

"Prayer: Words Whispered From Your Soul"

Matthew 26:36-43

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I read this joke while I was working on my sermon last night: A Sunday school teacher came to a pastor with a picture depicting Christ in an agonizing prayer in Gethsemane while his disciples slept in the background. "I showed this picture to my class today," she announced, "and one of the students said, 'That reminds me of Pastor Winger.'" Winger was her church pastor's name. Naturally, the pastor was quite overwhelmed. While searching for an appropriate comment, he must have failed to catch the twinkle in the teacher's eyes. After he stammered a moment, she asked, "Want to know why this pictured reminded my students of you?" "Yes, of course," Pastor Winger said, trying to sound suitably humble, "Well, Ronnie pointed to the sleeping disciples and said, 'You see, Jesus was praying so long, just like Pastor Winger does, that the disciples fell asleep!'"

I hope that my pastoral prayer is not too long for you. We know that prayer is a part of our Christian life and that it is important to practice it everyday. Apostle Paul exhorts us (1 Thesalonians 5:17), "Pray without ceasing" like breathing every second in our daily lives, but we don't know yet what exactly it means to pray and how to pray to God correctly. Two weeks ago, we had a chance to learn about Elijah's experience, about God's presence in his silence. I want us to take another opportunity to learn about prayer this morning and for the next two Sundays before we begin the Advent season on November 27. This morning, we will learn a prayer from our master, Jesus Christ. In our Scripture reading, Jesus prayed at Gethsemane. His prayer to God was desperate but very simple: "My father, if is possible, let this cup pass from me; not what I want but what you want." What lesson can we learn from Jesus' prayer this morning?

First of all, we notice that Jesus lifted up his petition to God, but he didn't ask God to do what he wanted, but he asked what God wanted to do for him. We pray for many other reasons: we pray for the sick, the lonely, our loved ones and we pray for blessings as well. We make a petition to God, but sometimes we experience that our prayer has not yet been answered. Naturally, we feel frustrated, and we doubt on our faith. Let me share a story for an example that we can think about our to shape our prayer attitude together. There was an old lady who had two sons. She always prayed for her sons. One was a straw shoe merchant and the other an umbrella merchant. She was always troubled, for when it rained her straw shoe merchant son struggled while her umbrella-selling

son fared well. On sunny days, she was worried that her umbrella merchant son would not sell any umbrellas. What is your suggestion for her prayer practice? The couple living next door heard the story from the old lady and told her, "Ma'am. Let's look at it the other way round. If it's sunny today, your straw shoe-selling son will do very well and if it rains today, your umbrella-selling son will do very well. So when you pray for your sons, you can always give your thanks and praise to God in your prayer.

What is the right understanding of prayer in our Christian life? Jesus Christ prayed hard at the Gethsemane before he was arrested and put to suffering by political leaders. In our Church year calendar, we usually reflect on this passage on Lenten season, especially on Maundy Thursday service, because Jesus' passion will follow up right after this scene. We need to know briefly what exactly happened to Jesus Christ on that night. After Jesus had the Passover meal with his disciples, he and his disciples went out to the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane for a time of prayer. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, knew that Judas, one of disciples, would betray him and put him to death on the cross. He was scared and afraid of what was coming up to him the day after. He must have sensed that he would be killed a few days later on a cross like other criminals.

Jesus refused to be rescued from violence. He wouldn't run away nor rescue himself. Jesus knew that it was not about him, but God's bigger plan for others. Jesus, the Son of God, was given his body as a 'ransom' for redeeming our 'cost of sin' through his sacrificial act of love. We know that as the Son of Man, this was a bitter reality. On this night, he was scared and full of dread because of his fear of death. The Gospel of Matthew radically shows us how much Jesus became vulnerable and fragile during that night. When the morning was broken, Jesus had to take 'this cup' by pouring out his blood, and break 'the bread' by breaking down his body on the cross. He was anguished in a deep and long prayer on that night.

The Scripture says that he was deeply grieved, even to death. He asked his disciples to remain there with him and to stay awake in order to pray for him. Jesus went a little further, and he threw himself on the ground. He prayed, "My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But please, not what I want but what you want." We find another important point in Jesus' prayer. The focus on his prayer is not about his preference, but about God's will. The purpose of prayer is not to enforce or beg God to please what we desire, but it is a communication with being honest to God. With trusting in the Lord, we lay down our pride, our desire, our self-centered directions, and humbly, we bring our vulnerable heart and soul for the presence of God in our time of prayer. We know that God will listen to His Children's praying as God did when He came

down to the Israelites in the Old Testament. Prayer is not a test of how physically God's power works for our life, but it is a spiritual practice to be in communion with God, and it also a constant communication with God. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, we should not cease taking our breath at all times no matter where we are or whether God meets our needs or not. Once we are connected to God, our connection is not temporary, but it will be forever. Prayer is a way of linking us to the love of God in our daily lives.

The last point we can find in Jesus' prayer is that even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was humble before God. In his most difficult time, he wanted to be in touch with God. We know that he is the Son of God and mighty God's son! How about us? We pretend that we are perfect and a great master of our life. But we know that we are not perfect. We admit that we easily become vulnerable and afraid when we experience difficulties and hardships in the storms of life. Our life is not permanent and infinite but a temporary and limited one before God. Prayer reminds us of our humble relationship to God. When we stay in touch with God through a constant prayer, we can be in communion with everlasting God. In early 1940s, Reinhold Niebuhr, a well known theologian wrote this prayer in his article, and it was widely accepted to AA and twelve steps programs as well. This prayer is very inspirational and insightful to me. The prayer goes like this:

O God and Heavenly Father,
Grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed;
the courage to change that which can be changed, and the wisdom to
know the one from the other, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is true that we are not the great master to be in control in our life. God is our master in life. Even Jesus Christ, in his most vulnerable moment, went out to a place for a time of prayer with God. Our genuine prayers make us humble before our God. Our prayer life helps us to reconnect to God. When you honestly pray to God, God will listen to your prayer and he will come down to meet you in your personal moment. As God promised in the Bible, He will wipe every tear from your eyes, when you come humbly back to God. You will not be alone in your prayer. Our loving, caring and compassionate God will be with you. He will comfort you and strengthen you every time you come closer to God in your prayer. Amen.