Prayer 2011-07-10 by Sandy Cheatham

Last Spring I was serving as a student pastor in a town near where we lived in Oregon. I had been there since the start of the year and was thoroughly enjoying being there. The senior pastor was fairly new, and concerned with revitalizing the church due to its lagging attendance. He thought of and got the congregation to try numerous approaches and though everything was met with enthusiasm nothing seemed to work. So, he decided to approach the church council about a deliberate time of prayer. Rather than attempt more of the pastors ideas, the church council would pray for God to let them know what to do, how to do it, and the what time to do it. I thought this was a great idea as I could tell some in the congregation were tiring of trying something new, and besides who could argue with prayer?

That council meeting which only lasted an hour taught me more, and continues to plague me more, than any seminary class I have taken. After the pastor presented his idea, there was a round of nods and several spoke up in agreement and witnessed to the power of prayer. The room grew quiet and before the vote was to be taken, (it was a Methodist church and they vote on everything..) one very brave man whom I shall call Tom, raised his hand to speak. Tom was the church guitarist, had been a member along with his wife for years, and was involved in just about everything at the church. I believe we all assumed he would call for the vote…he was a quiet man so we didn't expect a testimony or anything. Tom said, "I don't pray."

Everyone looked at one another, "what did he mean he didn't pray," "surely, he was joking." Tom went on to explain that he didn't pray, sure he said the prayers of the congregation but he was merely reading the words. He believed in God and all, he just didn't talk to God. No one knew what to say, including the pastor. The idea was eventually tabled and the meeting adjourned. People filed out as if they were leaving a funeral. Being curious by nature, I had to probe and poke so I could understand.

I define prayer as a conversation between oneself and the Divine. I am quite the talker so I never have had an issue with talking to God, either silently or out loud. My issue is with listening. According to the Webster definition of prayer, I don't have to listen. Webster defines prayer as a petition to one's God. "Dear God, thanks for the food, my toys, mom and dad…oh yeah, God could you help me pass my test tomorrow. I was a little busy with my friends and didn't quite get everything I needed done. I promise next time I'll study" At some point someone taught me that this as called a fox-hole prayer and I've come to think of it as the bratty child prayer, but it's still in repertoire of prayer. Eventually the fox hole prayer felt insincere so I went to the more formal prayer…"Our Father, who art in heaven," and eventually the five point prayer. This kept up for a few years, but it also felt insincere. I began to wonder exactly what prayer was all about, what does God want.

Here is my quick theological statement on prayer. Feel free to take what you want and discard the rest.

What – Prayer is a conversation between oneself and God. This means both parties "talk" and both parties take turns "listening."

Who- In my view the Divine is not vain, therefore he/she doesn't need to hear lots of praises. In fact, I think the Divine sincerely wants to know each of us better, just as we are not as we wish to be perceived.

When- Anytime, God doesn't have office hours so anytime we feel joyful, in distress, or just like chatting her/him up the line is open.

How- Now this is the tricky part…I believe one can pray with words out loud or silently in one's head/heart, through pictures in their head, through the movement of their body in dance, yoga, or running. You see God speaks more languages than we can even imagine. I think God wants us to be comfy...ourselves.

Finally, why – well, if you need science, numerous studies have shown that patients who practice prayer tend to be healthier than those who don't, specifically they typically have lower blood pressures. I believe that humans were created to be in community. Prayer can give someone a sense of community even if they are alone. God is always there.

Back to Tom who shattered the church council meeting with his declaration that he didn't pray. After talking to Tom for a while, on numerous occasions, he said that when he got too stressed he often would go out on his tractor and think. Eventually he would calm down and sometimes even have an idea on how to handle the issue. He didn't think this was prayer because he wasn't asking God for anything, he wasn't talking...just thinking. I'd argue that he was praying and that those "ideas" didn't just come out of the blue. That was God talking back.

Now with my belief that prayer if a conversation, God has to be doing something other than listening and then going on with her/his day. Sometimes, though it feels like that is exactly what is happening. In one of my last classes we read a short story called "Love Medicine." At one point in the story, the main character goes to church (mass to be specific) with his grandpa who everyone believes is going senile. As the rosary starts up, grandpa "filled up his chest and opened his mouth and belted out them words." Everyone keeps "muttering their prayers while the grandson stops and stairs at grandpa. Eventually he gets used to it himself and returns to his usual recitation but the question of "how come?" refuses to leave him. So after church he asks grandpa, "How come? How come you yelled?" and grandpa answers, "God don't hear me otherwise." God doesn't hear me…ever thought that? Listen in with me to that grandson's response:

I sweat. I broke right into a little cold sweat at my hairline because I knew this was perfectly right and for years not one damn other person had noticed it. God's been going deaf. Since the Old Testament, God's been deafening up on us. I read, see…I found discrepancies between then and now. It struck me. Here God used to raineth bread from clouds, smite the Philippines, sling down fire on red-light districts where people got stabbed. He even appeared in person every once in a while. God used to pay attention, is what I'm saying. (201)

Ever feel that way? Like God's on a long vacation…out of range from your prayers. As I had Seth read over my sermon he said he could sympathize with Tom and the grandson, but honestly he wasn't

so sure he wanted God to answer sometimes. Remember the story of Jericho where God told Joshua to walk around the walls, blowing horns for seven days and then the walls would come down. If God answered your prayers for world peace by telling you to go walk around Washington DC for seven days, blowing a horn would you do it? Or, would you think you had something bad to eat for dinner last night and perhaps should stick to toast this morning? If an answer comes from God, does it have to be logical and reasonable? How do you know what's from God and what's from your own mind?

I believe Seth's honest answer of I'm not sure I want to hear from God applies to many of us. Its easier to recite prayers from childhood or a list of needs than to truly be in conversation with God. Listen to what happens when God decides to interrupt this person:

"Our Father who art in Heaven..."

"YES?"

"Don't interrupt me. I'm praying...

"BUT YOU CALLED ME."

"Called you? I didn't call you. I'm praying. Our Father who art in Heaven..."

"THERE YOU DID IT AGAIN."

"Did What?"

"CALLED ME. YOU SAID, "OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN...".

HERE AM I. WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?"

"But I didn't mean anything by it. I was, you know, just saying my prayers for the day. I always say the Lord's Prayer. makes me feel good, kind of like getting my duty done. "

"ALL RIGHT. GO ON."

"Hallowed be thy name."

"HOLD IT. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?"

"By what?"

"BY "HALLOWED BE THY NAME."

"It means...it means...good grief, I don't know what it means. How should

I know? Its just part of the prayer. By the way, what does it mean?"

"IT MEANS "HONORED," "HOLY", "WONDERFUL"."

"Hey, that makes sense. I never thought about what Hallowed meant

before. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

"DO YOU REALLY MEAN THAT?"

"Sure, why not?"

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?"

"Doing? Nothing, I guess. I just think it would be neat if you got control of everything down here like you have up there.

"HAVE I GOT CONTROL OF YOU?"

"Well, I go to church."

"THAT ISN'T WHAT I ASKED YOU. WHAT ABOUT THAT HABIT OF LUST YOU HAVE? AND YOUR BAD TEMPER? YOU'VE REALLY GOT A PROBLEM THERE, YOU KNOW. AND THEN THERE'S THE WAY YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY...ALL ON YOURSELF. AND WHAT ABOUT THE KINDS OF BOOKS YOU READ?"

"Stop picking on me! I'm just as good as some of the rest of those phonies at the church."

"EXCUSE ME...I THOUGHT YOU WERE PRAYING FOR MY WILL TO BE DONE. IF THAT IS TO HAPPEN, IT WILL HAVE TO START WITH THE ONES WHO ARE PRAYING FOR IT. LIKE YOU, FOR EXAMPLE."

"Oh, all right! I guess I do have some hang-ups. Now that you mention it, I could probably name some others."

"SO COULD I."

"I haven't thought about it until now, but I really would like to cut out some of those things. I'd like to, you know, be really free."

"GOOD, NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE. WE'LL WORK TOGETHER...YOU AND ME. NOW, SOME VICTORIES CAN TRULY BE WON. I'M PROUD OF YOU."

"Look Lord, I need to finish up here. This is taking a lot longer than it usually does...Give us this day our daily bread."

"YOU NEED TO CUT DOWN ON THE BREAD TOO...YOU'RE OVERWEIGHT AS IT IS."

"Hey, wait a minute! What is this, "Criticize Me Day?" Here I was doing my Religious duty, and all of a sudden you break in and remind me of all my hang-ups."

"PRAYING IS A DANGEROUS THING. YOU COULD WIND UP CHANGED YOU KNOW. THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO GET ACROSS TO YOU. YOU CALLED ME, AND HERE I AM. IT'S TOO LATE TO STOP NOW. KEEP ON PRAYING. I'M INTERESTED IN THE NEXT PART OF YOUR PRAYER. WELL, GO ON."

"I'm scared to."

"SCARED? OF WHAT? I KNOW WHAT YOU'LL SAY. TRY ME AND SEE."

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

"WHAT ABOUT LINDA?"

"See, I knew it? I knew you would bring her up! Why she's told lies about me, cheated me out of money... She never paid back that debt she owes me. I've sworn to get even."

"BUT YOUR PRAYER...WHAT ABOUT YOUR PRAYER?"

"I didn't mean it."

"WELL, AT LEAST YOU'RE HONEST. BUT IT'S NOT MUCH FUN CARRYING THE LOAD OF BITTERNESS AROUND INSIDE, IS IT?"

"No, but I'll feel better as soon as I get even. Boy, have I made some plans for ol' Linda. She'll wish she never did me any harm."

"YOU WON'T FEEL ANY BETTER. YOU'LL FEEL WORSE. REVENGE ISN'T SWEET. THINK OF HOW UNHAPPY YOU ARE ALREADY. BUT I CAN

CHANGE ALL THAT."

"You can? How?"

"FORGIVE LINDA. THEN I'LL FORGIVE YOU. THEN THE HATE AND SIN WILL BE LINDA'S PROBLEM AND NOT YOURS...YOU MAY LOSE THE MONEY, BUT YOU WILL SETTLE YOUR HEART."

"But Lord, I can't forgive Linda."

"THEN I CAN'T FORGIVE YOU."

"Oh, you're right! You always are. And more than I want revenge on Linda, I want to be right with you... All right! I forgive her. Help her to find the right road in life, Lord. She's bound to be awfully miserable, now that I think about it. Some way, somehow, show her the right way."

"THERE NOW! HOW DO YOU FEEL?"

"Hmmm....not bad. Not bad at all, In fact I feel pretty great. You know, I don't think I'll have to go to bed uptight tonight for the first time since I can't remember. Maybe I won't be so tired from now on because I'm not getting enough rest."

"YOU'RE NOT THROUGH WITH YOUR PRAYER...GO ON."

"Oh, All right...And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

"GOOD...GOOD. I'LL DO THAT. JUST DON'T PUT YOURSELF IN A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN BE TEMPTED."

"What do you mean by that?"

"QUIT HANGING AROUND THE WRONG PLACES, WATCHING INAPPROPRIATE MOVIES AND TELEVISION, LISTENING TO SINFUL CONVERSATIONS. CHANGE SOME OF YOUR FRIENDSHIPS.
SOME OF YOUR SO-CALLED FRIENDS ARE BEGINNING TO GET TO YOU. THEY'LL HAVE YOU COMPLETELY INVOLVED IN WRONG THINGS BEFORE LONG. DON'T BE FOOLED. THEY ADVERTISE THEY'RE

HAVING FUN, BUT FOR YOU IT WOULD BE RUIN. DON'T USE ME FOR AN ESCAPE HATCH."

"I don't understand."

"SURE, YOU DO, YOU'VE DONE IT...LOTS OF TIMES. YOU GET CAUGHT IN A BAD SITUATION, YOU GET INTO TROUBLE AND THEN YOU COME RUNNING TO ME. LORD, HELP ME OUT OF THIS MESS, AND I PROMISE YOU I'LL NEVER DO IT AGAIN. YOU REMEMBER SOME OF THOSE BARGAINS YOU TRIED TO MAKE WITH ME?"

"Yes, and I'm ashamed Lord. I really am."

"WHICH BARGAINS ARE YOU REMEMBERING?"

"Well, when the guy next door saw me backing away from the neighborhood bar... I told my husband I was going to the store... I remember telling you, "Lord, don't let him tell him where I've been. I promise I'll be in church every Sunday."

"HE DIDN'T TELL YOUR HUSBAND, BUT YOU DIDN'T KEEP YOUR PROMISE, DID YOU?"

"I'm sorry Lord, I really am. Up until now I thought if I just prayed the Lord's prayer everyday, then I could do what I liked. I didn't expect anything to happen like it did."

"GO AHEAD, FINISH YOUR PRAYER."

"Oh yes...For Thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen."

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT WOULD BRING ME GLORY? WHAT WOULD MAKE ME REALLY HAPPY?"

"No, but I'd like to know. I want to please you. I can see what a mess I've made out of my life, and I can see how great it would be to really be one of your followers."

"YOU JUST ANSWERED THE QUESTION."

"I did?"

"YES, THE ONE THING THAT WOULD BRING ME GLORY IS TO HAVE PEOPLE LIKE YOU TRULY LOVE ME. AND I CAN SEE THAT HAPPENING BETWEEN US. NOW THAT SOME OF THESE OLD SINS ARE EXPOSED OUT OF THE WAY...WELL, THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT WE CAN DO AND TOGETHER."

"Lord, let's see what we can make of me."

"OK? YES, LET'S SEE."

Now that poor soul had some issues, but I wonder if it were you or me in that situation how the conversation would go. As I've already told you, I've been a fan of fox hole prayers myself. I've also had issues forgiving others and though I want to change the world for the better, I'm not always willing to put that into action. Yet, each Sunday I utter that prayer with the rest of you. I'm not too sure I would want God to interrupt in front of you guys.

That being said, I believe God wants us to know us for who we are and while the Divine may be able to read our hearts, he/she would rather that we choose to open those hearts of our own accord and share on our own. George and I, with Jane's help, are going to close with "Better than a Hallelujah." Our family listens to KLove on a regular basis and when this song first came out, George asked me why something sad like dying man's final breath could be better than a halleluiah and I was stuck, unable to answer for month's. In the last month, I've been able to explain it. You see sometimes, we sing hallelujahs and praises to God because we think that is what we are supposed to do. Often, we keep our deepest troubles to ourselves due to embarrassment or guilt. But, like I said a moment ago, God wants to know us as ourselves, to be our closest friend from whom we keep nothing. Therefore when we lay our troubles all out and turn to God for comfort, it can truly be better than a hallelujah.

Think about when you are most vulnerable during your day. I'd say it's probably in the restroom. This week, I challenge you to engage in potty time prayers. Every time you visit the throne, visit with God…let it all hang out. And then listen for God, look for God. Have the courage to engage God and to be engaged by God. In honor of Tom, who's courageous statement got me thinking, I'd like to close with a Prayer for a prayer by Robert Jones (Jones, Robert. *Prayers for Puppies, Aging Autos, & Sleepless Nights: God listens to it all.* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, 1990.)

Benediction: You are loved, precious child of God. Have the courage to engage, and be engaged by, the Divine and you will surely bless everyone you meet.