



July 25, 2010
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

*The Combustion Engine of Prayer**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13

Prayer is the combustion engine that drives the spiritual life of Jesus of Nazareth as told in the Gospel of Luke.

None of the other three gospel writers are as focused on the prayer life of Jesus as is Luke. Luke uses prayers and prayer times of Jesus as the suspension bridge that carries the weight of the story and on which spirituality is built.

In this Gospel, we know that Jesus is Jesus because of the way he prays.

Let's take a walking tour and see if that is true: Chapter 5: text says that it was Jesus' practice to withdraw to pray in deserted places. Chapter 6: he goes up into the mountains to pray; chapter 9 he spends the night in prayer. After praying, chapter 9, Jesus asks "who do people say that I am?" On the Mt. of transfiguration, he prays. He prays before he chooses his disciples, chapter 6. He prays before feeding the 5,000. He prays on the night before he died, chapter 22. And he prays from the cross as he is dying, chapter 23.

And today, Luke 11, "He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples asks of him a request. Betcha you can guess what it is about. "Lord," says the disciple, "will you teach us to pray?"

Well, yeah. Of course. In a way, isn't that THE question?

If you are a golfer and you sit down on a plane and beside you is Arnold Palmer, what subject might you think that you would ask him about?

If you are a cellist and you found yourself sharing a cab with YoYo Ma...what might you talk about?

If you were interested in broadcast journalism and found yourself in a conversation with Daniel Schorr, now the late Daniel Schorr, may he rest in peace and on no one's enemies list, ...what might be of interest?

So if you are a disciple. If you spend most of your time, on most of your days, admiring Jesus' life—what he believes, how he lives, how he values boundaried time alone, but how he also offers generous presence to those who desire his, how he marches to the beat of a different drummer—and you perceive that he has a single-mindedness, that like a magnifying glass grabs sunlight and squeezes it down from a little warmth to a point of fire...if you have lived life close enough to observe that kind of life, then you will have a hunch where the power comes from. And if you followed Jesus you would know that the parabolic lens is prayer.

Or to stay with the combustion engine metaphor, Luke images prayer as the ignition point, the energy, that which fuels and empowers the spiritual life of Jesus Christ.

The result of their longing and request according to Luke, is how we got the Lord's Prayer.

It is twice in scripture, here and in Matthew. It is Matthew's longer version that we base our Lord's Prayer on. However, in Matthew it is not prompted by a question. It is in Luke. I bet Luke is right.

Whenever I attempt to speak about prayer, I feel most inadequate. With just a little more integrity, I would disqualify myself and sit down. But I take some solace in Henri Nouwen, prolific author and student of Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who said, "When it comes to prayers, we are all, always, amateurs."

None of us turn pro when it comes to prayer.

I want to tell you two things I believe about prayer that emerge from these scriptures that have been evolving in me.

First, the longer I live I believe prayer is less about words.

In fact, we would-be wordsmiths may be doing ourselves and the church a disservice. For in our wordsmithing we may have been fostering the notion that prayer must be well-crafted and beautiful. And that is wrong. I may be an unintentional carrier of that heresy and burdened the church with it.

The best prayers in the Bible are the shortest. "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner"—the Publican in the temple praying. "Lord, save me."—Peter said when drowning. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."—the thief on the cross. Doesn't get better than those.

Ann Lamott says she only has two prayers: "Thank you thank you thank you; and help help help."

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk. He says there is a difference between prayer and prayers. Prayer is in essence, being with...like when you sit with your significant other on the porch with a morning cup of coffee. May be nothing to say, but "being with" is its own conversation. Prayers are combinations of words used to express that relationship.

Everybody can and does pray. And that is more important than trying to get any words right.

And something else that helped me with knowing that prayer is less about words is yoga. I come here for yoga every Tuesday night. It has been a learning curve for me to listen to my breath and lay aside my distractions for just awhile and stretch myself to the edges of me.

The second thing I have come to believe about prayer is that it is more like tuning my relationship to God, to live as a citizen in God's Realm, than seeing prayer as the buttons on a Holy Vending Machine.

Commentators go nuts trying to explain this parable Jesus tells about the cranky neighbor who is awakened by another neighbor pounding on his door in the middle of the night. It is an oddly crafted tale, probably spliced together with the seam lines showing. It pictures God as cranky Curmudgeon..

But seemingly the punch line is, if cranky curmudgeons eventually relent and provide for a neighbor's needs, surely God, who loves you will to so as well.

Pray, says Jesus, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Years ago there was an article in The Tennessean, Nashville's newspaper. It said, Will Campbell vows to never again pray the Lord's Prayer. Why? Will said, "Well, because, my son is a lawyer, and he would be out of a job! Nobody really wants God's will to be done on earth as in heaven...that's how we make our money and manage our kingdoms."

Prayer as tuning to live in the realm.

Yesterday Jeff was testing out the harpsichord for today's service. He said the tuning was good, and that harpsichords are notoriously finicky, like a guitar, every time you move them you have to retune them.

So are human beings. Finicky. We require frequent retuning.

Rather, than prayer as vending machine, tweaking my life, tuning to live within my place in God's life. Forgiveness is a part of that.

The Lord's Prayer does ask for daily bread. It asks that God not lead us not into temptation, but to deliver us from evil. An odd thing to pray. The word really is not temptation, but trial. And the reference is probably in the context of the eschatological thinking of the early church. The End Times are coming, and they will necessary bring tough times, testing times.

Though the wording is odd to our ears, for it sounds like we have to remind God not to test us or tempt us...the two phrases together mean to me, "When times come that test my metal, give me endurance enough to be delivered through them."

After all when tough times come to you don't you wonder if you will survive them?

Maybe it is just part of any intimate relationship to include the act of asking. Asking itself part of the receiving.

It's like picking up the phone to make the appointment to see a counselor. A lot of the work is done before you get to the therapist's door. Your initiative, your power to choose, is part of your own power of healing. God built us that way.

For me prayer is less about words, and more about being attentive to God. An awareness that that breath I took just then was a gift. The sunlight that comes through those windows is a gift. The trees that rose from the ground then became the pews on which you sit and still hold the precious memories of founding fathers and mothers from long ago. That's not prayers, but it is prayers.

And the more I can be aware of those kinds of things this day as I give thanks for some daily bread, the less my life is out of tune. What if you and I spent some time praying that every day this week?

*These are some of the roughly-drafted notes James Lamkin used in preaching the morning sermon.