

“May the words of my heart and
the meditations of our minds
be acceptable and
pleasing to you, O Lord.” AMEN!

As we settle into the priestly
prayer from Jesus told in the Gospel of John,
I find that I am hesitant to preach
a sermon on prayer.

A sermon on prayer almost never comes out
the way I hope it to.

A sermon that encourages us to pray
the way Jesus prayed always comes out,
how shall I say, less than peaceful,
not all all meditative, and
more like something to check off
a list than a listening event.

As if my ordering us to prayer is
the connection God desires to have with us.

It reminds me of a story I heard once
about a man who wanted to improve
his prayer life.

Once upon a time, a man named Andrew

who wanted to better himself by picking
up the practice of prayer.

So, like a good Lutheran,
Andrew set out to find a good self-help book
that taught the discipline of prayer.

Andrew liked that word, discipline,
because it gave him the feeling that
he could master his goal with
some good ol' fortitude.

The book Andrew found had a pretty cover
and after reading a few pages
he thought he was ready to put some of
the advice to the test.

He found a spot in the living room and
settled onto the couch, closed his eyes
and began to talk to God.

It went pretty well until the grandfather clock
signaled the top of the hour and
Andrew remembered there was a tv show
he wanted to watch, so he reached
for the remote control and
switched on the show.

The next day, Andrew realized he needed

to stay away from the clock so he went into
his bedroom to pray.

He sat down on his bed, closed his eyes
and began to talk to God.

A few minutes passed and the phone rang.

Thinking the call would be important
he opened his eyes to answer the phone.

Thirty minutes later he had extended
the warranty on his vehicle that was
about to expire.

Feeling good about the
newfound security in his car,
he realized the call had made him tired,
so he laid down and took a nap.

The next day, Andrew was furious at his
lack of focus and vowed that this time
he'd rid himself of all distractions.

He went into his closet and closed the door.

He stuffed a pillow under the door and
put his ear muffs on
to shut out all the sound.

There in the quiet darkness
he knelt down to pray.

Andrew was faithful unto the very end.

He had no idea, however, that the
fire department was banging on his
front door trying to rescue him from
the fire that burned his house
to the ground. (Pause)

You see, this purely fictional story
reminds us of the difficulty of prayer and
the difficulty to preaching the virtue and
value of prayer.

It almost always comes out forced or disingenuous.

Like some unwanted chore that
we are guilted into completing.

So, I feel a Spirit move for us
to look at Psalm 1.

Perhaps the same Spirit will move us
back to John's gospel later. (Pause)

So, let's look at Psalm 1.

You know me, and you know how much
I love to point out
the firsts and the lasts.

Psalm 1 starts out the Psalter with
the overall theme of the book.

That there are two roads to take in life.

These two roads are metaphors
to the way we are to live life.

The author doesn't say specifically but
it is understood that the
choice is ours regarding
which road to walk.

Choose wisely the writer advised.

The two ways or roads are
the way of the wicked and
the way of the righteous.

Happy are those who do NOT
follow advice of the wicked nor
go (or walk) in the way of sinners
nor silently listen to the words of scoffers.

The author chose to advise us
first on what NOT to do.

The writer did not have any problem
with advising people to stay away
from evil people.

And it is advice for us to not get mixed up
with a crowd that would pull down,
tempt you away from God or clouds
your good judgment.

Happy are those who stay away
from such vices but
delight in the Law of the Lord.

“The Law of the Lord” is the way our
translation puts it but one that is more
attuned to the Hebrew is this

“Happy, the one who delights in
the Lord’s instruction, for that one
murmurs the Lord’s teaching day and night.”

Don’t you love that earth language?

“Happy the one who delights in
the Lord’s instruction and murmurs
the Lord’s teaching day and night.”

It was in a close meaning to our
translation of “meditate” but made even
clearer is a repeated Scripture verse
murmured again and again, day and night.

(Pause)

These repeated scripture verses that guide us
to contemplative prayer help me and
I think they can help you, too.

“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

This is an easy one for me to murmur day and night
as I contemplate the infinite love God has
for all people and my falling short of
God’s will.

Lately, I have been using other mantras
to help keep my mind quiet and listening
to God’s Spirit.

One of my favorites, from a meditative app
Colleen and I listen to, is

“Om Shreem Namah” this translates
to an invocation of joy, generosity and beauty
into life and into the human spirit.

When the mind wanders we simply
repeat the mantra. (Pause)

In our gospel lessons the past couple weeks
we have heard Jesus express to His followers
that they are to bear fruit.

You may not know that, "bearing fruit" was
code language to live such the life that
other people benefit from the things
we say and do.

What a world transformation if more people
lived lives that bear fruit.

This is the very meaning of the portion of
Jesus' prayer that we read today as
he prayed for his disciples. (Pause)

In the Wednesday Bible study group,
we are in Mark nearing Jesus' arrest.

The same command to bear fruit
exists there, too.

In Mark, it comes when Jesus cursed
the fig tree because it looked healthy
but bore no fruit, it gave no figs.

Mark masterfully connects the curse of the fig tree
to Jesus' curse on the temple structure.

It looked healthy, business was good,
but it was not bearing fruit.

Not bringing resources and aid to the poor,
to the widowed, or to the marginalized people.

The temple leaders had become greedy and
liked the places of distinction they received
from wearing their long robes.

It is the same indictment on many
Christian congregations today and on clergy.

Fancy jets, expensive suits, and
outrageous shoes all while the poor and
the widow are devoured...
taken advantage of instead of cared for.

The Psalm Writer warns us
to stay away from them,
and reminds us to walk
the moral choices in life,
look to Scripture passages
to murmur and repeat.

With more positive influences, we are then told

how we will be like a tree planted
near streams of water.

The tree bears fruit and her leaves do not wither.

The psalmist has seen how sin works,
insinuating its way slowly and
methodically into one's life.

The familiar excuses we make.

Oh, that's just a harmless pleasure, or
it won't hurt anyone and sophisticated scoffers
can be pretty attractive to be around,
but these are not life-giving.

It is life-giving to NOT walk the path of the wicked
nor listen quietly to scoffers.

They are the ones who spin lies,
create mistrust, and sow seeds of
hate and division.

We cannot sit quietly listening
to these evil doers.

Jesus prayed for his disciples to
stand firm in delight for the Lord's instruction
and this Psalm paints for us a picture of

a fruit bearing tree by streams of water.

The tree is a lovely image especially
when one considers the arid, dry land
in the Middle East.

A tree is a life-saver and a sign that water is near.

Let us be the tree.

This is the instruction we are encouraged
to follow from God.

Murmuring prayer day and night with one another
so that we do not become like chaff driven
away by the wind.

On the path this Psalm writer
encourages us to take
we will encounter
the Lord's embrace...
forgiven so that we forgive,
loved and we will love,
and free to make others free.

AMEN!