

## Confronting the Fear

Matthew 6: 7-13

Last week, I drove to Dallas to visit some of my father's side of the family. These were people I've known most of my life, but when their reminiscing turned to sharing stories of shooting critters like snakes and armadillos, I began to realize how different my life experience had been. This was not my culture.

While in Dallas, I found myself attending a funeral service at the First Baptist Church, a very large church with a very definite church culture. I realized pretty quickly that this, too, was not my culture. Though it seemed to work for them, there was a lot of energy being exerted consistently to reinforce that culture. I was aware of a constant effort to affirm that God was working in people's lives, and also to avoid challenging questions about how God acts and if God acts

Many of the songs we've sung today, old gospel songs, are from that same culture - from the frontier and from the mountains. They came out of a culture in which life was too challenging to challenge who God is and how God acts. Religious faith existed to comfort us in our affliction and to afflict us when we became too comfortable.

Our sisters and brothers in New Orleans need that sort of comfort now. They need songs, words, and prayers of faith to assure them of God's presence in their despair. They need to have hope.

What, though, do we do when comfortable theology no longer comforts and familiar answers do not suffice? What happens when our questions long for deeper meaning - challenging more than defending the familiar answers of religion? What about when we become dissatisfied easy answers. Once you confess to yourself that you have such challenging questions, you can't go back to pat answers. So, fully aware and with uncertainty, you move forward and ask your challenging questions.

What about prayer? How can we pray? Is it a matter of asking for specifics or just "God's will be done"? Does prayer change things or just change us? Is there anybody there? Do we stand at the abyss of existence alone? Is God only a security blanket? What does it mean to "take it to the Lord in prayer"?

We can start by asking what does the Bible tell us about prayer? It tells us a lot, but, in Luke's gospel, when the disciples ask, "Lord, teach us how to pray," Jesus' response is what we call the Lord's prayer. It's more familiar version is found in Matthew 6, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The Lord's Prayer reflects the two great commandments. It's first half is all about loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second half is about loving neighbor as self.

If I know one thing about prayer, it's that you don't always get what you pray for -- even really good things. People still die. Relationships still fall apart. Businesses still go under. Students still fail exams. And once in a great while, the big one hits in the worst possible place and tens of thousands suffer, and thousands die. And that really challenges our theology of prayer.

If I were to affirm one thing about prayer, it would be the power of prayer to change the prayer -- the one who does the praying. Prayer has changed my perspectives, my values, and my attitude. Yet, prayer that only changes me still seems less than satisfying. Theologian Rudolf Bultmann, (*Jesus and the Word*) has really challenged my theology of prayer: "Prayer is not to bring the petitioner's will into submission to the unchanging will of God, but prayer is to move God to do something which [God] otherwise would not do."

My prayer has the power to change God's mind? This seems almost heretical, yet it has the ring of truth. Such a view reflects the idea that we are in partnership with God. Prayer is the key to that partnership. Prayer "changes what is possible to God. An aperture opens in the praying person, permitting God to act without violating human freedom" (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*).

Let me explain how I understand this happening. God as ultimate reality becomes God present in and through each life. God's presence is intimately bound up in our human lives. Prayer changes the context. God (in us) actually changes as we change our attitude in prayer. We join our prayers to the God presence already praying within us. Be still to hear the Spirit's prayer within. Respond with passion to the new world being born in our midst.

Let me offer an example. In response to the gulf coast flooding, in your own prayer, become aware of your own passion and pathos. Then, trust the passion, pathos, and power of the Spirit striving to strengthen the will of the workers, the faith of survivors, and the wisdom of leaders. We join our wills through prayer with the Spirit's will to hasten the healing, lessen suffering, loosen purse strings, enliven creativity, and awaken hospitality.

What is prayer? Let me offering a few images and invite you to consider the ones that speak to you (and to ignore the rest!).

Prayer is the conference room where we meet together with God in ongoing conversation for the purpose of growing and maintaining the relationship. Prayer is the effort to hold open the aperture through which the Spirit works in the world. It is the discipline we practice develop self-awareness and to discover power in our partnership with God.

Prayer is where life is lived. It is a place of total honesty where we intertwine our personality, our essential nature, with ultimate reality itself. Prayer translates the "ground of all being" into personal God. In prayer, we are living our hope for the future by actually placing ourselves in the vortex of God's own passion - in the flow of the life force.

Prayer changes things. Prayer changes us. It is the preparation for life. It is the primary battlefield where all life's struggles are fought before we encounter them outside ourselves. Prayer changes the world since we are part of that world. Community prayer changes community. It changes the corporate atmosphere of institutions, including churches. National prayer changes nations.

Prayer changes what is possible to God and us. Human choices control much of our world - choices to act or not to act, to help people, to send buses to evacuate people

without other means; choices to redirect funding away from levy projects along the gulf coast; choices to move funding away from education, away from health care, toward war, or toward greed. Systemic evil is rampant in the world. The powers of darkness result from human choices, human values -- our choice, our values.

Prayer means business. It's not wimpy. It is a matter of imperatives. Our passion is vital. "Jesus' teachings on prayer feature imperatives: "Ask! Seek! Knock!" "Thy kingdom come!" actually insists that God bring the kingdom near. Prayer requires God to act for the sake of the sick, the suffering, the weak." (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*).

We almost seem to insist: "Hallow your name!" "Make your will done, as in eternity so on earth!" "Give us our daily bread; forgive us as we forgive!" "Keep us from succumbing to temptation; deliver us from evil." We're engaged in an act of co-creation as one little sector of the universe. Your life, my life, rises up and becomes translucent, incandescent, a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe through prayer

Prayer is about trusting that God is and that God can do something. It is believing that we are not alone, even at the abyss, at the edge of hopelessness. There is a power to whom we can turn who'll listen, hear, respond, and love us. Prayer is cooperating with God and supporting God's efforts -- wanting God's values. It means truly wanting social justice, universal inclusion, and to love our enemy.

A man once found himself walking through the streets of Calcutta, so enraged by the poverty that he wanted to scream at God, "How can you allow such suffering?" Suddenly he came to a painful realization: "In the suffering of the powerless, God was screaming at me, in fact at all of us and at our institutions and social systems that cause and perpetuate hunger, poverty, and inequity."

This past week, I was mesmerized by the images coming from the gulf coast, especially from New Orleans -- the suffering and grieving people. I wanted to scream at our political leaders, and to scream at God, "How can you allow such suffering?" Suddenly, there was a painful realization: in the suffering of these very people -- the powerless, the hopeless -- God is screaming at me, at us: "How can you let this happen? How can you let it continue? What will you do?"

God saying to us, in the hardships and disillusionments of our lives -- perhaps God is praying to us -- "How long will you cooperate with the powers of darkness, systemic injustice, and greed in the world? How long will you turn a blind eye to the suffering people?"

Only God can redeem people and systems -- and only with human cooperation. We are partners with God, co-creators. In prayer, all the needs of the world, including our needs and those of the suffering people in New Orleans and the gulf coast and the Middle East and Africa and Latin American can all pass

through our consciousness in prayer. We can touch them, but we cannot hold onto them. We cannot fix them because they will overwhelm and destroy us.

We can only send them to God at the center of ourselves. This means letting go control to the power of the universe. Then, the Spirit sends back to us that thin slice of need for which our particular giftedness is appropriate. This is our call. On this path, you and I decide how we will answer prayer -- what we will do, how we will act.

Earlier in this service of worship, we prayed for the victims of Hurricane Katrina - all the victims. As you think about how you feel as you prayer, consider where the passion lies in your prayer? Trust that passion, but don't cling to it. Allow all that need flow back to God. Then, be open to the very particular action you can take - the specific direction you want to walk to meet need.

God calls people to be artists and prophets. These are the ones who dare to act on the bold belief that he (or she) has a word to speak that would be healing if it could be heard. [Sadly,] except for rare moments, most of us are overcome by forces of disbelief and we forget that our lives are for the greening of the earth and the greening of one another."

(Elizabeth O'Conner, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

Prayer is what we do so we will remember who we are. We pray so that we won't forget why we are here.