

"Beyond Facebook: Prayer Friends"

Sandy Reimer

Sunday, January 11, 2009

READINGS and SCRIPTURE

The real problem with prayer is not that God is effecting no changes in the world; nor that God is distant; nor even that God is silent. The problem is, that being so close and so totally around us, we still miss God. That is why the process of our changing, not God. ~ *Matthew Fox*

Through prayer, says James Pratt, things, which cannot be realized in any other manner, come about: energy which would be bound up is set free by prayer. When we pray, it is like the difference between looking on a person without love or upon the same person with love. ~ *Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski*

The Buddha said, "If someone is standing on one shore and wants to go to the other shore, he has to either use a boat or swim across. He cannot just pray "Oh, other shore, please come over here for me to step across." To a Buddhist, praying without practicing is not real prayer." ~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Jesus was praying in a certain place. After he had finished, one of the disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." ~ *Luke 11: 1*

SERMON – "Beyond Facebook: Prayer Friends" – Sandy Reimer

The day after Christmas was a time of big change for me. Our children gave Larry and me an I-pod for Christmas, which was very exciting, except I didn't even know how to turn it on. So the next day, Chris gave me an hour of tech support, from which I emerged able to turn the I-Pod on and off, plug it into the speaker, find and play the songs I wanted, and purchase new songs over the Internet. Feeling quite confident, I asked my daughter-in-law Morgan if she could help me learn to do Facebook. Kathy, my other daughter-in-law, had enticed me to Facebook with promises of stories and pictures of my grandchildren. So Morgan spent an hour helping me get on, post a picture, and write something on Kathy's wall. This past week, each night, I've tested out my new learnings by cautiously making my way around parts of Facebook. It's been fun! For me, it is a way to keep in touch with my grown kids and my younger generation friends - and perhaps in a couple of years, my grandkids. I've yet to hear from lost college roommates or ex-boyfriends, which could actually be a blessing.

A couple weeks of first-hand exposure to Facebook confirms for me how important connections are for all of us. We long for support and communication, for networking and friendship, and, while we can all attest to the limitations of Facebook, it is a valuable tool for a certain kind of keeping in touch.

Our new worship theme, "The Imperative of Intimacy," is intended to address these issues of connection. An imperative is something that compels our attention and our action, something that it is risky to ignore or forget. Intimacy – that ability to connect in meaningful and deepening ways with the Holy, with our own soul, and with others – is, I believe, an imperative for our spiritual and personal health and growth. To be made in the image of God, says Philip Newell, is to say that love and desire to connect

with one another is at the heart of who we are as human beings, stronger than any fear or wound that holds us hostage. Deep within each of us is a longing for intimacy, a longing for relationships and community where we can share our joys and tears, where we can sing and pray, where we can work for the healing of our own lives and for the healing of the world.

We're going to begin our reflections on the imperative of intimacy by focusing on prayer, the space where we touch not only the Holy, but also where we touch the depths of our own souls. There are two kinds of prayer that don't work for me: the rote prescribed liturgical prayers of my Lutheran childhood which were wordy, long, impersonal, and laden with the language of sin and guilt – and the tricky manipulative prayers where someone is really preaching their own sermon or pushing their answers on me under the guise of praying. Neither kind draws me into intimacy with God or with my soul or with the person who initiates the prayer.

I believe that prayer is less about words and asking for things than it is about letting go of all that distracts and consumes me. Prayer allows me to step into another realm of awareness. It is taking that deep breath, pausing in the midst of life, and bringing my attention inward and at the same time beyond myself. Prayer opens me to God, a holy presence that is already there, not a being I have to plead or bargain with for attention. Prayer unlocks a window within me through which the Spirit can enter. Prayer makes space within my mind and heart for God. Prayer calls me to a beyond-words experience of being filled by something greater, wiser, calmer and more loving than I am alone. Through prayer, as James Pratt says, energy which would be bound up is set free.

I don't believe we can predict or control how or to what purposes that energy works. That will always remain a mystery. But I do believe that prayer changes things. At the very least, prayer changes me. Prayer is like looking on someone with love. Even if it's not my love, it's surely God's light and love I'm sending to that person. And having done that, I find my patience deepens, my compassion grows, my ability to take things, including myself, more lightly is increased.

Flora Wuellner, my mentor in prayer, says when we pray, we have to let go of the notion of results, thinking we know what's best, what needs to be done. Instead we release the results to God. So I pray by naming my need or concern - whether it be for another person, or a situation in the world or my own anger or fear or hurt. I name it and lift it up to Divine Power. It works well for me to use an image of God's light to surround that concern. I certainly pray for healing for someone who is ill, for courage when I am frightened, for wisdom when I am confused. I try NOT to pray for the specifics of how those things can't happen. I do not always get the results that I would dictate if I ran the world. But I can tell you honestly that when I take the time to pray and when I remember to pray in this way, there is always, over time, some change and transformation.

Over the years, I have also discovered that praying with someone not only opens the channels of grace, but also opens me to a deeper connection of spiritual intimacy. I used to avoid this kind of intercessory prayer, because I had been the victim of too many folks who wanted to pray with me as a way of trying to change what I believed or

what I was doing. But I've learned from my teachers of pastoral care how to pray simply with others in ways that affirm their healing and their own journey. Less is always more, in terms of words. I've learned to ask people what they want me to pray for, and I follow their need. These prayers open, not only channels of grace, but also deep and intimate spiritual connections.

When I visit a family with a new baby, more precious even than holding that child, is that moment when we all join hands, and I'm allowed to be the conduit of giving thanks to the Creator for this new life. When I listen to someone struggling with sorrow or grief, with choices or no choices, I treasure that time when I am able to pray for that person for their needs and hopes as well as the gift of our time and sharing together. In my Advent contemplative prayer small group of six, we made a commitment to pray for one another during the days and weeks of Advent, and I believe the prayers from those five women helped sustain me through a busy and crucial season.

There are also times when we need someone to pray with us and for us, because we can't pray for ourselves or for those we love. I remember the evening in the emergency room when the doctors had discovered that Larry had a large abdominal mass that had to be removed surgically and we were waiting for a hospital room. Barbara Beynon and Charlie Williams came to be with us for a while, and when they were about to leave, Larry asked Barbara if she would say a prayer with us. And she did – at a time when I could not pray for either of us. What she said mattered far less than that she spoke and held us all in the holy presence of light and hope.

There have been clinical research studies of the effects of prayer, especially on medical outcomes. One double-blind trial included 1,800 patients who were prayed for without their knowledge by people they did not know. The results indicated that those prayers made no quantifiable difference in the outcomes. Another study, however, evaluated the impact of prayer on surgery patients recovering from well-defined complications after cardiac surgery. In this case, the patients who knew that someone was praying for them showed higher scores in their own reports of well-being, functioning and healthfulness following surgery than the patients who did not know someone was praying for them.

Knowing someone is praying for you, and being an open recipient of that prayer, does seem to matter. We sense that as we share our prayer concerns and pray for one another on Sunday mornings. We sense that same kind of blessing as we sing Happy Birthday to one another, a prayer that is a joyful song. I encourage you to open your life to the sharing of prayers with those you love, with friends, with kindred souls, with this church, at times when prayer is what is needed. It is the spiritual equivalent of going beyond Facebook in your prayer life. Make that prayer connection in real time with real people. Let yourself be blessed; let yourself bless others. We mistakenly get in the habit of thinking that only ministers can bless and pray. We can all minister to one another with prayer, both in difficult and joyful times, especially if we remember not to be preachy, not to predetermine results, and not to "should" on the person we are praying for.

As our Buddhist friend Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, the practice of prayer matters. So think of a moment of something you hope for, something you need, something you

want to pray for in your life this week. It may be a quality like courage; it may be an event like a birthday; it may be dealing with a family member or friend; it may be a health issue. And it doesn't have to be the most difficult thing in your life. Just picture it in your own mind and give it a name with a word or two.

Now turn in silence to a person sitting next to you. Everyone needs to have a partner, so look around and work this out, even if some folks have to move to a different row or seat. I'm trusting that we can do this. It's ok if you know your partner well; it's ok if you don't.

In a moment, one of you is going to tell the other, in a word or phrase, what you want to pray for. You are both going to take a breath of silence, then your partner is going to say, "I pray for you for and repeat your word or phrase." After another moment of silence, reverse the process. The second person says in a word or phrase, what he or she wants to pray for – and the first person says, after a moment of silence, "I pray for you for and repeats your word or phrase." Then everyone sit in the silence until I call us to our closing prayer and we will read the translation of the Lord's Prayer that is printed in the bulletin.

In silence now, everyone turn to a partner.

Ring chime

To pray, you open your whole self to sky, to earth, to one whole voice that is within you, and you experience that there is more than you can see, than you can hear, than you can ever know. You open yourself to the mystery of prayer: that it brings us into an intimate encounter with the God who is love; that it binds us together with one another in ways that bring us into the healing and grace of spiritual community; and that it opens all the windows of possibility through which the Spirit may move.

"Lord teach us to pray," said one of the disciples. And Jesus responded with the Lord's prayer, a translation of which we will now pray together in unison:

O Father-Mother of the Cosmos, focus your light within us and make it useful:
Create your reign of unity now, so your one desire acts with ours:
as in all light, so in all forms.

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.

Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.

Don't let surface things delude us, but free us from what holds us back.

From you is born all ruling will, the power and the life to do,
the song that beautifies all, and from age to age renews.

Truly – power to these statements –
may they be the ground from which all my actions grow. Amen.