falling into some kind of Eastern religion, usually some kind of meditation that is found all over Hinduism and Buddhism. And there is also the practice of silence so that you can empty yourself, or you can hear the voice of God, or hear an inner voice. The practice of silence goes back into all kinds of pagan mysticism. Christians have claimed it too, but it gets all mixed up because God and I end up being the same thing. Really what people are looking for in spirituality is an experience, a feeling, their own private miracle. Then I have proof, some kind of verification. Something has really happened. We continually forget that important verse in 1 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." That never occurs to people that they might be being deceived. After all they are doing it. We have this lack of knowledge of our own lostness.

What is Christian prayer? To Whom do we pray? We pray in the name of the Father and in Jesus' name as the basis for what we pray.

What do we pray? As the hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus" says: "We bring everything to God in prayer." As we know, all the psalms are prayers, some complaining bitterly. There are all kinds of things that the people in the psalms are saying.

In his Large Catechism Luther writes that if you don't know how to pray, there's the Lord's Prayer and all it takes is a whole lifetime to use it and use it up because there is so much in it.

We wonder about where to pray. We pray in church, of course. Some people have pointed out that it works well to pray while you are walking, or doing dishes, or mowing the lawn. There are all kinds of times and places.

When should you pray? There is that famous place in 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray without ceasing." That's 24/7. Someone has said you should pray an hour a day, but how can we do that? Someone said if you pray five minutes of every hour, in 24 hours you would have an hour of prayer.

That raises the question: What is prayer about? A nurse upon completing an eight-hour shift was asked to take another eight-hour shift. And she did. After that she went home and fell into bed exhausted. She could not think or pray.

Most of all we come to the question of why? Why do we pray? In Matthew 18:20 there is the basic promise. John 15:7 states: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask what you will, and it will be done for you." That's an amazing promise.

In Matthew 7:7-11 says: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." The text goes on: "If your child asks for bread, will you give him a stone. If he asks for a fish, will you give him a snake? Finally, if you who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" There is a parallel in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all [good] things with him?" Obviously, the answer is yes.

In Luther's Small Catechism on the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer it says: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. . . . To be sure God's good and gracious will is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also be done by us." There is that. God's will is done because it is his will.

We ask ourselves why pray if God's will is going to be done anyway? We get to Luther in the Large Catechism where he is more able to spell it out. There in the Preface to this discussion he says: "Why do we pray? We pray because we're commanded to pray. It is as if it were the Eleventh Commandment, which is that this is a work that we are called upon to do. We are called to bring everything to God in prayer.

The trouble with all of this is we are caught up in the method question because we think we can do it right and make it happen. That brings us back to Romans 8:26-27:

“The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness: for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

That’s a famous translation problem. What it means is that when we pray, it’s baby talk. The same word is used as when it talks about speaking in tongues in 1 Cor 14. Baba nana dada. We pray baby talk because we don’t know how to pray as we ought. We think we do. We’re like the little child who wants to drive the family car. We think we know how God should run the universe. Of course, the parents are delighted when their toddler is babbling. Our babbling is translated into what it should be by the Holy Spirit who knows the mind of the Father.

A couple of verses later Paul writes about why don’t we know how to pray as we ought. It is because the Lord asks us to be conformed to the image of his Son, which is that which is about the cross. We think in our babbling that we understand what it means for the Holy One of all the universe to take on sin, but of course we don’t. That’s impossible because we’re sinners. Nevertheless, the Father in his great mercy through the Son in the Holy Spirit makes it right.

Luther in his explanation in the Small Catechism, the Third Petition, goes on to say:

“How is this done? When God curbs and destroys every evil counsel and purpose of the devil, of the world, and of our flesh which would hinder us from hallowing his name and prevent the coming of his kingdom, and when he strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his Word and in faith even to the end. This is his good and gracious will.”

What it is saying is: Remember it is not about our method; it’s his doing. Not only does he translate our babbling through the Holy Spirit into what it should be, but he is the one who is upholding us. Therefore prayer is much more magnificent than we commonly think, and it is without ceasing. Amen