

The Language of Lent: Connection

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“Be still, and know that I am God!” -- Psalm 46:10

This is the second in a series of sermons on The Language of Lent, and the term I would like for us to reflect on briefly this morning is connection. I choose that term following the outline of our midweek Lenten program which is, itself, based on Marjorie Thompson's very helpful book, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*.

The Christian spiritual life is a big, broad, and very likely intimidating topic to many of us, and one of the reasons Thompson's book is so very helpful is that she takes that ancient, enormous topic and breaks it down into manageable pieces, and she introduces her readers to Christian spirituality by introducing them to individual spiritual practices, such as spiritual reading, prayer, and worship. The spiritual practice we're going to be looking at after supper this coming Wednesday is prayer, one of the principal ways we connect to God. It's not the only way, of course – the mere fact of our existence is the first reality that connects us to God – but for most Christians, when we think of connecting with God, we quite naturally think of prayer.

So if prayer is my topic this morning, my text may strike some of you as a bit off the mark: “Be still, and know that I am God!”

That's part of the tenth verse of Psalm 46, and you may remember it from the call to worship. Being still and praying are not, for most of us, two concepts we readily put together, and that's the first thing I need to point out to you about prayer: we Christians, especially we Protestant Christians, have tended to make our prayers talking when we should have made them listening.

Prayer, in the first instance, is about listening, and only later is prayer about talking. That's the first and most important thing I want to say to you this morning about connecting to God through prayer. Listen first, and then, if you must, talk. Open yourself up to what God might be saying to you – indeed has probably already been saying to you for quite some time – before you present God with your spiritual version of God's To Do list: heal a sick relative, protect a wandering child, get our church on solid financial ground, and bring peace to the Middle East.

These are the sorts of prayers most of us have been praying all our lives, and for very good and very bad reasons. The good reason is that we turn to God in prayer with what the hymn writer James Montgomery has called “the soul's sincere desire.” The stuff that matters most to us we have been taught to offer to God in prayer. The welfare of our loved ones, the future of our country, the protection of God's creation – these are the sorts of things that really, really matter, and we pray about them for just that reason, because they do matter. And so we should.

But the very bad reason that we tend to bombard heaven with our laundry list of wants, needs, and desires is because we who bear responsibility for leadership in the church have taught those of you out there in Pewville that this is the way to pray – talk, talk, talk. Words, words, words. Consciously or unconsciously, we preachers and teachers have handed you a model of prayer that talks rather than listens. Instead of

dialogue, we've taught you monologue, and the more words the better. We talk and we believe that it's God's job to listen, turning God into the great cosmic Ear.

Now it certainly is true that asking God for things in prayer is biblically based. Ask, Jesus said, and it will be given to you; knock, and the door shall be opened. We have it on Jesus's own authority that it is entirely appropriate to seek the good, for ourselves and others, from God when we pray.

The problem is that this kind of prayer – what we call supplications – has, for many of us, become our only form of prayer, and we've lost touch with another biblical teaching about prayer, which Psalm 46 reminds us of, which is to listen – to be still – and to know that God is God.

That's the part of prayer that many of us are very bad at, and we're bad at it in part because we're bad at being still. The seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal said that all of humanity's troubles come from our inability to sit still. We fidget. We rustle. We wander. We play with our electronic devices. In some homes, the television is on regardless of whether anyone's watching it. We seem to need constant distraction, and that problem seems to be getting worse.

When I was a child, we were told to look out the car window on long trips and count cows or license plates from a particular state or how many other cars had one headlight out – anything to occupy our minds and hands while we got from point A to point B. Today, we have built movie theaters into our vehicles for the same purpose.

We constantly bombard ourselves with stimuli and then wonder why it seems harder and harder for us to concentrate. I think it has less to do with old age and more to do with our age – our technologically-driven, media-drenched, 24/7 age. Being still may never have come naturally to human beings, but we have made it infinitely more difficult to be still by surrounding ourselves with distractions. From the time we get up in the morning – perhaps awakened by NPR – to the time we put out the light after the BBC News, our minds and hearts are constantly occupied. Is it any wonder, then, that we have so little time and energy left for being still with God?

“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God,” St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, “and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” Prayer is the path by which our restless hearts find their way home, to rest in God. “Be still, and know that I am God!”

So being still as the point of departure for prayer is the first thing I want to say about connecting with God this morning. The second thing I want to say is that it would be a mistake to understand being still with God as the sum total of prayer. Being still long enough and attentively enough to hear God's still speaking voice is the first step in prayer, but it's not the last step, because connecting with God inevitably means that we will connect with the world, because it is the world, after all, that God made, loves, redeemed, and call us to serve.

“In Christ,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God was reconciling the world to himself,” and prayer is the starting place for us to join with Christ in that reconciling work. Far from being a pious disengagement with the world, prayer properly understood is the point of entry through which we launch ourselves into the struggle for justice and peace. Prayer gives us our bearings, our sense of balance, and our sense of direction as we seek to help heal a broken and suffering world.

“Make me an instrument of Thy peace,” St. Francis famously prayed in what, after the Lord's Prayer, is probably the most famous and beloved prayer in the world.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.

That is not a pious retreat into a holy coziness with the divine; that is a spiritual call to arms, a summons to action on behalf of God and God's realm. How different might the world be if sessions of the United Nations were opened with those words? How different might our country be if our Congressional representatives started their day with those words, and really meant them? How different might the upcoming election be if those were the words that opened our political debates?

Prayer, friends, great and true prayer like St. Francis's, is not a substitute for action; prayer is the action for which there is no substitute. A woman named Jane Edwards is credited with that thought, and it's absolutely true. If we wish to be those ambassadors for Christ that we are called to be when we call ourselves Christian, then prayer must be the opening of our every working day. And if we do start our days with prayer, we will inevitably be led into the world in peace.

I want to conclude this sermon as we conclude most services in our church, with the opening words of the blessing that concludes the prayers we offer here every Sunday: "And now let us forth in peace." We go forth in peace from this place precisely because we have spent our time here in prayer. We have turned our minds and our hearts toward the source of peace, prayed for his peace to be our peace, and for our lives to be the offering we lay on his altar in the coming week. If you want to change the world, friends, start with prayer.