

Communion With God

1 Samuel 3:1-10

January 18, 2009

I.

Today's Gospel from John described the calling of Phillip and Nathanael, who also was known as Bartholomew, to become two of Jesus' original twelve apostles. There certainly is good sermon material here.

But I'm not going to preach on this Gospel for two reasons. First, the reading next week from Mark is about the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John as four more of the apostles. And although there are differences between that story and today's Gospel, they are similar enough to incline me to preach on a different subject today.

Second, that different subject, which is today's Old Testament reading about the calling of Samuel to be a prophet, contains one of the great messages of the Bible, and it opens the door for a discussion that is central to our faith. So, Samuel it is.

The reading begins when young Samuel was sleeping in the temple, and he heard someone call him. He thought it was Eli, an old priest who also lived in the temple and supervised Samuel's training. So, he went to Eli, but Eli said he had not called. Then the same thing happened a second time, and a third.

On the third occasion Eli realized that the Lord had been calling Samuel and that Samuel had mistaken the voice for Eli's. So Eli told Samuel what to do. When the Lord called a fourth time, Samuel said, "Speak [Lord] for your servant is listening."

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. How many times do we say just the opposite? How often do we say "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking"? How often do we pray in the sending mode rather than the receiving mode?

And there is nothing wrong with the sending mode. God wants us to speak to him in prayer, but he also wants us to listen. And so I would like for today's reading about Samuel to be a point of departure to discuss how both parts of prayer, sending and receiving, fit into our spiritual lives.

II.

Now, there certainly is more to prayer than I could cover in one sermon. And prayer also will be part of our Christian Education program outlined on the back of your bulletin insert. But there are some essentials we might consider today.

We can look at it from three perspectives. First, what do we think prayer really is? Second, why is it important? And third, what is the best way to pray, if there even is a best way?

So, to the first question. What is prayer, and by extension what is its purpose? At a basic level, prayer is personal interaction with God. It works both ways, and it's a two-way street because of God, not because of us. It is God's gift of his divine presence to us, and through it we can be transformed into the holy and obedient people we were created to be, even though the world tries to pull us in the other direction.

Through this gift God says he wants a relationship with us. He is available. The line never is busy, and the call is free. We never get put on hold. But we have to make the call, and we have to listen as well as express ourselves. Then, when we pray, especially as part of a regular practice of prayer, we are able to experience this never-ending gift of his willingness to pay attention to us.

Now, I just mentioned a "regular practice of prayer." At times, however, there is nothing regular about it. You might recall a few weeks ago when I talked about 911 prayers, which are "Lord, this is an emergency. Help me out of this mess," and 411 prayers, which are "Lord I need some information. What should I do?" While 911 prayers certainly are important, they hopefully are infrequent. Today I want to focus on 411 prayers and how they build our relationship with God.

Billy Graham once said that "prayer is the rope that pulls God and people together. But it doesn't pull God down to us; it pulls us up to him." And the catechism in our Book of Common Prayer says that prayer is "responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words." Let me repeat that. Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words. And, of course, the term "without words" exemplifies the story of Samuel.

And prayer can take several forms. They include petitioning God for ourselves, or interceding with prayers for others, or thanking God for what he has done, or acknowledging our disobedience and seeking forgiveness. And I want to emphasize the importance of regularly asking God to forgive us. Prayer is our pipeline, our artery, to God, and it can become clogged with secular cholesterol, so to speak, if our transgressions build up without being forgiven.

There also is another important way to pray. Our lives can be our prayers. Things we do in the world, outside of church, can be offered to God in thanksgiving for the opportunity to even do them. During seminary, and here at St. Thomas, I have offered my work as my prayer. I do things with hope they are God's will for me, and are pleasing to God. We all might consider this aspect of prayer in our jobs, our family lives, and our work in the community.

St. Paul was a classic example of this. It has been said that he lived in "moment-by-moment consciousness of the eternal existence of a holy and sovereign God," and that it was impossible for him "to conceive of any human activity apart from God." We might not be able to maintain such an intense level of devotion, but it can be something to which we aspire.

And prayer is the way to do that. It is the sense that we can be close to God, and that God can be with us in all we do. It is how we share ourselves with God, by thought and by deed, with and without words. Prayer is the way to peace when we are anxious, it is the way to insight when we are unsure, and it is the way to security when we are adrift. And that's just part of a long list of what prayer can mean.

III.

But we also might wonder why prayer is important. After all, God is everywhere and knows everything anyway. He knows what we need and want before we even ask. And we might think that God's will is going to be done no matter what we do or say. So we simply might not believe that prayer is important.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Book of James our Lord's brother proclaimed, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (4:2-3). Later, he said, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:16).

This means that our failure to ask can deprive us of what God otherwise might have done for us. We have heard it said that God has a plan for us. But what if God has more than one plan? What if there is Plan A and Plan B? And what if Plan A is what happens by default, but Plan B is what happens if we pray? Both plans could be within God's will for us because they're his plans. Who are we to say that God does not act in such a way?

There's a story about the Christian fellow who went to heaven when he died. Part of his introduction to heaven was to go to a certain very large building. He did so, and joined a line of other people waiting to go in who also were happy about ending up in eternity.

And while waiting in line he noticed people coming out of another door with very sad looks on their faces. When he got into the building he found out why. Once inside, each person was taken into a special room and shown all the blessings that God wanted to give them while they were alive, but that they did not receive because they did not ask.

Now, obviously, that does not mean we literally will get everything we ask for in prayer. God, better than ourselves, knows what's best for us. You might remember the lyrics from the 1971 hit song by Janis Joplin, "O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." There's nothing wrong with driving a Mercedes, but that kind of prayer probably won't work. There is an important distinction between selfish prayer and unselfish prayer. And we all probably know the difference.

IV.

Finally, we might ask, what is the best way to pray? How do we do it? The answer is that it makes no difference, so long as we sincerely reach out to God in a way that expresses our hope of continuing in a relationship with him.

We might have a traditional image of prayer as being on our knees, with our hands clasped together. We will do that today, and that's a good way to pray. But I said earlier that prayer not only is our thoughts and words, but also can be our deeds, and words are not necessary.

Except for the Lord's Prayer, there is no formula. Although though we use the same prayers each Sunday, we can pray anytime, and those around us might not even realize we are in touch with God. We can pray while driving, or stopped at a traffic light, or just relaxing in a chair. We also can pray by reading. The study of Scripture and devotional material can be a form of prayer.

And finally, prayer is something to be approached reverently no matter how we do it. At times there is a temptation to treat our prayers as "shopping lists" or as "boxes to be checked," and we approach prayer in a mechanical or routine way. I am as guilty of that as anyone else. When that happens, just take a deep breath and start over. Let the Holy Spirit help you.

And we can be distracted as we pray. We try to maintain a prayerful attitude, but thoughts about schedules, agendas, or other worldly matters creep into our minds. This is typical, and is one of the ways that Satan tries to water down our faith. Satan wants us to have weak prayers. Again, just stop for a moment and ask the Holy Spirit to help maintain connection with God.

And after all is said and done, we might ask how we know if our prayers are answered. God always answers prayer. Someone said that the answers are "yes," "no," or "wait." And "wait" probably causes the most anxiety. A friend once told me he thought God said to him, "Are you kidding me?"

But whatever the answer is, it will be God's will for us. And if there is a Plan B if we pray, then Plan B will happen. And perhaps we won't be so disappointed when we go into that big building in the next world to see what we missed in this world.

V.

The bottom line is that when we pray from our hearts we can trust God to know what is best for us, even if it is not exactly what we ask. It might be even better in the long run. And if we listen, like Samuel listened in today's reading, we can experience God and we will be changed.

If we treat prayer as the continual development of our relationship with God, then we can more fully know the riches of God's love for us. We can know that God hears us, that he loves us, and that he will take care of us. *Amen.*