

From the Pastor's Desk

Prayer and Meditation

Prayer

Prayer can be defined as us talking to God, which can occur in several forms:

Prayers of Petition, which is part of our service every Sunday. Recently, the youth have often led these prayers on behalf of the assembly. Here we communally bring our needs and concerns to God. Prayers of Petition can also be referred to as intercessory prayers and are also offered privately.

Prayers of Praise are probably most often found in our music where we praise the magnificence of God for all his mighty acts done throughout history and in our lives. Prayers of praise also take place apart from song where we praise God with words of adoration. The Prayer of the Day and other prayers during worship services are prayers of praise and are sometimes combined with prayers of petition.

Prayers of Thanksgiving: The Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer, which begins: "The Lord be with you." "And also with you." "Lift up your hearts..." What then follows is normally a prayer of acknowledgement and thanksgiving for all that God has done. The acts that are acknowledged follow the liturgical calendar. For the next few Sundays of Easter, references will be toward resurrection. Prayers of Thanksgiving can also be private where you thank God during your personal prayers for all his blessings.

Prayers of Lamenting or Sorrow: Often you will find these prayers in the Book of Psalms where the author is lamenting a situation of sorrow. These prayers were plentiful during Israel's Exodus and Exile. Perhaps in your life when things were very difficult you found yourself offering prayers of lament.

Prayers of Resignation to God's will: This is most clearly seen in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he said: *My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.*" Matthew 26 Perhaps you have also found it necessary to pray this prayer during certain occasions in your life.

In the Lord's Prayer, the above types of prayer can be identified: *When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name (Praise), your kingdom come (Petition). Give us each day our daily bread (Petition). Forgive us our sins (Petition), for we also forgive everyone who sins against us (This is more of a promise from us than a petition). And lead us not into temptation' (Petition).* Luke 11:3-4

The Prayer of Jesus

Notice that all of the above forms of prayer, we are talking to God in the form of Petition, Praise, Thanksgiving, Lament or Sorrow and Resignation. When you study the prayer life of Jesus, the above forms of prayer seem to comprise only a small part of it. The majority of his prayer was in private. What do you think he was doing during these hours of solitude?:

News about him spread so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. Luke 5:15-16

Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles. Luke 6:12-13

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed, Simon and his companions went to look for him. Mark 1:35-36

The primary form of prayer Jesus engaged in during these long hours was probably contemplative prayer or meditation. Rather than talking to God, Jesus was disposing himself to hear God talk to him. If you study his life when he often spent hours in prayer, it was normally prior to important parts of his ministry, such as choosing his apostles. Jesus was entering into union with God that resulted in God working powerful acts through him.

Contemplative Prayer and Meditation

As you seek to follow Christ, perhaps you will find yourself drawn to this form of prayer. It is a challenge. In the forms of prayers mentioned above, we are the ones in control. We form the words of petition, thanksgiving, praise, etc. and do so at our choosing, either privately or communally. Your mind is active in bringing forth the desires of your heart.

Meditation is more difficult to direct. You have to contend with incessant mental distractions and internal chatter. But, with practice, you are able to observe yourself thinking as your mind leaves its spiritual focus and takes you from one thought to the next. However, in time, space begins to occur between thoughts and you find yourself drawn into the presence of God and an internal peace seldom felt. It helps to learn techniques to help quiet the mind. I have found it helpful to return to the word “Jesus” when finding myself distracted.

I first learned to meditate while in the seminary from 1979-1983. The Spiritual Formation Director taught a form of mediation to my class called Centering Prayer and it is the form I continue to use today. I found similar classes taught at Luther Seminary during my studies there. To learn more about Centering Prayer, you can go to their web site: <http://www.centeringprayer.com/cntrgpry.htm> . Click on “The Method” to learn the various steps in this type of prayer. This summer, I will be leading a few classes to teach Centering Prayer. If you are interested, please watch other Newsletters for more information.

Some have concern about meditation because it is a practice people from other religions use. They fail to see its Christian roots in both the life of Jesus and the early Church. Meditation has been a part of Christianity since its inception. Prior to the invention of the printing press, meditation was a large part of Christian spirituality. With the printing press came the publication of prayer books and hymnals. These were great accomplishments, but the emphasis on prayer techniques toward spiritual union with God were replaced with personal and group reciting of printed prayers. Reciting prayers certainly has its place, particularly within communal worship. Today there is a resurgence of interest in ascetical theology, contemplation and meditation. What is at its center is obtaining, not only knowledge of Jesus Christ, but intimacy with Christ. Because of our Trinitarian understanding, intimacy with Christ is intimacy with God.

Jesusolatry

It is possible to worship Jesus apart from the Trinity, but it severs Christianity from its Judeo-Christian roots. This has been called “Jesusolatry”. Here there is a reluctance to equate Jesus with the God of Abraham because it suggests an equality with other monotheistic religions. In an attempt to elevate Christianity beyond other religions, Jesusolatry perceives Jesus as a superior God unto himself, which negates the Trinity. Adherents of Jesusolatry talk much about Jesus, but little about God, unless it is in reference to his wrath, which is meted out to those who refuse to believe as they do. Not surprisingly, there is a failure to understand meditation, which is perceived to focus on God, even though it is Trinitarian. Ultimately, Jesusolatry becomes polytheistic and demotes Jesus to a divine status less than the Trinity. Most adherents would deny this, but it has become their practice. This theology is most clearly seen in the “Left Behind” books and movies. Perhaps entertaining, but a corruption of Christian theology. Today, in some areas of the country, Jesusolatry is becoming the dominate religion.

Our Creeds and Trinitarian theology remedy the quandary of being God or Jesus centered . It states that we believe God, which is understood as the monotheistic God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is one, yet, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But, in this mystery, the Trinity is completely present in each of the three persons. The Nicene Creed states this in other terminology: Jesus is “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.” This is the definitive Creed of mainstream Christianity developed in 325 AD, but, is seldom, if ever, proclaimed in Jesusolatry churches.

So, to draw closer to God is to draw close to Jesus and to draw close to Jesus is to draw close to God. This theology keeps us within the main stream of Christianity and our Judeo-Christian roots. It also maintains a positive environment for ecumenical and inter-faith relations.

~ Pastor Bob