

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor

Ash Wednesday – February 17, 2021

Joel 2:1-2, 12-1, Psalm 51, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord, Jesus Christ. C: Amen

Jesus taught his disciples, saying: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Just the word “prayer” can raise all kinds of responses and feelings in us. These may range from the most pious of responses to the feeblest of excuses. An example of the former is the woman I heard about several years ago who took Jesus’ instruction to the disciples to pray in secret so seriously and literally, that she refused to have her children baptized, because that would have required her and them to participate in prayer in public – during the worship service. This really happened.

When we’re literal in our understanding of Jesus’ instructions, which were first given over 2000 years ago – we fail to appreciate the spirit in which words were and are used, and instead, we cling almost to the death to our personal and individual understanding of the meaning of the words.

You’ll recall that Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes numerous times when they insisted that only their understanding of one or another of the 613 laws that they knew YHWH God had given them was correct. Their objections frequently had to do with Jesus healing people on the sabbath, because the religious leaders perceived healing to be “work,” and the law said that people were not to work on the sabbath. Jesus said that the law – even God’s law – was made for the benefit of people; people were not made to be squeezed and pinched into contortions to obey God’s laws when the result was that they would live in pain or injustice would result and they wouldn’t be able to experience the joy that God had granted to all of creation.

But what about the feeble excuses? Well, two common problems that people have when they talk about praying is that they don’t have the time to pray; or they don’t know what words to pray. Well, the time issue we know is resolved. Even our youngest children can tell us that the right place to pray is anywhere, and the right time to pray is any time – not just when we’re in a worship service, whether in person or virtual.

And Jesus took care of the excuse of not knowing what words to say when we pray, too. He told the disciples that when they didn't know what to pray, Holy Spirit would find the words for them. So, if we don't know what to pray, we can just pray, "Lord, help me to know how to pray." Or "Dear God, give me the words that I need to pray." Or any other, similar words.

I'd like to share with you a humorous take on different attitudes about prayer that comes to us as a poem by Sam Walter Foss, who was a librarian and poet who lived in Massachusetts in the 1800s (and who was the son-in-law of a minister). The poem is called, "The Prayer of Cyrus Brown."

THE PRAYER OF CYRUS BROWN

by Sam Walter Foss

"The proper way for a man to pray,"
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes,
"And the only proper attitude
Is down upon his knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,"
Said Reverend Doctor Wise,
"Is standing straight with outstretched arms
And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no,"
said Elder Slow,
Such posture is too proud.
"A man should pray with eyes fast-closed
And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be
Austerely clasped in front
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground,"
Said Reverend Doctor Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Hidgekin's well
Headfirst," said Cyrus Brown,
"With both my heels a-stickin' up
And my head a-pointin' down."

"And I made a prayer right then and there,
The best prayer I ever said,

The prayingest prayer I ever prayed,
A-standin' on my head."

<http://www.bartleby.com/380/poem/214.html>

Now, each of the churchly leaders quoted in this poem: deacon, reverend, elder, and reverend doctor, knew that he was correct. Each knew that he was in touch with God's directions about exactly how holy conversation should proceed. But Cyrus Brown pointed out that it is **whenever, and wherever** we are in need of that communication, whenever and wherever we need to raise our thoughts, to humble our hearts and to seek the Lord's help. That is the right time and place – and the right way to pray.

So we can pray, in our own words, in our own time, and in private. Or we can pray in ancient words (like the Lord's Prayer), at official public gatherings (like worship services), and in all words, at all times and in all places that fall between these two extremes.

The second discipline of Lent our text from Matthew offers in Jesus' teaching, is fasting. What does the word fasting mean to us? Probably, at first thought, not eating or drinking anything for some period of time. But it may also be not eating a particular food, or not drinking a particular beverage during a particular period of time. This second approach is what we usually think of when we talk about Lent – we say that we'll "give up" something for all the days of Lent (excluding Sundays, of course).

Some people object to the "giving up" approach, because it may seem more like dieting than fasting. Many people take advantage of the opportunity to "give up" things like chocolate, dessert and alcohol during Lent because they lack the self-control not to consume these things at other times of the year.

But I don't know that it matters how we fast. When we do, we experience a heightened awareness of who is at the center of our lives as we give up complete control of satisfying our whims and desires at every minute of every day. The experience of not being able to have whatever we want whenever we want it also gives us a slight experience of what life is like every day for the millions of people in the world who are "food insecure" or who suffer from hunger, malnutrition or even starvation.

We can use the Lenten season to strengthen our resolve to be disciplined in our obedience to God. Alternatively, we can use our faith to strengthen our resolve to do what we know we should do (or not do what we know we should not do) all the time -- not just in Lent.

The third discipline of Lent is doing works of love, which we interpret as almsgiving.

“Alms” is an ancient word which we rarely use today. It is a religious practice which involves giving materially to another as an act of religious virtue. It’s different from giving tithes and offerings, since it’s specifically for the purpose of helping people who are in greater need than we are.

Of course, you could hand out change or dollar bills to people who are asking for money on the street and that would be almsgiving. But in Lutheran churches we frequently use special methods, like special envelopes, so that the amount given can be segregated, and then given all to one organization that works to ease the financial difficulties of people who are in need. It’s thought that this is a more effective way of using what God has given us than through individual distribution. Sometimes we find that organizations match contributions that church members make, which increases the effect of the almsgiving.

During Lent we can combine both fasting and almsgiving by saving what we would have spent on what we don’t consume through fasting, and then giving that amount as alms.

Although it is not included in Jesus’ instructions to disciples that we heard earlier, the last of the traditional Lenten disciplines –self-examination and repentance – is very helpful during this season. It’s like gauging our practice of the Christian life the way we might check our weight or blood pressure. We can weigh our faithfulness by reflecting on our day, every day. We also can look to others in our family, both biological and spiritual, for guidance. There’s a practice called the Daily Examen that consists of a brief prayer and review at end of each day of what I did; why; and how my behavior comports with my understanding of God’s will for me. The Examen concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving; of repentance, as is appropriate, and of strength to move forward in discipleship.

Let’s pray: Merciful God, accompany our journey through these forty days. Renew us in our baptismal vows to provide for those who are poor, to pray for those in need, and to fast from self-indulgence, so that we may find our treasure in the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, whom with you and the Holy Spirit we worship and praise, one God, now and forever. AMEN!\