



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Listening to the deep: the practice of prayer"

Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

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O God, in this moment we are listening: listening with our ears, with our minds, with our hearts, with our bodies. In our lives we are listening, to the news, to our neighbor, to the rhythms and melodies of life. Help us to hear you in it all we pray. Amen.

So we are in the midst of a series of sermons on Listening to the deep that began on Epiphany Sunday with the desire to follow the leading of God, and will end next week as we go up the mountain with Jesus and his buddies. How do you listen? How do you discern amid all the voices and choices? The wisdom of the heart, discerning together, and listening to our surroundings when the winds of life have blown us off the path we thought we were on. And no series on this topic would be adequate without at least some talk about prayer right? Surely that is our way, as followers of Jesus, people of faith, of connecting to God right?

Well friends, this is the United Church and I have to tell you that in my experience we do a dismal job of teaching and learning the practice of prayer. I mean for goodness sake, Muslims pray 5 times a day. Do that for a while and you learn a thing or two about prayer. And within the Christian tradition, really it is the Catholics, the Orthodox folks, that have the practices of mystical prayer down, and the Pentecostals have the practice of ecstatic prayer covered. We, well, I'm not sure we know what we mean by prayer. Our minds and our bodies are so busy, and we like words so very much, but what are we doing when we pray? Are we praying to convince God to do something that God hasn't thought of doing? Are we bringing people to God's attention- is God really so asleep at the switch that a reminder from us is needed?

As a 19 year old, I was confused by United Church prayer so I went to the Catholics where I was living, at UBC at the time, and asked a Catholic sister, Sister Kathleen to teach me to pray. She was amazing, because she didn't tackle any of my philosophical problems with prayer. She didn't untangle the knot in my stomach around prayer. She didn't help me distinguish between my childhood letter to Santa and my childhood prayer to God. Nope, she gave me a simple book of mindfulness exercises, and taught me to breathe. I mean I knew how to breathe, but I had forgotten that I was doing it. I had lost touch with this very basic thing in life, breathing. The simplest and most fundamental conscious thing we do to live- we breathe. And the more I noticed I was breathing, the more I paid attention to that breath going in and out, the more I imagined what that breath was doing in me, the life sustaining exchange that was taking place over and over in every moment of my day, the more I came to actually feel that exchange taking place, the more aware I was of being alive, the more aware, and grateful I became that I am here. And somehow, my life started to become more prayerful.

I started to wake up. Brother David, a monk and writer says prayer is waking up to the presence of God. Maybe prayer was more than my confused 19 year old United Church brain thought it was. Maybe it is more than filling God in, or convincing God, or making myself feel better. I started to see that there are prayers, and there is prayer. Prayers are important, pouring ourselves out before God, a song of praise to our maker- "How Great Thou Art." And prayer, as a way, as a state of being, and as a practice is living, well the world opens up. Prayer has a way of permeating the day, stealthily infiltrating every moment getting under the radar of our trigger-happy conscious mind, if we let it. Brother David says, for example, biting a tomato, and stopping to experience it, tasting it, appreciating it, savor it, is prayer. Thich Nhat Hanh says that

when we wash the dishes, and know and experience the washing of the dishes, the water, warm on our hands, the soap, the rain on the window, the smells, the feelings... we are at prayer. As my favorite go-to wordy protestant Barbara Brown Taylor says, "When I look up from feeding the outside dogs to see the full moon coming up through the bare trees like the wide iris of God's own eye- when I feel the beam of it enter my busy heart straight through the zipper of my fleece jacket and fill me full of light- I am in prayer. When I spend all afternoon chopping onions, stewing tomatoes, and setting out every piece of silver I own for a supper of soup and bread with my friends, I am in prayer. When I am so sick that I cannot do anything but lie in bed with a jar of 'Vick's Vaporub' and a blister pack of cold mills lost somewhere in the sheets, with all the time in the world to remember whom I love and why, I am in prayer." Waking up, is prayer.

Which brings me to our gospel reading for today. Things are just whipping along in the life of Jesus and his friends according to Mark's gospel. John the Baptist has been arrested, Jesus has been doing a combination of teaching, preaching, healing and casting out demons (which, by the way, is a whole other sermon) and the place, needless to say, is in an uproar. People are flocking his way. He must have just flopped into bed at the end of the days. But we hear that he got up early, before anybody else, and slipped out to a quiet place to pray. I wonder what he was actually doing when he was praying.

Was he recalling the day before, sifting through the barrage of encounters that it all might settle somewhere, somehow in his soul? Was he pouring out his doubts and fears, sorting through and agonizing over the questions? Was he sitting in silence, a blissful, wakeful silence, letting the quiet body of God's earth hold him, strengthen him for the day, before, all too soon, his friends searched him out and found him saying "everybody is looking for you." And the day, the next place, and the next flurry of encounters begin?

You see, prayer is a lot of things and there are as many ways and nuances within the ways as there are people walking this earth. And since Sister Kathleen broke the tight mold that confined my understanding of prayer with her simple wisdom and teaching, I have discovered just how many ways I pray. I have discovered that when a song arises unbidden from within, pay attention. It is likely a prayer. What have you discovered? How does your soul pray? There are so many ways, every one being a communion:

When we pay attention to what is, here, now, right in front of us, we pray. When we, with words, or sighs too deep for words, alone or together, with cupped hands, or lit candles, pour our hearts out, let what is deep in here find expression out there, we pray. When we trust God enough to be grateful for everything, even the hardship, trusting that hardship has a way of sneaking the very deepest insights under our defenses, and knowing that the practice of gratitude for hardship is a very deep kind of faith, we pray. When we leaf through our laundry list of people, and situations, of deep hurts and stunning joys, we pray. When we sit or walk or hold a hand in silence, listening by accident or on purpose, being "still enough for long enough for the shy deer-soul inside to step into the clearing" and be revealed, we pray. When we simply mark the day as sacred, like Muslims do 5 times every day, or like the black robed monks of Stavronikita in northern Greece have done for a thousand years, awake at 4 in the morning to say, "this groggy moment too, O God, is sacred," we pray.

Friends, it matters less how you do it than that you try. It matters far less the times you have forgotten to do it than the times you have remembered. But like Jesus, step aside the steady flow of your life to attend, to pour out, to thank, to listen, to place a mark- dog-ear the day. You may be none the wiser for it. But life will not slip by. You will have savored it just a bit more. Amen.