

Finding your way to pray....

Sunday Jan 31st 2009

JIM SHORT at Ladner United Church – 900 and 1100am

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

1:4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

1:6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

1:7 But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you,

1:8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

1:9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth.

1:10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

13:1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

13:2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

13:3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

13:4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant

13:5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

13:6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

13:7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

13:8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

13:9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;

13:10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

13:11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

13:13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

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Resources: Philip Yancey – Prayer/ & David Bruce Jesus 7/24 provided for me a lot of information and focus for this sermon. I have attempted to note where I quoted directly from them

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In thinking about this week's sermon....I looked back on my own life and tried to remember when and where I learned about prayer...

Like many people of my age – born in 1957 I am the tail end of the Baby boom generation...and for the first part of my life – into my childhood and early teens – Canadian culture as I experienced it was "christian"

I grew up attending a local United Church – our friend circle all went to that church or a local church so we had much in common...

We had the Lord's prayer every morning in public school – the Minister did prayers every Sunday – we said a grace at meals...

and at bedtime to face the terrors and dark of the night I said my prayers – Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take...and God bless...

and I named ever person I could think of...

I don't remember anyone in that period teaching me anything about prayer or how to prayer...I must have assumed early on – that either it came to you by rubbing off or that someone else did most of the praying for you...I did not until close to 30 really delve into prayer nor have a kind of awareness of my prayer practice...I know that's hard to believe because you probably thought at age 2, I was a kind of spiritual giant....

in "Christendom" as we now call those times (this being perhaps a Post Christian world) I think it was assumed that young people like me would grow up in the culture and get it...that somehow it would rub off...

We prayed in our young people's groups – we had prayer books that we used – I studied theology and went out into my first parish without much indepth study or thought around prayer...

Two things changed that reality for me – one was experiencing a period of burnout in the 1980's and the other was taking a two year continuing education course – on spiritual direction...which allowed me to delve into the history and literature of prayer over the centuries....

Some of us grew up in that world – in those days – if you went to your local small independent book store and asked for something about spirituality they might now know what you were taking about and they send you to the small religion bookshelf were most of the books would be about Christianity and

the rest about world religions...had you asked for a book on how to pray – chances are they would not have had anything and might have referred you to a church....

Now you can go to a place like Chapters and there is a large section with Christianity, every major world religion and a large section on spirituality...

the church I grew up in did not have a prayer chain, a time in the worship to pray out loud, a healing prayer group, any form of meditation or contemplative prayer....whatever and I was never taught anything about prayer...and there was certainly no such things as An Idiot's Guide to Prayer...or Prayer for Dummies...

so I had to learn...and I am not an expert – in many ways with prayer I feel still like a stumbling amateur exploring new ground...

my thoughts this morning are a kind of autobiographical primer...addressing some basic questions....
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What is prayer? As its basic...prayer is a conversation...Romans 8:26-28

26 Likewise 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. 27 And God,* who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit* intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Prayer is a conversation between you and God through the Holy Spirit...

Prayer is saying yes in a personal way to a relationship that God has initiated and wants to have with you...

If you meet someone and you'd like to know them – you could in this world – begin by googling them, do your research – ask others – how do you know them and what are they like – you might get a resume or go to their facebook page – but if you really wanted to know them...eventually you would have to sit and both talk with them and listen...

Why do we pray?

We pray because as we pray – (move this definition image out of your mind – when we say pray – people often think – someone good with words praying for me) (and also let me note that prayer is both speaking and listening and when we speak of listening we move into the areas of prayer we sometimes call contemplative or centering)

We pray so that we might know God – the word "know" when used in biblical literature is also the same word used for sexual and intimate relationships between human beings...

It expresses intimacy...

In this relationship between us and God – there is a difference though between this relationship and human ones...

when I meet someone and especially if I care about them, am attracted to them, want to know them more and spend time with them...

those lurking fears within me begin to rear their ugly heads...will they like me – really like me – will they love me for me – will I get hurt, dissapointed, what if I do not measure up...

and with God – well – because of the witness of the bible made fully known in Jesus we already know that God loves us...

God loved us...from the beginning of time...and we have already been promised that nothing we can do will ever change that...

Romans 8

³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A first urge of prayer – towards relationship with God requires you to accept three basic premises on trust

- 1) God exists
- 2) God is capable of hearing of hearing our prayers...
- 3) God cares about our prayers...

None of this can be proved or not provied...It simply is. (Yancy Prayer page 79)

Faith is a relationship between God and us. In conversation and time spent - relationships deepend and so it is with God.

Who can pray?

Anybody...if you want to throw someone into spiritual cardiac arrest – go to a church meeting, especially if an ordained minister or someone trained theologically is present and without giving them further notice...ask them to pray...

You can...God wants to hear your words....

No course or qualifications are needed...and unfortunately we are seduced in by feeling like we have to have special qualifications...(and remember if you will I suggested this about the bible last week – no special qualifications are required to simply take it up and read)

there are no proper words or vocabulary...

don't have to be a trained minister or theologically educated...

There will never be a show entitled "So you think you can prayer?" with some theologian like Simon Cowell going – what is that?>

The only acceptable words of prayer – are your words...

There are all kinds of resources available about ways to pray, when to pray, prayers others have written, techniques for prayer...

and they are only resources to be used alongside of and to support what I will call you voice, your urges, your thoughts, your fears, your struggles however you have understood them...they are not a substitute for your prayers but a support....

in the Book Jesus 7/24 that some of us studied last year (page 23 – Jesus 7/24 David Bruce) the author says that learning to pray is like learning to love – it takes a lifetime...

and he identifies four types of prayer

- a) Established prayers - i.e. The Lord's Prayer
- b) conversational prayers – flow from a conversation that would resemble any conversation you would have with someone
- c) flash prayers – Not all prayers require a formal setting posture or mood – sometimes it is simply blurting out help
- d) Devotional Prayers and Practices

"There is no one way to pray or minimum requirement. And people will pray in different styles. Remember that praying itself is not the goal, but rather the means of fostering a warm, challenging, loving relationship to Jesus."

and in fact – some people would say that the formality of the 20th century church has done a disservice in this area...

Walter Wink reminds us:

"Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless...it is much more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues of the church.

it makes us believe we can't be brutally honest in our "prayer" – conversations with God

It is like an author described baseball – when asked about the game of baseball and to describe it - they said – you throw the ball, I hit it, someone catches it...

So it is with prayer...

What do we pray for?

certainly not to control God nor to get God's attention nor to tell God what God should do...hear that a lot in prayers...

not as a kind of investment – putting money in the bank to earn some kind of heavenly interest...

At some point – though there are endless reams of speculation on what to pray for and what not to...I have come to the place...where I accept the mystery...

I pray as I see fit, as I am led, for what I think I want and need, for things even that I believe to be impossible and I try to leave it with God...I have worked hard over the years and still am working not to manage God's world, God's life, God's church but rather to be led by God to fully participate in it...

When should we pray?

All the time...in the words of the great hymn...we are to pray and praise thee with out ceasing and to glory God in your perfect love...Paul says the same thing...

Prayer practiced over a period of time becomes like a stream always running through you that at times you are aware of and at other times not,,,but irregardless is always there...

I had that sense last week when I sat beside someone who had a young person die tragically in their life recently...

I don't know him well – my counsellor ministerial training always leads me to wanting to ask how someone is and listen – he looked still pretty much in shell shock – I said I was sorry to hear...

and then the meeting began – my back was towards him – but I was aware of him there and everynow and then that awareness came to me and I prayed silently and quietly to myself – God be present...

to pray unceasingly

How are prayers answered?

I don't have the answer for that...but I can share something of my story...around 1988...I came to this dawning awareness that most of my life I had lived with way to much anxiety...

I sure had lots of energy...but living with that kind of anxiousness is tiring and so with a young family and a busy job...I began to feel like it was just harder and harder to keep going and sparing you all the details...I had to acknowledge that I was burnt out and had to take time off from work...

and I was worried – people understand and are sympathetic with broken legs but not always with mental health issues, issues of the heart, issues of the soul...

I was afraid...for myself and for my family and that I might lose my job...

Amongst other things that summer – I spent a lot of time sitting in my backyard...staring into space and praying – I could not do much else and my prayers I must tell you were not eloquently crafted in the King's English...

they were angry, questioning, fearful, colourful...and that summer I prayed like I had never prayed before...from the heart in pain and with desperation...

it is often in those times – times of sickness, death, loss, difficulty that we learn to pray "real"...

and I as many of you have done – had to confront all of my constructs and inner frameworks that had brought me this far – some of which were no longer functioning...

I bargained...God if I do this will you take all of this away

why is this happening to me

why won't you answer my prayers the way I want

why was I born with this – if you knew me in my mother's womb and you loved me – how did this happen

okay what did I do – to deserve this

and on and on and on...

that summer I re-discovered the first steps towards health – but I was not and have never been healed....

what I did receive thought was the gift of the presence of God in Jesus beyond and deeper than all of those questions I asked for which there was not an answer...

there were still people who loved me despite...I had to learn to ask for help – to speak about my feelings – to not be perfect and to set aside some unrealistic expectations....

eventually there was a helpful medication available
I learned that diet and exercise and sleep are very important
changes were made in work habits and patterns...

two things emerged – two things resurrected from what felt like a summer of dying...

health – (not healing)

the skin close presence of the incarnate God who walks with us, beside us and abides with us...as Philip Yancy says: (ibid p. 153)

As a side note I also discovered that prayer is like wrestling – it is in the bible – wrestling with God - Jacob wrestles all night in the book of Genesis with an adversary (in his dreams) and when he awakes his hip is broken (he is wounded) but he receives a blessing and a new name...

That summer I wrestled with God – and emerged still wounded but blessed...that is how our youngest son Benjamin received the name Jacob as his middle name – he was also a blessing – conceived in that time of wrestling...

and the presence of the God who knew pain and suffering in his God's life because he watched at a distance the consequences of the risk Jesus took when he became human and people turned on him, rejected and crucified him...

in that time God became for me in Jesus the one who suffers with us and the one who is not wrecking vengeance from a high on those of God's servants who do not perform nor is God some kind of sugar daddy, santa clause heavenly blessings granter...

"Prayer does not change God, but changes him or her who prays"

The confederate soldier's prayer

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked God for health, that I might do greater things,
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of others,
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for
- but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among persons most richly blessed.

*Found on the body of a Southern soldier
1861-1865*