

The Pilgrim Church of Duxbury
Prayer Advice
Matthew 6:5-14
Rev. Peggy O'Connor
March 12, 2017

In 2007, a man played the violin inside the entrance of a Metro Station in Washington DC for 45 minutes, during the morning rush hour. 1,097 people went past him. Most did not notice or if they did they did not show it. 20 people threw money in his violin case, most without breaking stride or looking at him. 7 adults stopped to listen. One listened for three minutes, then looked at his watch and went to work. Another listened for a few minutes at the end of the performance. When the music stopped she was the only one who applauded. Several people noticed her but kept on walking. The only sound being the noise of all their footsteps.

The violinist was world renowned soloist, chamber musician, recording artist and conductor, Joshua Bell. His performances often sold out. Yet, 1,089 people had rushed by him.

Last Sunday was the first Sunday in Lent and we started a new sermon series on prayer. This seems like a good theme for Lent as it is, traditionally a time of prayerful reflection. Plus, the question of how to pray is one I am asked to answer frequently. Just like the disciples and other followers of Jesus, we want to know how to pray...especially how to do it right. Why was this important back in Jesus' time and why is it still important to us? Let's start with Jesus' time.

It is important for us to remember that Jesus was a Jew and that he, like all Jewish men, followed an ancient practice of praying sets of prayers at specific times or moments of every day. His disciples and followers did the same thing. They knew how to pray. They knew the prayers by heart. They knew when and how to say them. Some were said standing...some with bowing gestures ...some with others...some alone. So, why ask Jesus to teach them to pray?

People asked him how to pray because Jesus also prayed in new ways. He would get up early and go out into the desert or up on a mountain or down by a stream and pray, not with any formula or in any traditional way, but in a personal, conversational way. He would start by calling God Abba.

We think of Abba as Father but that is akin to a scientific name for a rose. It is no doubt accurate but it is far from descriptive of the scent, the color, the tenderness of the petals or the sharpness of the thorns. Similarly, Father does not give any of the nuances between a Jesus and God. Abba is more accurately translated as poppa or daddy, which is of course the name we use for our father until we think we are too old to use it. Then we switch to Dad...to show how independent and grown up we are. We forsake Daddy or Poppa because it becomes too embarrassing to say in public. That is, until Dad is hospitalized. Then we rush to his side, take his hand and call him that long forgotten name: Daddy.

Daddy is so intimate that it becomes too embarrassing to say it in public until our need to convey our true and never ending love overcomes our embarrassment and...Daddy comes out of our mouths and surprises us. This is the intimacy Jesus had with God. The disciples saw it and wanted it. So do we. And it is what Lent calls us to pursue.

The problem is that we are also afraid of that intimacy with God. So, like the disciples, when we ask how to pray we are hoping for posture and the right words. So we too say, teach us how to pray...ie what to say...to kneel or to sit or to stand...to raise our hands or put them together. A YouTube video would be helpful.

Jesus tells those gathered not to get caught up in the form of prayer and not to make it into a public ritual. Rather, he instructs, go into a private place or out into the wilderness and pray this way. Start by addressing God not as the prime mover and shaker; not as the all-powerful creator God; but as Daddy. Make it personal. Be vulnerable. Have a discussion. Talk about your failings and ask for help with the things you struggle with; like greed or desire for power or forgiveness. Prayer, he says, is an intimate and deeply personal conversation with God that is like the relationship of a parent and a small child.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them this kind of prayer because they saw that it made a difference in his life and they wanted what he had. What they had not bargained for was that his answer would challenge them so.

Like the people who rushed past Joshua Bell, the disciples, like us, were too busy to slowdown and be in the moment. Life for us is a giant to-do list of tasks. Get to work on time; check email, go to a meeting, work on that report, call six contacts, resolve a complaint, fix problems, etc. Beautiful music or deeply personal prayer does not fit the schedule.

If we are honest we want a check list approach to faith: Say the Lord's Prayer...check; Pray for others...check; go to church...check. : and a formulaic way of praying. And, we want to know exactly what to say. Because if we do it right then...then my friends...we think and hope our prayers will be more effective.

Do you remember learning how to pray? I remember saying prayers at bedtime as a child. And I remember going to church and saying prescribed prayers. But learning how to pray began in youth group when we were asked write our own prayers...a concept that blew my mind. I could write a prayer in my own words? Wow! I was excited...and then the fear and worry of saying it wrong hit. It has taken a life time for me to learn to pray and it is still a work in progress. So I get why the disciples and the people around Jesus wanted him to teach them how to pray. And I get why we still think we need to learn how to pray.

Most of the meetings I attend at church start with prayer and if I am in the room most often I get asked to do the praying. Sometimes I ask if someone else would like to pray and mostly when I do everyone looks at the

edge of the table. People tell me they don't know what to say. I get it. When I was a new minister I used to write out prayers for meetings. I labored over the words to make them meaningful and as beautiful as I could. Then one day I forgot my prayer and had to just pray. It was halting and I felt foolish. But one person told me, after the meeting, that they really appreciated it.

It took me time to understand that sometimes the most awkward prayers are the best...and that it is in the gaping silences that God arrives, puts her arm around me and gives me words I did not know I had. This is the prayer that Jesus invites us to...intimately vulnerable and life changing prayer.

When Joshua Bell played at the metro station in DC 7 adults paused. But by one account, every child who passed by wanted to stop and watch. In each case the parent hurried the child along. And in each case the child did everything they could to slow down. They knew that this was special and that it should not be missed. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said we should have the faith of a child. Not that our faith should be simple but that we should try to retain the vulnerable openness and the exuberance of a child. The willingness to, figuratively, rip off our clothes and run around in the rain because we want to immerse ourselves in this God given life. To pause and kneel down on the sidewalk to marvel at the wildflower that has grown up through a crack. And to run full tilt toward God; arms open wide; eyes ablaze with love and joy; hearts open and spirits aflame; crying out our most intimate name for God...unable and unwilling to hold ourselves back...

wanting to tell God about our day...the good...the bad...and everything in between... knowing that we will be fed, forgiven, and loved...every time.

Let us pray...