

Abounding in Thanksgiving: A Sermon on Prayer

Genesis 18:20-33

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-15

Luke 11:1-13



This morning's lectionary readings focus on prayer. The Genesis passage continues the story of three travelers who visit Abraham and promise that he will have a son. One of the visitors is identified to be God, and Abraham has a discussion with God. In fact, Abraham actually argues with God; he haggles with him like someone in a Middle Eastern market. In the Psalm (as in many Psalms), we have a specific example of a prayer: "I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart . . . I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name." (Ps. 138: 1-2) In the gospel reading, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray in Luke's version of the Lord's prayer; the next paragraph in Luke contains Jesus' well known promise about prayer: "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Luke 11:9-10)

In my sermon this morning, I am going to try to answer the question, "What is prayer?" I am going to begin, however, with

three examples of misunderstandings of prayer to help make clear what prayer is not.

The first is an objection to prayer that began with the New Atheists and often appears in the comments section on the internet when unbelievers want to make fun of people of faith. Atheist commenters regularly accuse Christians of having an "imaginary friend." The point is that prayer is something childish that an adult should have grown out of. Belief in a God who answers our prayers is like the boy Calvin in the old comic strip Calvin and Hobbes whose stuffed toy tiger was his imaginary friend.

The second approach views prayer as a philosophical problem. People ask: "If God knows everything and if God is going to do what he intends to do anyway, then what is the point of prayer? Surely we cannot change God's mind?" Prayer, then, becomes, not something we do, but a philosophical problem about how we bring together God's almighty power and human freedom.

The third approach is that of the prosperity gospel. The claim is made that if we have enough faith, God will answer our prayers. We will never be sick. We will never be poor. If we become sick, if we are poor, it must be because we do not have enough faith.

Each one of these approaches is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what prayer is, and the best way to correct misunderstandings is to offer a proper understanding. For a proper understanding of prayer, we can look at the one passage in our readings that only mentions prayer in three words, "abounding in thanksgiving." In his epistle to the Colossians, the apostle Paul writes: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." (Col. 2:6-7) This is an example of what biblical scholars call Paul's "indicative-

imperative." Since God has done this in Christ; therefore, you should do that.

Although "indicative-imperative" is a kind of technical term for biblical scholars, there is nothing mysterious about the idea. It is just a way of saying that Paul understands there to be a relationship between knowledge and practice. What we do depends on what we know. Recently, the Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith has written a book entitled *You Are What You Love*. Smith's point is that the things we do show what we love more than the things that we claim to know. There's a great example in 1 John 3:17. John asks: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" If we say that we love God, but we don't show it by how we treat people, we really don't love God.

But I would add that, while it is true that we do what we love, it is also true that we cannot love what we do not know. So the New Atheist does not pray because he believes that he has outgrown the god who is an imaginary friend. The New Atheist looks at the universe and he says that the lights may be on, but there's nobody home. Or maybe the lights are not even on. The Christian looks at the universe, however, and he says the lights are on, and we know that someone is home because Jesus is the light. Paul writes: "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him," and "For in him," meaning, in Christ, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority." (Col. 2:9-10) We Christians know that there is someone at home in the universe because that someone has actually paid us a visit. God has become one of us in Jesus Christ.

What then is prayer? Prayer is living in the world as if we believe that there really is a God and that God has done certain things. Prayer is living as if there is someone at home in the universe. Prayer is our response to how God in his

goodness has acted in Jesus Christ. It is how we walk as we have received Christ.

But prayer is also an action. It is something we do. It is not simply believing certain things or having the right doctrines. (And that is where Jamie Smith is right when he says that “You Are What You Love.”) “Walk” is a verb suggesting that the Christian life is a journey. The image is one of pilgrimage. We have a destination. We have a goal. We have a starting place and a path, and Jesus Christ is the starting place, the path, and the goal. But we actually have to take steps, to put one foot in front of the other. So prayer is a kind of shorthand way of describing the Christian journey. There are other things we do besides prayer: Worship, sacraments, acts of mercy, but, in a sense, all of Christian life is prayer.

And this is where all three of the misunderstandings I mention get it wrong. Prayer is not, like the New Atheists think, about having an imaginary friend. Prayer is living as if there is someone home in the universe because that Someone has come to us in Jesus Christ. Prayer is not a philosophical problem about whether our prayers can change God’s mind. It is rather what the apostle Paul calls a walk, walking in Christ, “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” Finally, prayer is not magic, as the prosperity gospel preachers seem to think. Prayer is not a relationship with Santa Claus, but a call to follow Jesus Christ, and that will mean taking up a cross. When we assume that prayer means that God should answer all of our requests, we need to remember that Jesus Christ prayed in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering would pass him by, and it didn’t. Not even the incarnate Son of God had all of his prayers answered.

If prayer is an imperative – Do this! – what are the indicatives? What the Bible tells us about who God is and what he has done tells us why and how we should pray.

First, prayer is an acknowledgment that we are not alone, and that we are made for someone and something. At the beginning of his Confessions, St. Augustine wrote: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Even here, once again, when we talk about creation, it is Jesus Christ who is at the center. Earlier in the letter to the Colossians from which we read this morning, Paul wrote: "He (that is, Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1:15-17) As John's gospel puts it: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:3). So we live in a world that God has created, and he has created it through Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God who became flesh as one of us.

All of our texts tell us something about this God who has created the world and created us – that God is good and he cares for his creatures. In Abraham's argument with God in Genesis 18, he asks a fundamental question to which the answer is supposed to be self-evident: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:24) In the Psalm, we find a word which is one of the characteristic ways in which the Bible describes God, the Hebrew word *hesed*, which English Bibles translate as "loving kindness" or "steadfast love": "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness. . . . The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever." (Ps. 138:2, 8) In the gospel reading, Jesus asks "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13) In the next chapter in Luke's gospel, we read Luke's version of material that we also find in Matthew's sermon on the Mount:

“And [Jesus] said to his disciples, ‘Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! . . . Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!’” (Luke 12:24-28) If the Creator of all things cares for birds and flowers and grass, he certainly cares for us.

Second, the texts speak of what theologians call providence. God not only has created the world, but he is in charge of the world. He knows what he is doing, and, in the end, he is going to make things right. The Psalmist writes, “For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life . . . The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.” (Ps. 138:6-8) In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray that God’s kingdom will come, and his will should be done (Luke 11:2; cf. Matt. 6:10).

Third, Paul’s letter to the Colossians tell us that this God who has created the world and watches over it and us, has redeemed us in Jesus Christ. This redemption is good news and not bad news. God himself has come among us in Christ. Paul writes that in him dwells the fulness of God, but we also have come to share in Christ’s fulness. Paul writes that we have been buried with Christ in baptism, that we have been raised with Christ through faith in his resurrection, that when we were dead in our sins, God made us alive in Christ and forgave us our sins (Col. 2:9-13). Who we are – our identity – thus flows from our union with Christ. We are people whose sins are forgiven and who have new life because we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection.

Our temptation is to find our identity elsewhere, and that is why Paul warns us of the dangers of being held captive by what he calls philosophy and empty deceit. We live in a world in which the culture of consumerism attempts to fill our infinite hunger for the God who has made us for himself with baubles and trinkets – with all kinds of “stuff” that will, in the end, leave us hungry. As Augustine says, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” The empty promises of contemporary culture cannot compete with this one Jew from Nazareth in whom the fulness of Deity dwells. The false promises of our culture cannot give us something that can satisfy our infinite desire for love because only an infinite God who loves us infinitely can do that, and our culture only believes in the kinds of small things that can be sold by advertising. Contemporary culture can not believe in a God who loves us infinitely, or in a world that was created by love.

These then are the indicatives. These are the reasons that it makes sense to pray. God loves us and created us. God cares for us and watches over us. God has redeemed us in Christ. What then are the imperatives? In light of the above, what should be our response? While volumes could be and have been written, I am going to mention three aspects of prayer that correspond to the three points I made above.

Our first response should be gratitude. The Psalmist writes: “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart,” and later, “All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth.” (Ps. 138:1,4) Paul writes that we should “abound in thanksgiving.” (Col. 2:7). Prayer is the recognition that we are creatures and depend on God, that everything we have is a gift from God. Prayer is saying “Thank you” to a God who created us, who has given us our life and all the good things in our lives, and who has loved us and gave himself for us in Jesus Christ.

Second, prayer is a recognition of our dependence on God. Because everything we have comes from God, prayer is the

recognition that we can trust God and so can depend on him to meet our needs. So after thanksgiving, prayer consists of trust and petition. The Psalmist prays: "On the day I called, you answered me," and "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me." (Ps. 138:3, 7) In the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, he teaches us to pray "Give us each day our daily bread." (Luke 11:3) Jesus reminds us that if our child asked us for an egg, we would not give him a scorpion. If we care enough for our children to give them good things, certainly we can depend on our heavenly Father to care for us just as much (Luke 11:11-13). In 1 Peter 5:7, we are told to "Cast all of your cares upon the Lord, for he cares for you." This does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It does mean that in a world that is filled with troubles, we can trust that God is in charge and he knows what he is about. As Paul writes in Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" And again, there are Paul's familiar words, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28, 32-32)

Finally, prayer is confession of sin. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us." (Luke 11:4) This is perhaps the hardest part of prayer for contemporary culture to understand. The reason, I think, is that there has been a shift in modern culture from a culture of guilt to a culture of shame. Guilt is an acknowledgment of wrong-doing, that someone has done something objectively wrong that really hurts other people. Shame, however, is not about objective wrong-doing, but about cultural disapproval. Shame is not so much about something we have done as about something we are. The current culture rejects language of sin because they think sin language is about cultural shaming, and no one wants to be

shamed. At the same time, our culture is one where people constantly shame each other. That is perhaps why there seems to be so much anger these days. Everyone shames, but no one wants to be shamed. With shame, there can never be forgiveness.

An important part of prayer is confession of sin, but confession flows out of forgiveness; it is not a condition of forgiveness. The gospel offers us forgiveness, not shame. Paul writes, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." (Col. 2:13-15) In a culture of shame, forgiveness is good news because it can set aside our guilt. Forgiveness saves shame for those internal and external voices that would continue to condemn us, but no longer can because we have died and risen with Christ. In a culture of shame, it is good news to know that the God who created the world, who loves us, who watches over us, who cares for us, has taken upon himself in the cross of Christ all of those things about which we might rightly or wrongly feel shame. Confession is good news because it is good news to no longer have to bear the weight of guilt and shame.

So these are the three main tasks of prayer: gratitude, trust, confession. And prayer is the action that follows from the three things we know about what God has done for us: that the good God has created us and given us all things as a gift; that God cares for us, watches over us, and works all things for our good; that God has redeemed us in Christ, and delivered us from all that can condemn or accuse us. But at the same time, do not forget. Prayer is an action; it is something that we need to do. It is not enough to know that we should be grateful, that we should trust God for what we need,

that we should confess our sins. Prayer is a pilgrimage. Prayer is a journey in which we must put one foot in front of the other. As Paul writes, "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." As we leave this building this morning, let us take seriously the words of the post-communion prayer: "And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen."