

## **“Prayer: Reconnect with God”**

Luke 7:36-39, 44-50

November 13, 2011

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

When a nightclub opened on Main Street, the only church in that small town organized an all-night prayer meeting. The members asked God to burn down the club. Within a few minutes, lightning struck the club, and it burned to the ground. The owner sued the church, who denied the responsibility. After hearing both sides, the judges said, “It seems that whether the guilt may lie, the nightclub owner believes in prayer while church doesn’t.

This morning, I am not going to talk about the efficacy of prayer. To be honest with you, I don’t know exactly how prayer can change our nature: the 9-11 terror, earthquakes or human chronic illness. Six years ago, I had an opportunity to work as a hospital chaplain for a year at UCSF research hospital in San Francisco. One day, I got a call from labor & delivery unit. One of hospital staff called for a chaplain’s visit to a patient who lost her triplets during her pregnancy. I heard that the patient requested a chaplain’s visit. I went up the floor. As soon as the patient saw me, she cried and said to me, “I prayed hard to God, but God didn’t hear my prayer.” What answer could I share with her? What I did for her was not try to give a clarity of understanding why this happened to her, but I asked God for granting her comfort and strength to overcome this difficult time. I didn’t believe that the patient wanted to hear a right answer for her situation, but she needed someone’s presence to witness her difficult moment. I believed that was the reason why she asked for a chaplain’s presence. We pray for affection, not for change because change is not ours but God’s authority.

We don’t know why innocent people die and why natural disasters occur and why unfortunate things never stop happening in life. But I still remember a sentence that I once saw in a chaplain’s office. The words were in a framed picture. It said: “Life is fragile, handle with prayer.” Prayer is still an important part of our spiritual life in our relationship with God. We know that we need guidance and direction by God whom we trust. Prayer is a channel to be in touch with the love of God. Prayer is not only a conversation with God, but it also helps us to reconnect with God. This morning, I hope that we can find a better way for our spiritual growth through a better communication in prayer: What do you think is the right attitude to pray to God?

We know the importance of prayer as Christians. Most Christians admit that prayer is the primary way that we communicate with God. A better prayer life will help us to establish a better relationship with God: I talk to God, and God listen to me, but on the other hand, in prayer, God speaks to me, and I listen to God. So prayer is not a time when we ask God to fulfill our to-do lists, but rather as a communication between us and God. In prayer, we discern God's will, receiving insight, inspirational thought for nurturing our souls, and we listen for God's guidance and direction for our future. As Teresa of Avila reminds us of prayer, "souls without prayer are like people whose bodies or limbs are paralyzed: They possess feet and hands but they cannot control them." In order to continue to grow in faith, we should practice our prayer life in our daily lives. Prayer is a contact point how we, temporary beings, can be connected to the everlasting God. We bring our joys, concerns, hopes, fears and every other part of lives before God. Prayer is a mysterious experience that we can be in communion with God. I would like to go a little deeper through a story in our Scripture reading. Our prayer may not change our nature, but it can transform us in our relationship with God. In our reading, a woman encountered the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In this story, we can see a life-changing experience in this woman's story.

The story goes like this as we read this morning in the Bible. One evening, Jesus was having a special dinner party by one of religious leader's house. When he was at table, all of the sudden, a woman came into the house to meet Jesus without any appointment. This lady was not an invited guest to this gathering. We don't know exactly who this woman was. Traditionally, the interpretation is that the woman was a prostitute because Jesus acknowledges that her sins had been many in our reading, but there is no evidence that she was a prostitute. She could have been ill, disabled or have had contact with Gentiles to be considered to be a sinner by all of the Jews in the city in Jesus' times. But the obvious thing is that this woman was considered unclean, and unacceptable, because according to the Bible, she lived a sinful life. In other words, she was marginalized, abandoned, and outcast by her community. She was an outcast in a first century Galilean city where everyone knows everyone else's business and personal lives. There was no way to be reconnected to this community. Imagine this woman's broken heart! There was no one that she could open up her broken heart to and no one to share her life story with in this town. She must have heard that Jesus, a new Messiah, was having a gathering at one of the leader's house. She was eager to meet him and to pour out her broken heart before him.

This woman wanted to come closer to God, and she gave her best to Jesus for what she had for the Messiah. She boldly began to wet Jesus' feet with her tears, and to wipe his feet with her hair. That was an expression of her deep and

genuine heart. Then she also poured out her expensive perfume. Do you feel this woman's desperate heart for salvation meeting the Messiah? Think about this happening in view of the manager of the house. This must have been a very embarrassing experience to their guests. Obviously, this was an event against the social customs of those times. In addition, letting down woman's hair in public was such a gross act of immodesty. The woman was supposed to be penitent, but Jesus never commented on her wrongdoing; rather, he understood her heart.

What makes this story so surprising to us is the way Jesus responded. Rather than criticize her inappropriate act and rudeness, Jesus immediately accepted her and celebrated her act. Jesus said: "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus embraced her with a compassionate heart. This must have been a life-changing experience for her. She was marginalized, abandoned and cast-away as a prostitute or a sinner in her community, but now she experienced welcome and understood forgiveness by the Messiah. We can imagine that the great love and mercy of God had become an event for her through this encounter with Jesus. Somehow, she was able to experience God's grace and mercy which would cover her status as a sinner. This woman must have come to sense in the deepest part of her heart that there is nothing we can do about the fact that God loves us and there is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us.

What do you see in this woman? There is a very interesting contrast in view of perspective between Jesus and Peter in our reading. Peter persisted in seeing this woman as a sinner, but Jesus had a totally different perspective. He saw her as a forgiven woman and accepted her as a child of God - as her great love had shown to him. What can we see and learn from this woman for our prayer life? When we pray to God with a humble mind and a genuine heart like this woman, God will respond to us and listen to us. Our honest and humble attitude in our prayer will reconnect us to God. God will see our heart rather than our appearance. God is more interested in the authenticity within us than our status in appearance. In the same way, in prayer, as John Bunyan said, "It is better to have a heart without words, than words without heart."

We need to remember that Jesus showed this woman forgiveness and acceptance. A true prayer will touch our God, and God will grant us forgiveness and acceptance. Our God won't judge us and criticize us about our unbelief or lack of faith. What this woman offered to Jesus Christ was her deep heart and an honest confession. No matter what other people felt or how others condemned her as a sinner, Jesus was pleased to see her heart and the actions from her heart. Jesus blessed her saying: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." She experienced such care and such welcome from Jesus through this special

encounter. A true prayer brings you a feeling of understanding, forgiveness, acceptance and welcoming rather than guilt, shame or condemnation. Just as Jesus sent forth the woman back to her community in peace, in prayers, God want us to build a community of forgiveness for sinners in this church with the Spirit of welcome. When you come closer to God in prayer, no matter who you are or what you have done, God will forgive you and accept you as a precious child of God. God will meet us, embrace us and restore our broken relationships. I hope and pray that our prayer will be the way to reconnect us and our community of faith with God.