

Series: The Words of Jesus (His Public Teachings)**Today: Words on Healthy Spirituality****Text: Matthew 6:5-18****A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.****Sunday, November 16, 2008****First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

The seasons are about to change. You can feel it in the air this morning, and we will be feeling it all week. Fall will soon turn to winter in that steady ebb and flow of nature that reminds us that we are the created and not the Creator. Our lives are in the hands of the One who created and sustains us, and this is a good thing.

The season of the church year is about to change, as well. Today is the last Sunday in Pentecost which is the longest season of the church's year. It began in May with Pentecost Sunday, and it ends with Christ the King Sunday which we will celebrate next week. Then, on November 30, we start the church year all over again with the first Sunday in Advent. Every year we begin with the anticipation of the coming of the Christ (the second coming), and we end with the proclamation that Christ is Lord of all that is and still head of the Church. It is a cycle much like the seasons of nature.

So today is our final "at bat" with the Words of Jesus; his public teachings. We will return to them following Advent and Christmas focusing on his private teaching. During Lent we will focus on his healing ministry. Following Easter we will examine his post resurrection sayings, and next summer we will look at his intimate encounters with friends and strangers.

On this final Sunday of focus on the public teachings of Jesus, we are going to examine the Lord's Prayer as a model of healthy spirituality.

Jesus teaches his disciples this simple prayer to correct an abuse of prayer. Now some of you may say, *“How can prayer be abused?”* The answer is simple. Prayer is abused when we fail to say our prayers with the proper attitude toward God.

In the day in which Jesus lived there was a prayer that all Jews learned, and they still learn it to this day. It is called the Shema (pronounced shem-ah). *“Here oh Israel, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.”* One learned it as a child the way some of our children have learned prayers like *“Now I lay me down to sleep...”* Almost as soon as they could talk, they would say this prayer, and there is nothing wrong with it as a prayer; nothing at all. The question posed by Jesus is the attitude with which the prayer is prayed. Is it said for show, or is it said with a heart longing for God? Jesus warns about praying for show.

This is not as much a problem in the Presbyterian Church. The opposite might actually be the problem. Sometimes it is difficult to get people to pray out loud in a group. However, if you have been involved in the more expressive branches of our church, those who lean toward the more Pentecostal or charismatic expressions of the faith you will understand the warning of Jesus.

I remember, early in my ministry, attending a prayer meeting where people tried to outdo one another in the length of prayer, the fervor of prayer, the posture of prayer. It is this which Jesus warns against. Prayer is meant to come from the heart, whether spoken in public or in private. If we are more concerned about the words we are saying or the way we are saying them, we are not praying to God, we are praying to be heard by others. So Jesus says beware of practicing your piety in public in a way that you are

more concerned about the public posture of what you are saying. Instead, focus on your relationship with God.

Then he teaches his disciples a prayer. It is a simple prayer, but a powerful prayer. We call it The Lord's Prayer, but it is really a prayer he gives to his disciples and in it is a model of healthy spirituality.

There have been volumes written on healthy spirituality. If you were to go to Berean Bookstore, Barnes and Noble, or Borders and look in the section of books on spirituality today, you would likely find over 100 titles. So you can spend your money on the books, or you can use The Lord's Prayer as your guide because by teaching them to pray, Jesus tells his followers that healthy spirituality is: 1) Focused on Relationship; 2) Honors God; 3) Seeks the Kingdom; 4) Prays for Daily Provision; 5) Forgives and is Forgiven; and 6) Acknowledges Vulnerability.

1) Focused on Relationship

The prayer opens with words of relationship. In the Jewish tradition even the name of God could not be spoken. It was too holy. It was a breath sound; an inhale and an exhale. There were four consonants: YHWH. Later the vowels were added and it became Yaweh. Jesus changes all that with his prayer. God is not some distant, removed, unattached life energy force. "Our Father" implies an intimate relationship with God and connectedness to our brothers and sisters on the earth.

Further, the prayer does not pray "My Father." It is not a solitary prayer. It is prayed with and on behalf of the whole Christian Community.

Phillip Yancey tells of a conversation with a Christian pastor from India who said to him: "Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be

duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That's the real miracle."

Our Father reminds us that the God whom Jesus represents is a relational God who focuses on the relationships with others as a key strategy in a healthy spirituality.

2) Honors God

While God is not viewed as one who is distant and removed, the prayer reminds the person praying that God is God and we are not: *Hallowed be Thy Name*. While God longs for a relationship with us, it is unlike any relationship we have. It is intimate in character and yet to be held as something very holy indeed, and that requires both time and dedication.

The book [Final Salute](#) tells the story of Major Steve Beck, a U.S. Marine whose heart-wrenching task is to inform the nearest of kin when a Marine is killed in Iraq.

The honor guard learns from Beck how to salute their fallen fellow-Marine as they leave or resume guard with a slow salute that isn't taught in basic training. The slow salute requires a three second raising of the hand to the head, a three second hold, and then a three second lowering of the hand—a gesture of respect that takes about nine times longer than normal. Beck explains: "A salute to your fallen comrade should take time."

Indeed, those who die serving their country are worthy of great honor, worthy of a slow salute, worthy of extra time. To do some things fast, just to get them done so we can move on to the next thing in our lives, sends a subtle message of disrespect.

So it is with our worship of God. God deserves a slow salute. God deserves both our time and our dedication if we are to hallow God's name.

3) Seeks the Kingdom

The prayer reminds us that healthy spirituality seeks to build the Kingdom of God before it seeks to meet our personal needs. This is a tough one because most of us are so used to praying a laundry list of what we want before we seek what God wants.

However, healthy spirituality seeks what God wants before we tell God what we want.

Those of us in 12 step recovery groups are reminded of this every time we go to a meeting. We read the 12 steps developed by our founder, Bill Wilson, and when we get to step 12 we hear: *“Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we try to practice these principles in all our affairs praying only of the knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”*

This is the meaning of the words, *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* Laundry lists are all right. God wants to hear from us, but in the end, God wants to know that we are more interested in bringing about the kingdom of God here on earth as God conceives of it in heaven.

4) Prays for Daily Provision

Healthy spirituality also acknowledges that God is the giver of everything we have. *“Give us this day our daily bread”* asks God to provide the daily provision of what we need. It is the stewardship part of the prayer. We recognize that God is the one who provides for all our needs. We are only the stewards of what God has given us.

I am aware every time we go to Kenya or Honduras or some other Third World country how difficult it is for us to really mean this part of the prayer. Even as we say it, we do not mean it. I doubt there was one of us who prayed that part of the prayer earlier in the service who really doubted that we would be fed at least one meal today. In this

country, we know that we aren't going to go without food today. In Lancaster City, even the poorest of the poor will be fed three meals a day if they want to be. Through the Lancaster County Council of Churches breakfast is served every day at St. James' during the week, at First Reformed on Saturdays, and at Trinity Lutheran on Sundays. Sack lunches are distributed every day at St. Ann's Roman Catholic, and dinner is served every day in churches around the city.

People don't have to go hungry here if they don't want to. However, in Kenya when someone prays that prayer they literally mean, "*Show me how to find food for my family, today.*" And when they receive it, they are grateful and give thanks to God. Our prayer reminds us that we are fed by the hand of God every day, and we need to learn how to say thank you.

5) Forgives and is Forgiven

Healthy spirituality reminds us that we need to learn how to ask for forgiveness as well as how to offer forgiveness.

My wife reminds me regularly that the words that most often get stuck in my throat are "*I'm sorry.*" She also reminds me that after I have done something which has damaged our relationship, she is more than willing to forgive, but she needs me to ask for it. Obviously, God is not finished with me yet.

Forgiveness is a transaction. The one who has offended needs to ask of the one who has been offended if the relationship can be restored. Healthy spirituality doesn't hold a grudge. It acknowledges that God has forgiven us all our sins in Jesus Christ, and if God can do that, we can surely get over the petty stuff of day-to-day life.

There is not one of us who are perfect. The point is to acknowledge our errors, ask for forgiveness, and move on.

I read the story of a young man who was appointed president of a bank. Intimidated by his new responsibilities, he nervously sought the advice of his gray-haired predecessor: "Sir, what has been the secret of your success?"

"The secret, young man, is two words: right decisions!" replied the older man.

"But how do you make right decisions?"

"One word: experience."

"But how do you get experience?"

The old man smiled. "Two words: wrong decisions."

6) Acknowledges Vulnerability

The final petition in the prayer is to ask for God's protection as we make it through our lives. "*Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" It acknowledges that left to our own devices we will likely serve our own self-interest and not the interest of the God who created us.

Around 1970, Walter Mischel launched a classic experiment. He left a succession of 4-year-olds in a room with a bell and a marshmallow. If they rang the bell, he would come back and they could eat the marshmallow. If, however, they didn't ring the bell and waited for him to come back on his own, they could then have two marshmallows.

In videos of the experiment, you can see the children squirming, kicking, hiding their eyes—desperately trying to exercise self-control so they can wait and get two marshmallows. Their performance varied widely. Some broke down and rang the bell within a minute. Others lasted 15 minutes.

The children who waited longer went on to get higher SAT scores. They got into better colleges and had, on average, better adult outcomes. The children who rang the bell quickest were more likely to become bullies. They received worse teacher and parental evaluations 10 years on and were more likely to have drug problems at age 32.

Mischel concluded that children may be taught "that it pays to work toward the future instead of living for instant gratification." (Source: David Brooks, "Marshmallows and Public Policy," The New York Times (5-7-06))

Conclusion

The words of Jesus in The Lord's Prayer are a good reminder to us of a healthy spirituality. They are marker points of growth 1) Focused on Relationship; 2) Honors God; 3) Seeks the Kingdom; 4) Prays for Daily Provision; 5) Forgives and is Forgiven; and 6) Acknowledges Vulnerability.