

Praying (November 4, 2018)

A special welcome...

Last week, we shared a brochure entitled “*Intentional Living: Is God Calling me to More?*” A brochure focused on faithful discipleship, a brochure focused on intentional discipleship lived through praying, serving, and sharing.... And we invited you into an extended reflection on your praying, your serving, and your sharing in this, the closing weeks of another liturgical year.

- And so today, a word about prayer...
- Next Sunday, a word about sharing...
- And two weeks from now, a word about serving...

Praying, serving, and sharing... Faithful discipleship... Intentional discipleship...

Our hope is that this sustained focus will find concrete expression, first, in the meal we'll host here at St. Mary's on Thanksgiving Day and, second, in the collection of any formal commitments we may choose to make for the new liturgical year that'll begin on the First Sunday of Advent. Our annotated brochures will be carried to the altar with the bread and wine in our offertory procession. Again, no names... No identification as such... No public sharing... Instead, the anonymous commitments of faithful disciples for a new liturgical year...

And so, in a moment, a word about prayer...

But first, a question about “more...” “What’s this ‘more’ that’s being asked of you? What’s this ‘more’ that’s being asked of me?” After all: “I pray when I can. My life’s pretty full. Some days, I don’t have two minutes to spare. I’m sure God understands.” Sound familiar? “And I serve, my oh my, do I serve. You wouldn’t believe how many demands I’m subject to each and every day.” You, too? “And I share. Yes, I share when and where I can. But there’s only so much of me to go around.” Right? “What’s this ‘more’? What’s this ‘more’ that God is asking of me? What’s this ‘more’ that God is asking of you?”

The answer, in fact, can be found in today’s Gospel reading from Mark in which Jesus affirms a core teaching in the Book of Deuteronomy: “We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.” God, it seems, wants it all. God, it seems, wants more. God, it seems, wants more from you, and he wants more from me, too.

Sounds pretty demanding, doesn’t it? Yes, perhaps... But let’s pull the lens back a bit. When we attend closely to Jesus’ words, a somewhat different picture emerges. Yes, God wants it all, but God is patient, it seems. You know the stories: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son... God is ever so patient. Consider, especially, if you will, the story of Mary. God asked so much of Mary, didn’t he? Her whole life, in fact... God didn’t demand anything of Mary, however. Instead, the angel Gabriel extended an invitation to Mary, and then waited. Gabriel waited on Mary’s response. God was patient with Mary; and he is patient with us as well. Mary’s response? “May it be done to me according to your will.” Mary surrendered her whole heart, her whole soul, her whole mind, and all her strength to God. Yes, God wants more, but God is patient.

How to illustrate this point in contemporary language... Many of you are familiar with a poem written by Margaret Halaska. Sister Joanne Marie has shared this poem – *Covenant* – with many of us here at St. Mary’s. This wonderful poem illustrates God’s patience in the form of a story.

Covenant by Margaret Halaska...

The Father knocks at my door
Seeking a home for his son.
Rent is cheap, I say.
I don’t want to rent. I want to buy, says God.
I’m not sure I want to sell,
but you might come in to look around.
I think I will, says God.
I might let you have a room or two.
I like it, says God. I’ll take the two.
You might decide to give me more someday.
I can wait, says God.
I’d like to give you more,
but it’s a bit difficult. I need some space for me.
I know, says God, but I’ll wait. I like what I see.
Hm, maybe I can let you have another room.
I really don’t need it that much.
Thanks, says God, I’ll take it. I like what I see.
I’d like to give you the whole house
but, I’m not sure...
Think on it, says God. I wouldn’t put you out.
Your house would be mine and my son would live in it.
You’d have more space than you’d ever had before.
I don’t understand at all.
I know, says God, but I can’t tell you about that.
You’ll have to discover it for yourself.
That can only happen if you let me have the whole house.
A bit risky, I say.
Yes, says God, but try me.
I’m not sure –
I’ll let you know.
I can wait, says God. I like what I see.

Yes, God wants “more.” God wants our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, and all our strength. But God never intrudes. God doesn’t demand. He invites. God is patient with us.

And so a brief word about prayer... In fact, three concerns are often expressed about prayer.

- First, “God already know what I need, so what’s the point?”
- Second, “I don’t have time for prayer?”
- And third, “I must not know how to pray. I don’t get anything out of it.”

A brief word, then, about each of these concerns, something to reflect upon, perhaps, over the course of the coming week...

First, “God already knows what I need, so what’s the point?” This common objection reflects a misunderstanding about prayer. You see, we don’t pray to change God’s mind about this, that, or the other. We don’t “form” God into something we want him to be. Instead, God forms us. God forms us in prayer. God forms us in sustained prayer. As noted in Isaiah 64 and echoed by Paul, God is “the potter” and we are “the clay.” God forms us. God forms us in prayer.

A second concern: “I don’t have time for prayer.” Two responses... First, it’s true that Paul tells us to pray always and everywhere. What he meant by this, however, is that we need to stay grounded. We shouldn’t lose ourselves in the sheer busyness of our lives. We mustn’t forget that we are, first and foremost, God’s adopted sons and daughters. To stay grounded in the to-and-fro of the day-to-day, spiritual writers recommend short, “aspirational prayers” that can be recited over and over again, whenever and wherever we find ourselves. Prayers of praise: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name...” Prayers seeking forgiveness: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner...” And one I often recite just before walking into a classroom full of freshmen: “Come Holy Spirit, come!”

But there’s another response to this second objection. It’s especially important to pray when we’re overwhelmed by busyness. We have to make time for prayer. Mark Twain once noted: “I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.” Sometimes we have time for short prayers. At other times, only longer prayers will do.

Prayer – regular prayer – keeps us grounded. Prayer – sustained prayer – is the vehicle through which God forms us.

A final concern: “I must not know how to pray. It’s just a bunch of words. I don’t get anything out of it.” Again, God is patient. He doesn’t demand prayer. He invites us into prayer. In turn, we would do well, perhaps, to be patient with God. We should trust that God is doing something essential in our lives, even if we can’t seem to make any sense of it from moment to moment.

More importantly, perhaps, there are so many forms and styles of prayer. It’s a matter of discerning the form or style of prayer to which you are being called: the celebration of the Eucharist, of course, but, perhaps, as well: the Rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours, a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament, the Psalms or other readings from Scripture, journaling, Centering Prayer, Soulcore, and so many other wonderful forms of prayer, many of which are offered here at St. Mary’s.

And so a reflection question for the coming week: “What kind of prayer is God inviting you to in advance of the coming liturgical year?”

Prayer, the first of three ways in which we live as faithful disciples of Jesus. We invite you to reflect on your prayer life over the course of the coming week. Does God want “more” from you in terms of “prayer”? Again, space is provided at the bottom of the first panel on the inside of our reflection piece for any commitments you might choose to make in this regard.

For more on prayer, consider joining us here in Church on Tuesday evening at 7:00 for a conversation about prayer.

Yes, God wants all of us: our hearts, our souls, our minds, and all our strength. But our God is a patient God. He invites. He does not impose.

Next week, a word about sharing...