Some thoughts on Prayer

A book by

Ray W. Mendenhall

Richard Foster has said that “prayer is the hearts true home.” Yet prayer, to many, is a mystery. The how and the why of it, the content,, the form, the appropriate times and places. Jesus spoke a lot about prayer in Mattthew 6 giving us the Lord’s prayer among other things. He modeled prayer in his own life and mystery. His was a life of prayer, if you will, his life a prayer itself. Following are some thoughts on prayer gathered from things I have preached and written. I commend them to you not as great wisdom so much as reflections and thoughts on prayer from my own life and ministry. I would be remiss if I didn’t say that I learned much from others along the way. I share them in the hope that you might find something here which will inform, encourage and enhance your own life of prayer.

 Ray W. Mendenhall, copyright 2020

 Balancing Our Prayers

 What is prayer? How do we practice it rightly and well? There are many examples of prayer in scripture, especially among the psalms. There is much advice about prayer as well. We are to “pray without ceasing,” though how exactly may present a challenge. We are told to pray in simple words and “not heap up grandiose but empty phrases” to impress. We are told that the spirit will pray in us and for us when our words fail. But in the everyday, rough and tumble of life, how should we approach and practice prayer?

 Prayer isn’t about gathering up eloquent thought, words and phrases but rather simple words straight from the heart. Prayer isn’t trying to impress God somehow but reaching out to God with our deepest needs and joys. Prayer isn’t about us and what we want but about God and His will for us and for the world. Prayer is a conversation where listening for God’s direction is as important as sharing our Heart-felt yearnings and desire. Prayer is about coming into and being in the presents of God.

 During my work in the certificate program for Spiritual Formation, I discovered and explored many ways to pray. One of my favorites is a form called contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is not words but only silence. In Contemplative prayer, one strips away all the layers of the self and the world, empties themselves of all thoughts and distractions and simply sits quietly in the present of God. When you achieve the state of contemplative

prayer you can sense the divine, feel the present, even draw upon God’s spirit and feel God’s strength. At least that’s been my experience. Prayer, however we practice it, is about approaching God and entering God’s presence.

 Some years ago I learned about something called the ACTS approach to prayer. ACTS is an acronym for the four basic parts of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. These four parts form what one might call a balanced prayer. Praying this way in a sense covers all the bases, approaches God in four distinct and important ways.

 Adoration points us to praise. We pray the prayer that adores God, praises God, that recognizes God’s greatness and glory. Confession is a prayer that acknowledges our shortcomings before God and expresses sorrow for our failures. Thanksgiving is just that prayers of thanks to God for blessing and graces, for every wondrous gift and thing God gives us. Supplication may not be a word in your vocabulary. It is an old Biblical word for prayers for people and their needs. It includes petitions, which are prayers we pray for ourselves and intercession which are prayers we pray for others.

 These four parts cover the terrain of prayer in a believer’s life, but in reality we rarely pray a prayer that includes all four. Anne Lamott in her recent book “Help, Thanks, Wow” picks up on these kinds of prayers. She says that “help, thanks, wow” are the bedrock emotions of prayers. Sometime we need help for ourselves or

maybe for others so we pray prayers of intercession or petition.

At other times we are overcome by a deep and joyous gratitude,

a gratitude that wells up in us and comes out in prayers of thanksgiving. Sometimes we are just caught off guard by a wonder, a glorious sunset, a beautiful scene, a sudden, unexpected act of kindness we witness or receive and our response is “Wow”, adoration and praise flow out of us as a response to the moment. Confession is the element that seems left out here, but I think it could easily be a part of the “help” prayer. Help me, Lord, turn my life around, help me when I fumble and falter, help me when I fail You, Lord; help me turn from disobedience and sin to obedience and faith.

 As I said and as Lamott suggests, we don’t pray prayers that include all parts at the same time in the same prayer, so how do we practice balanced prayer, prayer that embraces all four. In our worship, you will notice that we do not pray any prayer that has all four of the ACTS elements in it, yet in the prayers and hymns of our service we do express all four. We don’t balance all four in any single prayer, but we embrace all four in ongoing prayer of worship and the church. ACTS calls us to a prayer life that embraces all four elements, not all together, but evident here and there throughout our ongoing prayer life. As we pray for this and that, we remember at times to include one or two of the elements in a prayer and other elements in other prayers. Balance prayer is a prayer life that

embraces all four parts in our day to day prayers. In this God is honored and our cares are heard. In this God is glorified and the world is prayed for. In this we lift up before God the sum total of our lives and we are blessed. In this way, we balance our prayers.

 KISS

 You may be a bit puzzled by the title here. What does a kiss have to do with prayer? There is that passage about greeting one another with a holy kiss, but that’s not what we are talking about here. KISS here is an acronym and as an acronym you know what it means… Keep it simple saints. It is in this instance a reference to prayer, a call for keeping prayer simple.

Matthew 6 is an exercise in exaggeration. It is I believe a prime example of the use of humor by Jesus. In Matthew 6 Jesus offers pointed exaggerations of the wrong behavior as a way of highlighting the correct behavior. For instance, verse 5 shouldn’t be read plainly and simple. There is more drama in it. DON’T be like the HYPOCITES who PRAY LONG and LOUD for the adulation of the crowd not for any religious reason. Verse 7 is the same, not subtle but played up big. DON’T be like the GENTILES who think THEY will be HEARD because of their many HIGH sounding and FANCY words. Contrasted to this is proper prayer. Go to a quiet place. Pray quietly in secret. God knows what you need, so pray simply and directly to Him, from a humble heart. Eloquent words and heaped up phrases is not going to convince God to give you anything other than what He desires for you. So don’t try to impress God in prayer simply embrace God and draw near.

When you go looking at prayer throughout scripture, you don’t find lofty phrases or long, drawn out prayers with lots of fancy words. Look at the pure, simple lines of the prayer in Psalm 51

“Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and put a right spirit

within me; Do not cast me not away from Your Presence and do not

take Your Holy Spirit from me,” simple, direct, heartfelt. The

psalms has other examples: “Bless the Lord, O My soul, and Bless God’s Holy Name; bless the Lord, O my Soul and forget not God’s benefits”, or “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, out the mouth of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark against our foes;” simple words, heartfelt faith.

 One of the people that has intrigued me over the years was Mother Teresa. She has just been beatified which is the first step in becoming a Catholic saint. What amazed me about her was her simplicity. She had a simple mission “to serve the poor, the sick, the forgotten, the discarded and disregarded, the poorest of the poor.” For over half her life, that mission engaged and consumed her. She met Popes and dignitaries, heads of state; she even spoke at the UN. She won a Noble Peace prize for her simple ministry undertaken in simple ways. If you read any of her writings, you will find simple words that inspire and challenged. With her simple words and simple ways, she drew nuns from all over the world to join her order and set up missions in many different places; but what captured me the most were her prayers. Her prayers were tapestries of simple words… simple prayers using simple words and simple phrases, simple prayers straight from the heart.

 God calls us not to fancy words or boisterous phrases or elaborate displays of fervor, but to simple prayer. God calls us not to flashy Christianity, but quiet faith. When you pray create a space for God in the silence of your own heart and there speak to Him simply, tell Him of your love, tell Him of your life, tell Him of your need. Send your prayer like a gentle kiss, blown on the spirit, to the God who listens and blesses.

Truthful Prayer

 Psalm 51:6-9 Luke 18:1-7

 In Luke 18, we hear of a judge who fears neither God nor mortal. He cares nothing for truth or true justice. He provides justice for the well-placed or the wealthy. His idea of justice is gaining power or a big payoff. He cares nothing for the common people or their needs. Enters a persistent widow. She has a just cause. She is in the right. But the judge is resistant. The widow returns again and again to plead her case, to review the evidence, to prove her point and the judge listens and listens until he can stand it no more. He grants her request not because it is right but because she is annoying. She wears him down so he gives in.

 Luke tells us the story is about prayer. Some have suggested it is about persistent prayer, praying and praying until you get your request. But that could not be farther from the truth. The fact is that God is nothing like the unjust Judge. Where the judge lacks compassion, God is filled with compassion. Where the judge is heedless to the cries of the common people, God is listens to his children’s pleas. Where the judge holds back justice until he gets a reward, God pours out justice freely. The point is that if we pray and do not lose heart, If we pray and trust God’s judgement, if we place our just cause at the feet of a loving father, God will answer and bless. We need not pester God for God is ready to answer when his children pray for the right, but prayer must begin with the truth. The woman comes in truth. Her cause is right. Her case is clear cut. It’s the judge who cares nothing for truth.

Truthful prayer begins with the truth, the deep truth, the

sometimes uncomfortable truth. When we pray for forgiveness, a

simple “I’m sorry” is not enough. We come in honesty about our wrong doing; we reveal our sin.

 During my years in seminary, I worked one year as a youth director for an Episcopal Church. I attended church there each Sunday figuring that as a leader of youth, I needed to set an example for my youth. It was important that the young people see me worshipping in church week after week. Episcopalians unlike the Presbyterian tradition have a set liturgy, using many of the same forms Sunday after Sunday. One such form is the General prayer of Confession. We would pray each Sunday in a general way about things we have done and the things we have not done. Now I don’t know about you, but I rarely sin in general, my sins, when they come, are pretty specific. God desire the truth, I believe, the specific truth rather than generalizations.

 When we pray for ourselves, God desires a statement of our need and how we are going to work with God to meet it. When we pray for others, God is listening not simply for our request but how we will work as part of the solution or the help or the healing. True prayer requires the truth and only the truth will do.

There is a psalm that I think reflects this kind of truthfulness in prayer. It is psalm 131. Let me read it for you.

Here is a person who tells the truth, who knows their place in God’s realm, who does not aspire to greatness but simply to rest in God’s Grace. They are honest about who they are and they are honest about God and how He blesses so they can rest content in the providence and care of God.

 Prayer begins with the truth, the truth about ourselves and the truth about God. When we put those two things together in our prayers, we are blessed again and again.

 Be Open!

 It was John Claypool in His book “Opening Blind Eyes” who pointed out Jesus’ use of the Greek word “Ephphatha.” Ephphatha means “be open.” It is a word that Jesus used often especially when healing. He opened muted mouths. He opened blind eyes. He opened deaf ears. He mended broken bodies and shriveled limbs. He opened hearts and minds and lives. Claypool suggests that this ministry of openness may in fact have been a primary focus of Jesus’s work. Christ comes to open us up to truth, to life, to love, to God.

 In Luke 18, two men come to the temple to pray. One heads right up to the front of the temple which tells us something right from the start. The other lingers in the back, almost in the shadows, which also tells us something. The one in front begins to pray out loud a prayer filled with his religious attributes, a virtual litany of his goodness. He commends himself to God, points out his good works and his generosity, thanks God for making him better than other men pointing out the guy in the back in particular, but here’s the rub. His prayer is egotistical, self-righteous, pompous, boastful, judgmental and demeaning towards others. His prayer is a promotional ad campaign, a smoke screen around his life, a cover-up to hide his real acts and intentions.

The man in the back, nearly prostrate on the ground, beats his chest and moans quietly a simple prayer over and over, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” Which one prays from an open heart? I’ll give you a hint. It’s not the guy in front with his nose in the air. He prays exactly what he thinks God wants to hear. He does not pray from an open heart. He prays from a full heart, a heart so filled up with himself that it has no room even for God.

 The tax collector knows his sin. He knows his feeble frame. He knows the nature of his sin sick heart. He lays himself out like an open book and prays for the one thing he needs desperately and that only God can give. He prays for mercy before a holy yet gracious God. His heart is empty, His heart is broken and he opens his emptiness and brokenness to God.

 One cannot pray from a shutdown heart or a closed down life. No one can truly communicate with God while speaking falsehoods and keeping secrets. Prayer requires that we be open, completely open, that we open ourselves to the power and the presence of God. Prayer at its essence is to open a channel within ourselves and communicate with God.

It was Karl Barth in his commentary to the Romans who said something that has stuck with me over the years and informed my spiritual life. Barth said “can we take the slightest risk which is in fact the greatest, dare we stand with hands empty that we may grasp what only empty hands can grasp?”

Only a life with room in it can really receive a blessing from God.

There is a response in higher liturgical traditions that signals the beginning of prayer. The leader says “lift up your hearts” and the people respond “we lift our hearts to the Lord.” Prayer begins when we lift up our hearts just as they are before the Lord. As the Psalm 51 reminds us, it is “the broken and contrite heart that God will not despise.” It is the open heart that God seeks. When we come to prayer with an open heart, we pray a prayer God will hear, a prayer that God wants to hear and a prayer that God blesses.

 Prelude to Prayer

 I think it is safe to say that the Beatitudes (Mathew 5) as a whole are not held in high regard in the world at large. Meekness is not a virtue, Mercy is not a strength. Tears are a sign of weakness Righteousness is out of style. Purity is over rated. Peacemakers are wimps. The willingness to be persecuted is not a strategy for success. Who would believe in such naïve concepts, unless….. unless they saw something bigger than this world and believed in something beyond this world. The beatitudes are not just a good school for Christians, they are a good school for prayers as well. They form the proper spiritual atmosphere for our prayers and for our life in God reigns.

 One of the popular analogies that Paul used for talking about the Christian Life was the image of the athlete. He used it in many places to explain the way of and the way into a life in Christ. The athlete doesn’t just show up for the race and run. The javelin thrower doesn’t just show up and throw the spear. The discus thrower doesn’t start throwing the discus at the competition. Athletes practice, prepare and train for their event. They condition their bodies. They build muscle mass. The create muscle memory. The build their ability and develop through arduous practice and training. The same can be said for prayer. It requires preparation, practice and spiritual training.

 The first way to become a good prayer is to start praying. You may not be very good at it at first, but each prayer builds on the next. Each prayer teaches something. Each prayer lifts the next to a higher level.

The second way to build your prayer life is by studying the great prayers of scripture. The Psalmist are among the skilled prayers of the Bible. They teach prayer language, the proper approach and demonstrate ways to enter into the spiritual temple of prayer. Jesus was an accomplished prayer. Along with the Lord’s Prayer, which He taught us, Jesus demonstrated a rich personal life of prayer. He revealed the ways one can and should approach God. He modeled prayer language and prayer times. He taught prayer forms and proper topics for prayer. Jesus showed us many things and many ways and among them He showed us the art of prayer. If you want to learn to pray, study the prayer life of Jesus.

 A third way to shape and form prayer words and prayer life is to drink in scripture, immerse yourself in the Holy Word so much that you breathe it out in heartfelt prayer.

 The beatitudes as a way of thinking and believing, the example of the Psalmists and Christ Himself form for us a kind of prelude to deeper prayer…. The practice and preparation, the spiritual training and conditioning for humble and effective prayer. Like the faithful one in Psalm 1, we delight in the law and the word of the Lord, we meditate upon it day and night, we fill up on it until it spills over in us and in our prayers. Then like the mighty tree beside the river of life we bear great fruit and prosper in all that we do. Then we grow strong and become prayers who pray in the Spirit of the Lord, prayers who pray prayers that connect deeply with the holy within us and in the world.

 A Passion for Prayer

 Psalm 42 compares the deer’s thirst to a longing for God. The language is clear. This is no minor thirst, a dry mouth, an insignificant matter. It is an insistent, incessive, irrepressible thirst, an ardent and unrelenting longing. It is a deep thirst that needs quenching.

 Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4) meet in a thirsty place. Beyond the physical thirst within them are the other thirsts of their hearts and spirits. Jesus longs to share the good news of the gospel. It is his deepest passion, his greatest desire, to transform lives through the love and grace of God. The woman comes with a thirst for life beyond where she finds herself. She seeks a spiritual answer, a faith and the help and hope to fill her growing emptiness. She, too, brings a need that is urgent…. “Sir, Give me this water, [this living spring] so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Give me that which quenches all my thirsts.

 When Jesus spoke of the hunger and thirst for righteousness in the Beatitudes. It was not something spoken of mildly. It was not “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” but rather “blessed are those who HUNGER! And THIRST! for righteousness.” It suggests an unbridled passion for all things Godly.

 Recent science suggests that we human beings may have a predisposition for the divine, we are, you might say, hotwired for God. The study of brain waves in people engaged in spiritual

activities like meditation or prayer reveals a strong emotion reaction in the brain, a response so strong that one longs for the experience and seeks it again and again. Like the deer longing for water, we have an inner longing for God. Like the woman trapped at the well day in and day out, we long for the flow of God’s spirit into our lives, a flow that will fill us with faith and trust and blessing.

 Prayer, I believe, is a thirst, an inner practice we long for, an inner need we seek to fill again and again. Prayer is a reaching out, a spiritual connection, a deep passion within us. Prayer is a deep thirst, an abiding hunger for the presence and the power of God in our lives.

 There is an old Buddhist story about a young man who went to a wise master and said, “Master, teach me to pray.” Whereupon the master grab the pupil, stuck his hand in a barrel of rain water and held him under. The student struggled and fought and floundered until the old master finally let him go. Gasping and sputtering, the would-be student said, “Why did you do that?”

 The old master replied, “When you need to pray as badly as you need to breathe, then I can teach you to pray.”

 Prayer is not a passing fancy or a routine act or a mild compulsion. It is an ardent need, a spiritual longing in our lives. It flows from a hunger and a thirst for God. It is a passion so deep we cannot ignore it or simply lay it aside. As Augustine the great bishop of the early church reminds us, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until we rest in You.” Prayer is a cure for the restlessness of our hearts and souls. Prayer is the way we come to rest in the loving arms of God.

 Breathing our prayers

We breathe our praise

Into your sanctuary, the holy heights of Your Presence.

We breathe our praise

Through all the deeds of Your holy hands,

Into the atmosphere of Your glorious goodness.

We breathe our praise

In horn and flute, through strings and harp

The swish and sway of the swirling dance.

We breathe our praise

In clink and clang of clashing cymbals,

Rising in resounding ring, the crescendo of Your glory.

We breathe our praise

In the quiet calm of all creation, with every living thing.

We breath our praise

In pulse and pause of life,

We breathe our praise.....

 Ray W. Mendenhall

Sister Alice from Hawaii came to an American Seminary and said, “I have come to the Seminary to learn to pray. In Hawaii,” she continued, “before the missionaries came, our people would come to the holy place to pray. They would sit outside for a long time preparing their prayer. Go into pray and then they would sit outside for a long time after breathing life into their prayer. When the Christians, they would just say their prayer and they were done. That is why we called them ‘haolis’, the breathless ones.” Prayers like praise need breathe to bring them to life.

Before we go further, we must acknowledge a truth about prayer. We do not always get what we pray for. We only get what God knows is best for us. We get what we pray when we are tuned to God’s Will and prayer is one of the ways we come into tune with God. As someone once said, God answers all prayer- sometimes He says “yes”, sometimes He says “no” and sometimes God says “be patient.” Prayer in tune with God’s Will is the kind of prayer we seek.

 So, how do you breathe life into your prayers?

 We breathe life into our prayers when the promise of the prayer becomes a purpose in our lives, a standard to strive for, a goal to achieve.

We breathe life into our prayers when our concerns are translated into actions. When what stirs our hearts becomes the actions of our hands. When what our heart prays our hands take up. When we study on what we can do to make our prayers come about. When the call of our prayers become the cause of our actions in the world.

We breathe life into our prayers when we seek to serve the needs of the people or conditions prayed for. When We respond to our prayers with every resource we can bring.

This may be in fact more prayer, but it also includes all that we can bring personally to the task of making the prayer come true.

We breathe life into our prayers when we let the Spirit breathe in us and through us.

Breathing life in to our prayer includes opening ourselves to the breath of God’s Spirit within us. We allow God to move in us, breathe life into us and through us to help our prayers become real in God’s grace.

In the pulse and pause of life, we breathe our praise and we breathe life into our prayers.

 A Life of Prayer

 Richard Foster in an article called `praying the ordinary' suggests some ways to bring our prayer into the common lanes of life. One way Foster suggests is by "turning everyday experiences into prayer." We offer up the work we do, the places we go, the tasks we undertake as an offering to God. The events, the activities, the ordinary actions of our lives become a prayer.

 A second way to bring our prayer to common life is to see God in the commonplace of life. It is what Brother Lawrence shared in that devotional classic, “Practicing the Presence of God.” In every action, no matter how small, how insignificant, how mundane; we maintain an awareness of God in it. We wash our pots in the presence of God; we vacuum the floor to the glory of God. We wait in line; we shop at the store, all in the presence of God. We experience God in all of life.

 Yet another way is to let the experiences of life call us to prayer. "Meeting a friend, reading the newspaper, passing the homes on our street, when family members leave and when they return, everything we experience can call us to prayer, can remind us of many concerns, many joys for our common prayer.

 It is not the words we say that make our prayers. In fact, Jesus warned us that words can get in our way, can distract us from true prayer; but it is the constancy of our prayer, the way we let it pervade all of life that makes it most common and most real.

 Common prayer is not the way we conduct our prayer in the

midst of our life. It is not the words we say or the holy things we do

or the kind of thoughts we hold and share. Common prayer is the way we conduct our life in the midst of our prayer and how we conduct our prayers in the midst of our life. It is the prayer that is woven into the very fabric of our living.

 Planning and Planting

 If you are going to plant a garden, you don’t just plant it anywhere. You assess your ground. You seek the right spot. You identify the place, the richest and most productive ground. Then you prepare your garden spot. You break up the ground. You check the PH balance. You add nutrients. You cut the rows evenly and the proper distances apart. Then you set the seed one at a time, with measured care. You give your crops every chance to grow up and strong and full.

 Now it strikes me that prayer requires the same kind of diligence and care. You want to plant your prayers in fertile ground.

 A farmer goes out to sow some seed or so the story goes. He is not very scientific about it or intentional. He uses what is known as the broadcast method, that is, he throws seed

everywhere, hither and yon, hoping some of it will find ground good enough to grow in. It requires a lot of seed to do this and it is very wasteful. Yet in Jesus’ day before people knew much about modern agricultural practices, this was the common way of growing crops. And it worked, after a fashion, some fell on fertile ground and grew wonderfully well. But again it was wasteful and time consuming and limited in its harvest.

 I think we can learn something crucial about prayer from the parable of the seed. We can learn how to approach it and how

not to approach it. Prayer calls for careful preparation and intentional action. It calls for a plan that plants it in the right place so it can become fruitful.

 A sower sows the seed and some fell on hard ground…it could not put down roots.

 If ones plants his or her prayer in the hard ground of little faith and lost hope. It cannot take root. It will not grow well or strong. Prayers need faith and a healthy sense of hope to grow strong.

 Some seed fell on rocky ground, it put down roots but the ground was too shallow and it withered.

 If one prays from a crowded life filled with too many other things taking up all the space, there is little room for the prayer to breathe. The prayer gets crowded out. It has no room to truly take root and grow.

 Some seed fell on the thorny ground. It sprung up but the thorns and the weeds grew up and choked it out.

 If one prays from a life filled with distractions, with endless cares and concerns. Soon the cares and concerns will clutter up the prayer and choke it off.

 But some fell on good soil and there was a bumper crop.

 When one plants his or her prayer in the soil of the spirit, alongside the holy things of God, then the prayer wings its way into the fertile ground of God’s ear and God’s heart. Nothing hinders it. Nothing binds it. Nothing gets in its way and the prayer harvest is rich.

 So how do we plant our prayers in good soil, in a way and in a place where it can grow bountifully?

 Some years ago I went to a seminar led by Dr. Al Winn. You may not know that name, but at the time Al Winn was a well- known pastor and prominent church leader in the old Southern Presbyterian Church. He served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the church and was revered for his compassion, intellect and wisdom. I remember lamenting in the class about how I wanted to spend more time in devotion and prayer but that I found it hard to find the time. Dr. Winn in his wise and gentle way said this, “I find that when I want to set aside time for God, I put it on my calendar just like any other important appointment.”

 Prayer needs to be planned to be well planted. As you come to prayer, follow this path of preparation.

 Set aside specific times for prayer. Plan them ahead of time to get the most out of your time with God.

 Clear your calendar. Clear your heart. Clear your mind. Let nothing linger in you or your prayer space that will distract you during your time of prayer.

 Prepare the rich ground of your prayer with scripture. Read and reflect on God’s Word constantly. Study the prayer patterns of the Psalms. Seek God’s guidance for the words and the way of prayer.

Then, like a garden well planned and prepared your prayers will grow in you to full bloom and will grow in the heart of God. And the rich harvest? It will be filled with the fruit of God’s blessings. It will be plentiful in the goodness of God.

 Simple Prayer

 It seems fairly obvious here that Jesus is talking about simple prayer, quiet, heartfelt, unpretentious prayer. I have seen people like the Hypocrites here and I have known people like the Gentiles in this text. I have not been greatly impressed by either. In my family, we practiced the art of short and simple prayer, and whenever someone prayed a little long, my mother was not shy about pointing it out. Hence, I learned to pray succinctly. Recently, I have been exploring a kind of prayer that invites simple, short and sweet. It is praying with beads. Now I know that I am a Protestant and Presbyterian and except for a few of our Anglican brothers and sisters we are not given much to pray with beads or any other kinds of relics. Ask anyone and they will probably tell you the Catholics have the corner on that market with their rosaries. But the older I get, I find that I crave things that are simpler and direct, uncomplicated and well, fun! I have found that praying with beads helps direct my prayers and draws me deeper into the prayer experience. In other words, beads keep my prayers focused and on track.

 To add some irony and oddity to it all, I generally pray using a Buddhist prayer bracelet. I prefer the ones that have 18-20 beads on them. This provides a good size bead and flow to the prayer process. (they are fairly inexpensive on Amazon.) The next question of course is where do the prayers come from? I usually develop my

own but the book “A Bead and a Prayer” and “Another bead, Another Prayer” (on Amazon, by Kristen Vincent) are helpful guides. But let me share some of my experiences and prayers.

 Praying the Lord’s Prayer with beads is, of course, a good start. Using other scripture like Romans 8, “neither death, nor life, nor angels nor principalities… can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” or the “Shema” from Deuteronomy 6: 4-5: “Hear, O people of God, the Lord Your God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” You can add Jesus’ additions with includes “mind” in the list and adds “and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12: 29-31)

 I have found that adapting sacred songs and scriptures to be a good way to develop bead prayers. Here are a few examples: (note a “/” indicates a move to the next bead)

The Lord bless you/The Lord Keep you/The Lord shine the light of His love on you/The Lord’s grace flow in and through you/The Lord’s delight be in you/The Lord give you peace/Blessed peace evermore. (adapted from the Aaronic Blessing Numbers 6:24-26)

Come now almighty King/Let Your true greatness sing/And Teach us to praise/Father so glorious/Lord all victorious/Come, now rule over us/All through our days. (adapted from the hymn “Come, Thou Almighty King.)

O Blessed prayer/O blessed prayer/You draw me out/ of worldly care/And raise me to/my God alone/To make my heart’s desires know/In times when I can find no peace/My prayers grant me a sure release/I know not how,/I know not where/It comes to me/through blessed prayer. (adapted from the hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer”)

Gracious Lord/take my hand/Lead me now/help me stand/I am weak/ I am weary/so alone/Through each storm/in the night/Lead me Lord/towards Your light/Fill me now/ gracious Lord/Take me Your home. (adapted from the spiritual song “Precious Lord”.)

 And finally this one that is loosely based on scripture but is different enough to be somewhat original.

May God’s peace now rule my heart/May grace fill my every part /and wherever I go/in whatever I do/Through words or deeds/May I live all my life for the Lord/May I live for the Lord/all my life for Lord/May I live all my life for the Lord.

 Praying with beads may not be for everyone and that’s okay, everyone is different. But if the ideas of this approach appeals to you, grab some beads and pray. Or if you are industrious, make your own bead chain or bracelet. God bless you in your life and prayers.

 The Sound of Silence

 I was driving along the other day on a pastoral call. I didn’t have the radio on. My cell phone lay silent at my hip. I was savoring the silence of the drive despite the heavy traffic. I came to a stop light and heard a car nearby playing music so loud that with all our widows closed tight, I could still hear the music plainly. I thought to myself (as if speaking to the music fan nearby) “If I wanted to hear music, I would turn on my own radio.” Maybe I was being petty, but I felt the other’s music was an intrusion into my silence. At the next stop light, I was “fortunate” enough to be close to the same car again, and I began to reflect on the experience.

 There is a lot of noise in our world, a lot of things to distract us. There is the hustle and bustle of everyday life, elevator music everywhere civilization has put down roots. There is crowd noise and car noise and even the drum, drum, drum of countless fingers on countless hard surfaces everywhere. Some people arrive home and turn on the television immediately, not so much to watch it as for the noise, the “company” so to speak. There is something in most of us that resists silence; that is uncomfortable with long silences. It has been my experience working in churches that a time of silence in a worship service lasts at best about 30 seconds or so, after that people in the congregation start making various kinds of noise, coughing, clearing the throat, a sigh, a laugh, a snicker, a breath, a yawn. Something must break the emptiness of the silence. On reflection I am concerned by this. I fear that in all the noise around us, the noise we manufacture, and the noise that we nurture, we may well lose our sense of God. Silence is essential to our spiritual life and growth, essential because in the silence we encounter God. The prophet Elijah at the mouth of the cave finds God not in the horrendous wind, or the jarring earthquake, or the raging fire, but in the silence, where the still small voice of God called him and sent him. God was not in the colossal, the cataclysmic, or the catastrophic, but in the silence.

 Silence is a one of the major disciplines in the academy of the soul. The late Father Basil Pennington, a Trappist monk and spiritual writer once wrote, “If we want to be God’s people, God’s person, we need to carve out large blocks of time for silence.” Far from the noise and distractions and hustle and bustle, the sound and fury of everyday life, we encounter God; we hear God; we sense God; we meet God. Silence is the sanctuary of God.

One of the wonderful practices that I have discovered over the years is the prayer of silence. It is called in tradition contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer has no words, no thoughts, no images. It is a prayer of silence, absolute silence, silence of the body, silence of the mind, silence of the soul. In contemplative prayer, one relaxes the physical body totally, empties the mind completely of all distractions and thoughts, opens themselves to the silence, brings nothing but themselves to the prayer space and sits quietly in the presence of God. When practiced well, it is a deep form of prayer. Beyond the prayerful aspects of the practice, it is every relaxing. Stress seems to melt away and one comes to a state of deep peace and contentment. I have found that the cessation of stress and a sense of calm often lasts long after the prayer time is over. It is a prayer and a practice that “mellows” a person to put it in a contemporary sense. Silence is a grace. It draws us into the presence of the holy, and fills our lives with physical and spiritual Peace. To find God, to hear God and to sense God, to come to know God better, seek God in the silence. For there you are alone and truly at home with God.

 Prayer Availeth Much

 Sr. Teresa in her book, Everything Starts with Prayer, has said this, “In most modern rooms you see an electric light that can be turned on by a switch. But, if there is no connection with the main power house then there can be no light. Faith and prayer is the connection with God, and when that is there, there is service.”

 Prayer is the power flowing through our lives. Prayer is our connection with God. Prayer is a gift by which God opens a spiritual channel for us to use to speak to Him. Without prayer we are practically powerless spiritually speaking. Prayer then, focused prayer, regular prayer, constant prayer is an important element of our spiritual life.

 Prayer is a must in our life. It guides us, grows us, leads us, informs us and engages us. Prayer prepares us for service. Let me share with you five things I know about prayer.

 1. Prayer is not frivolous.

 I knew a woman once who said that she prayed for things like good parking pace at the Mall. I told her I thought God had better things to do than hold us a parking space at the Mall. She replied that if God was concerned with every aspect of her life then He was concerned about her parking as well. That pretty much ended the conversation, but I still contend that prayer is serious stuff for serious business not the rally call of a tote and fetch God.

 Fred Craddock tells the story of visiting prayer meeting in a church he was visiting to preach in. He said that the gathering was a strange scene. The people, He said were praying for things like new cars and mink coats and a date with someone named Jim. Over in the corner one of the group was keeping a running tab of answered prayer. “I don't know what they thought they were doing,” Craddock said, “But it certainly wasn't prayer.”

 Prayer is serious business about God's serious business and though a good parking space at the Mall is nice, it is not the subject of prayer. Prayer is for Kingdom living, not worldly frills.

 2. Prayer is natural.

 I think prayer is the most natural things in the world, for prayer at it root is just talking to God. It is saying from the heart what we need to tell God. There is no need to “pretty it up.” We don't need flowery language or stain glass window voices. We don't need to know some secret code or use some mystic language. We just talk to God about all the things that are on our hearts, all the things that we want to know about in seeking God's Will. Prayer is at its heart a conversation in which we seek God's wisdom on the situations of our lives.

 3. Prayer is real.

 It is not a verbal exercise to make us feel better. Prayer is true communication. It reaches the heart of God and each prayer finds a response there, a response from the divine heart that reflects God's Will for our prayer concerns. Interesting enough there has been numerous studies on the effects of prayer recently. All of them reveal that prayer, even intercessory prayer over long distances have an effect even when the person being pray for is unaware of it. Prayer is real, even the medical world is beginning to realize that. In 1995 only three medical schools in this country had a course exploring the role of religion and spiritual practice in health. Three years later nearly thirty medical schools had such a program. We don't need medical science to prove to us that prayer is real, but it is nice to know.

 4. Prayer is transforming.

 Or to put it another way Prayer changes things. Sometimes it changes the way we look at something. Sometimes it changes the situation itself and sometimes it changes us. Prayer often brings us around to God's Will. Jesus said at the end of His prayer in the garden, “Not my will but Thy will be done.” It's not about what we want but what God wants and prayer can bring us around to God's Way. Prayer tunes our hearts to God's frequency so that we can sing God's Song and not our own.

 5. Prayer is powerful.

 That's what James is trying to tell us. The prayer of the faithful is powerful. It “availeth” much as the King James Version puts it. The prayer of a faithful person yields results. And the best way to become faithful is to feed our faith daily: pray often, to read scripture regularly, to reflect on the words and the way of God often. The best way to become a faithful person is to practice our faith daily. If you want to become a great pianist, you practice daily. If you want to become a champion athlete, you train constantly. If you want to be a better golfer, you golf often. If you want to become a first class Christian, you practice your faith daily. A person who weaves prayer into the fabric of their everyday life grows closer to God. A life immersed in the things of God becomes a godly life.