

What Can I Bring?

Bedford Presbyterian Church

August 19, 2018

Whenever we are invited to a group dinner our first question usually is: "what can I bring". When he communicated with me about preaching today, John asked me to plug in to a series of sermons on "how to pray". I'm suggesting that a good question for each of us to ask about our praying is, "what can I bring?" I'm doing that because I believe there are definitely some attitudes and intentions that we need to bring to our times of prayer and this morning we'll be thinking about a few of them though I'm sure there are others I've overlooked. Jesus, in that scripture we read together, gave us a strong hint about the most important thing for us to bring to our praying.

I. We need to bring a sense of God's holiness.

He said in that prayer he gave as a model that we should begin with a reverence for God. We are, after all, communicating with the creator of the universe. Perhaps we might recall some phrases from Carrie Underwood's hymn "How Great Thou Art."-phrases like "awesome wonder...consider all thy hands have made...power throughout the universe displayed." You might read the early part of Mark Chapter 9 with its account of Jesus being so changed in appearance on the mountaintop that to Peter, James and John his face seemed to glisten and his clothing became so brilliantly white it was described as being whiter than anyone on earth could bleach it. Or perhaps we might recall a few verses from Psalm 8-"Lord, how magnificent is your name in all the earth...when I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, what are human beings that you should care for them?" Or, if you wish to feel the awesomeness and power of God in a story, read the 19th chapter of I Kings. It tells of the prophet Elijah's flight from the wrath of Queen Jezebell and walking 40 days and 40 night across the desert to Mt. Sinai. He was hiding in a cave and God came to him, called him to the mouth of that cave. A windstorm struck so powerful that it cause landslides on the mountain but the text says, "God was not in the wind". The same was true of an earthquake and then of a firestorm. God was present to Elijah in "a still, small voice." All that is awesome and it is

holiness. That sort of full appreciation for the holiness and power of God might also help us move toward another of our needed contributions to our praying.

II. We can bring an openness to the 'other', the different, to what the theologians call the transcendence. We can bring an openness to mystery and to something happening in our prayer time that we could not have expected and may not completely understand. That's not going to be easy for us to bring. We've learned and accepted the world views of our parents, our extended families, our neighbors and the various communities of which we are a part. Being open to changing those world views is painful and difficult but as John Killinger reminded us in his book on prayer, "our ability to enter into strange experiences and to attribute a measure of reality is not only greater than most of us suppose, but it actually increases to the degree to which it is exercised.

I've been working on this lately and I have indeed found there are surprises when we open ourselves up to the new and strange. Here's an example from last week. I stopped in a fast food place to grab some lunch on my way to visit Carolyn. I had brought the morning paper along and intended to read as I ate. The gentleman in the next booth had other plans. He began immediately to engage me in conversation. My first inclination was simply to ignore him and if that proved insufficient to ask to be left alone. I remembered I was trying to become more open to new experiences, so I gave him my full attention. "I do voices", he said and then he reeled off the names of several widely familiar and distinctive voices he could reproduce. He went on to share with me that he had been invited to appear on a national TV variety show, or maybe it was one of those late night talk shows. He said he got that invitation "because I can do both Yogi and Boo Boo, most people who do voices can only do one or the other. I can actually do them in conversation." Then he began to imitate for me the voice of some other person I was supposed to recognize. His companion sort of rolled his eyes and said, "come on Pete, we're going to be late." If I had showed less openness, I might never have had an opportunity for conversation with someone who can do both Yogi and Boo Boo. The new is often just that strange to us, but in our praying we need to be open to it.

So, along with a sense of God's holiness and openness to all that is new and strange...

III. We can bring properly ordered expectations. In another of those recent experiences with keeping myself open to the new, I met someone I now consider a friend. We began to converse and explore our points of common interest and then he began to share with me some of the challenges and difficulties he and his wife were facing. He said, "I don't know whether I should ask God to fix it or not." We talked about that some, and later exchanged emails about it, and seemed to agree that prayer is not a call service for a God who is just Mr. Fix It. It's probably not correct to come to prayer with the expectation that God will simply fix whatever we have broken. We also seemed to agree that the God who came to be with us in Jesus did not intend simply to hang out with us. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ wants to be fully and helpfully present with us in all our joys and sorrows, all our accomplishments and our apparent defeats. So if we have made some serious major errors in our living, while it's not ok to simply ask God to fix it, it is entirely correct to seek God's helpful presence as we try to move our lives in new directions that parallel his intended path for us.

As a part of those proper expectations....

IV. We can bring to our praying a willingness to be changed. That's another tough one. We very much prefer to remain in our comfortable living patterns, even if they included some things that are terribly bothersome to us. Jesus said that an important part of our prayers is to say, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". A lot of the time we are keenly aware that God's intention for our lives and for the lives of those around us is markedly different from our own, and we want to hang on to what's comfortably ours. Sometimes I've called this openness to being changed as we pray "trying to share God's loving intentions." Whenever I'm successful, at least for a moment, in sharing God's viewpoint, I'm changed.

So to our praying we can bring a full sense of God's holiness, and openness to the mysterious "other", properly ordered expectations and a willingness to be changed.

V. We can also bring gratitude to our prayers. One of my favorite writers on the life of the spirit is Morton Kelsey. His book included "Adventure Inward" and "The Other Side of Silence." He's an Episcopal priest, a theologian and a psychologist who studied with the pioneer psychiatrist Carl Jung. In every book of his that I have read he repeats, often more than once, "if the only prayer you ever

pray is 'thank you' that would be enough". If you just browse through the book of Psalms, reading perhaps some first verses, or other verses that catch your eye, you can't go very far without noticing how important giving thanks to God was to those ancient Hebrew poets. Several of the Psalms begin with the sentence "Give thanks to the Lord for the Lord is good and his steadfast love endures forever." Every hour of every day provides us with something that has come to us with little or no effort on our part and which is truly a blessing. A moment's reflection can always remind us of so many blessings for which we are indeed grateful. Our gratitude for present and past gifts from the Creator can continue to help us realize that whenever we come to a time for praying....

VI. We can bring a confident trust that God will care for us in that moment in all our futures out of the bounty of his steadfast and enduring love. I believe that what I was at least hinting at in that conversation with a friend I told you about a little while ago. We don't bring our questions, problems or difficulties to God expecting God to take our blueprints and fix them. We come honestly attempting to share our lives with God, to enter into God's will for our living, and trusting that even when we do not understand God's intentions, even when we aren't at all clear about how God will deal with the mess we have handed him, we can always trust God's love to provide what's needed.

So you see there's a lot we can bring to our praying: Trust, Gratitude, a willingness to change, proper expectations, an openness to the different or strange, and a profound sense of God's holiness.- AMEN