

Bothering God Prayerfully

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January 10, 2016

- [Isaiah 43:1-7](#) "...You are precious to me and... I love you and give you honor. Do not be afraid – I am with you!" (vv. 4-5)
- [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): Jesus shows us how prayer can keep us engaged with God.

Writing a sermon involves hours of preparation and study. Most ministers I know use professional journals, scholarly books, and in-person or on-line discussion groups on sermon topics to aid them in studying the Bible passages. From time to time I come across sermons – or sermons are given to me – that someone has found particularly interesting or inspiring. Sometimes they've been written by friends, or nationally-renowned preachers, or someone I've never heard of.

Today's message comes from the pen (or computer) of the Rev. Richard Donovan. For years I've used some of Dick's Bible study materials as aids in preparing sermons. As examples of how a biblical text might be interpreted, Dick's study materials include an actual sermon by himself or someone else. For as many years as I've been using his study resources I've never used one of the actual sermons he provides... until today. Dick begins that sermon by asking,

Can you imagine being too famous? Comedian Bill Murray, who became famous for his roles in such movies as "Caddyshack" and "Ghostbusters" and "Scrooged" and "Lost in Translation" says:

"Nothing can prepare you for being famous. It's completely different from the way anybody's parents raise them. You think it will be a life of leisure--and there are moments of riding in limos and having somebody carry your bag--but it's also a 24-hour-a-day job. To people who want to be rich and famous, I'd say, 'Get rich first and see if that doesn't cover it.'"

John the Baptist was famous. He was a famous preacher--like Billy Graham or the Pope. He didn't mind the attention that came with the job. He was preaching in the wilderness--the equivalent of an old-fashioned big-time tent meeting or a modern-day traveling show--and people were coming from everywhere to hear him. He was telling them to repent and to get right with God--and they were responding by the thousands. So far, so good!

The problem wasn't that he was famous. It was that he was TOO famous! People were saying, "Wow! He must be the messiah!" (i.e., God's promised savior). John was NOT the messiah--he was called only to get people ready for the messiah. For people to believe that he was the messiah was wrong--like having people mistake the preacher for God! No preacher can afford to let people make that kind of mistake.

And so John said, "NO! You have it wrong! I am NOT the messiah! Not even close! Let me explain the difference. The one who is coming is so great that I am not worthy even to tie his shoes. I just baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

In other words, "You ain't seen nuthin' yet! The one who is coming is not only greater--he is altogether different. I am like a flashlight--he is like the 4th of July! I am like the one who

hands out donuts at a disaster--he is like the one who rushes into burning buildings to pull people to safety! I am just POINTING the way--He IS The Way!"

After that story, we have Luke's account of Jesus' baptism. Luke is so concerned to subordinate John to Jesus that he doesn't even tell us that John baptized Jesus. He says only that Jesus was baptized. Then he tells us that heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove--and a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased" (v. 22).

Note that the Spirit and the voice did not come during Jesus' baptism, but afterward--when Jesus was praying. Prayer was so important to Jesus! Luke often pictures him at prayer, but only occasionally tells us what he prayed about:

- We know that he prayed for his disciples (22:32--see also John 17).
- Just before his death, he prayed that, if the Father were willing, this cup might pass from him--in other words, he prayed that he might escape death--but only if the Father was willing. He concluded his prayer by saying, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (22:42).
- He prayed even for his enemies. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (23:34).
- As he died, he prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (23:46).

But we don't know what he prayed after his baptism. We might think of Jesus' baptism as his ordination, so perhaps he was praying to be equal to the great task before him. Perhaps he was praying for vision to lead rightly--for strength to withstand temptation--for disciples who would be faithful--for success in his role as savior.

But, whatever the content of his prayer, it was during his prayer that heaven opened--and the Spirit descended on him--and the voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In other words, while Jesus was at prayer, he received the blessing. That is instructive. Sometimes we fail to appreciate the power of prayer. Sometimes when faced with a difficult problem, we say, "Well, all we can do is to pray"--as if hope has been exhausted, and we are left only with pitiful prayer. We would do better to say hopefully, "Well, we can pray"--knowing that, in prayer, we connect ourselves to God--to God's power--to possibilities beyond our imagining.

Every day, God answers prayers in astounding ways. Every day, God blesses people who have taken time to pray. That doesn't mean that God answers every prayer as we ask, but it does mean that prayer is a great power--not a pitiful last resort.

But it is fair to ask why Jesus prayed. After all, didn't he come from heaven? Couldn't he somehow connect with the Father intuitively? Wasn't he always connected to the Father?

I believe that Jesus was always connected, in some sense, with the Father. But his prayer life shows us that he considered prayer to be something more than handing a wish-list to the Father. When he prayed, he wasn't like a college student writing home for money. He was more like a son coming home to visit--to sit down and talk--to further an important relationship--to gain strength--to keep on the right path.

- If prayer was important to Jesus--if prayer was the source of his strength and true direction--doesn't it make sense to believe that we need prayer for strength and true direction as well?
- If it was while Jesus was praying that heaven opened and the Spirit descended on him, doesn't that suggest that our prayers are important to the Spirit?
- If it was during prayer that Jesus heard the Father's voice saying, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased," wouldn't it seem wise for us to spend more time in prayer--and in listening for the Father's voice?

Some years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and prolific author, wrote an article in which she told of her granddaughter Madeline's experience of two traumas in succession: the death of a friend and her parents' divorce.

Things came to a head on Madeline's birthday, when it was time for her to blow out the candles. Her grandfather told her to make a wish... and she hesitated. She had already wished for her friend to live, and the friend died. She wished for her parents to get back together, but knew that they wouldn't. Why bother? Nobody had much of an answer. I can just imagine how quiet it got around that birthday table.

But it did set Barbara to thinking. The subject had been wishes rather than prayer, but the two aren't that far apart--at least in the mind of a child. Barbara began to consider how to encourage Madeline to pray, even though she could not always expect her prayers to be answered as asked. After a good deal of thought, she wrote this article. I think that you will find it helpful. She said:

"What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty."

Barbara Brown Taylor concluded the article this way:

"One day, when Madeline asks me outright whether prayer really works, I am going to say, 'Oh, sweetie, of course it does.' It keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It's how we bother God, and how God bothers us back. There's nothing that works any better than that."

After Jesus was baptized--while he was praying--heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove--and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Prayer is one of God's vehicles for blessing. Let us be a people of prayer--so that we might also be a people of blessing.