



Liturgical Day: The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 8, 2006

Sermon Title: Daily Prayer and Bible Study

Back in earlier days, most Americans attended a one-room schoolhouse. These schools typically employed a single schoolmaster who was responsible for the education of *all* the children of a town, from the littlest children to the ones ready to leave the nest and be on their own. It was a hard job, balancing all the levels of education represented in that single room. But it also presented some very unique advantages. For example, older or more advanced children were able to review all of their skills daily as the younger children worked on mastering them. Any gaps that the older children had could be addressed by the daily exposure to the younger children's practice. And younger children were exposed to material far too sophisticated for their understanding, yet they heard it year after year until at last they were ready to receive it as their own. In effect, all children benefited from being in the same room with one another, the younger from the older, and the more mature from the less mature.

Christian communities are much like that. In our congregations, our levels of faith maturity vary from pew to pew, from person to person. Yet we can all receive revelation from one another. A seventy year old woman might hear the Good News for the first time as she hears a middle school boy read the scriptures. Similarly, a simple prayer offered by an otherwise quiet member of the congregation might be the very trigger that someone else needs to make a connection and take action in the world for Christ. Camp, too, is a place where faith maturity can vary dramatically between campers. Yet one will grow as she prays with another, and one will find peace through another's experiences. Faith habits are caught, not taught, by being close to others who share the common bond of a love for Jesus Christ. In such a community, faith becomes not rote, but habit. It soon becomes part of who we are. It becomes lifestyle.

Recent events in Pennsylvania exemplify what I'm talking about. Here is a school and a community that live lives of devotion and prayer. The adults treasure the children, and the children respect the elders. I'm sure it's not a perfect community, but it seems to me that they have something pretty important figured out. Because last week, when several of their children were executed, the first thing that these broken-hearted people did was to forgive the man who committed this crime. Through their community and their lifestyle of study and prayer, they were able to truly reflect Jesus Christ in their actions and in their words: "Father, forgive him." And who knows the enormous impact of their witness as it has been played across the airwaves all around the world.

But how do Christians get to that point? How do we learn to place absolutely everything at the feet of God? How do we get to the place where our faith habits overpower even our emotions? (Some of us might put up a fight!) I believe that Christ-like action comes from established habits of living deeply and daily in scripture and prayer. And that takes discipline.

The disadvantage we have as Christians is that most of us are at our "one-room schoolhouse" at best one day a week. Though Sunday is a day of re-equipping and renewal, we need the disciplines of prayer and daily Bible study throughout the week to keep us centered. These are our basic communication tools with God. And it is through prayer and digging in scripture that we can begin to discover God's will for our lives. The scriptures become more than words; they speak directly to us and provide meaning for our lives right now. Intentional time in prayer allows us to share our lives with God – the joys the sorrows, the struggles – and we find that our spirit is lifted because we are

FIRST LESSON

**COLOSSIANS 3:1-17**

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. LUKE 18:1-14**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD, SOURCE OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE: HELP US TO STUDY YOUR WORD DILIGENTLY, TO COME TO YOU DAILY IN PRAYER, AND TO GROW IN YOUR LOVE AND ALL THAT IS GOOD. SUPPORT ALL WHO TEACH, ALL WHO LEARN, AND ALL WHO ARE SKILLED IN PRAYER, THAT TOGETHER WE MAY KNOW AND DO YOUR WILL; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.**

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not traveling this journey alone. Even so, these disciplines are tough to develop on our own.

Experiences like Rainbow Trail provide a real advantage for those that participate in them. The power of Rainbow Trail's faith community is that we live faith twenty-four hours a day. There is a rhythm to our day that creates and develops those disciplines of prayer and daily Bible study. We start every day with morning watch, an individual quiet time for everyone to spend time in scripture and in reflection and prayer as they start their day. We begin and end our day with worship. Our counselors close each day with their campers in cabin devotions. Prayer is woven into just about every aspect of our program. Even on the day that we hike each week, we abandon other activities so that we can do Bible study in the evening.

Our campers are surrounded by excellent Christian role models to whom Christ is central in their lives. The witness of these staff members opens the door for conversation of how faith becomes integral to life, not only at camp but once they return home. These campers experience faith as a way of life, if only for a week. But I truly believe they have received a glimpse of the kingdom during their time with us. Even in the imperfections of human relationships, it is how we deal with those imperfections in the context of a faith community that they experience something different than what our world has to offer.

Outdoor ministries main purpose is to help equip those that come to our site to share the Good News and be Christ's light in the world. Part of that equipping is introducing these disciplines as part of life. The ministries of places like Rainbow Trail provide a place where Jesus is talked about in normal conversation and that faith is central. During their week, our campers experience leadership opportunities, a new understanding of the gifts that they have to offer the world, and maybe even that first sense of a call to a lifetime of ministry. As we encounter each camper, we hope to equip them to be stronger Christians in the world, more active leaders in your congregation, and view their life as a calling to serve Christ in the world.

In our gospel text for the day, Jesus reveals three key points for us to consider about prayer:

1. In the parable of the unjust judge, the widow is persistent and the judge finally grants her justice. In the same way, won't God grant us justice as His people? God wants to hear from us and wants us to be persistent in our asking.
2. We should approach God in prayer with humility. Understand that we are addressing God, our creator. But also know that we can approach God boldly because we have been invited to do so as his children.
3. Prayer was so critical to Jesus – if that is true, what can it mean for our lives?

If you would please turn to page 5 and take a few minutes to reflect on the questions in your Habits of the heart booklet. One question to focus on: Who can you partner with to develop a daily prayer and Bible study discipline?

Once we develop a discipline of daily prayer and Bible study, our lives are transformed in dramatic ways. These disciplines will help us develop a lifestyle that is more Christ-like in how we approach the people around us. We view each day with a different set of eyes. We begin to look for where Christ is alive in our life and how we can become his hands and feet in the world. With a foundation of daily prayer and Bible Study, we begin to reflect Christ in our lives and our actions.

There is a story I'd like to share with you this morning. It is told by Robert Fulghum, you may know him as the author of "Everything I Needed to Know I Learned In Kindergarten" --

At the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar on Greek Culture, Alexander Papaderos rose from his chair at the back of the room and walked to the front, where he stood in the bright Greek sunlight of an open window and looked out.

He turned. And made the ritual gesture: "Are there any questions?"

Silence quilted the room. These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now there was only silence. "No questions?" Papaderos swept the room with his eyes. So, I asked, "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?"

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Papaderos held up his hand, stilled the room, and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was. "I will answer your question."

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.

And what he said went something like this:

"When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. "I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible., so I kept the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine--in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find."

"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game, but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light is there and it will only shine in dark places if I reflect it.

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world --into black places in the hearts of men-- and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of life."

And he then took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk."

Let me leave with two questions – both can be found on page 5 of your "Habits of the Heart" booklet:

1. What are your greatest challenges in having a daily time of devotion for God?
2. Whom might I ask to have devotions with me on a daily basis?

Amen.

Dave Jarvis (October 8, 2006)

English Text:

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup> He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup> In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' <sup>4</sup> For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." <sup>i</sup>

## Greek Text:

<sup>1</sup> Ἐλεγεν δὲ παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὸ δεῖν πάντοτε προσεύχασθαι αὐτοὺς καὶ μὴ ἐγκακεῖν, <sup>2</sup> λέγων· κριτὴς τις ἦν ἐν τινὶ πόλει τὸν θεὸν μὴ φοβούμενος καὶ ἄνθρωπον μὴ ἐντρέπόμενος. <sup>3</sup> χήρα δὲ ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐκείνῃ καὶ ἤρχετο πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσα· ἐκδίκησον με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου. <sup>4</sup> καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν ἐπὶ χρόνον. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα εἶπεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ· εἰ καὶ τὸν θεὸν οὐ φοβούμεαι οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπον ἐντρέπομαι, <sup>5</sup> διὰ γε τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον τὴν χήραν ταύτην ἐκδικήσω αὐτήν, ἵνα μὴ εἰς τέλος ἐρχομένη ὑπωπιάζῃ με. <sup>6</sup> Εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος· ἀκούσατε τί ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας λέγει. <sup>7</sup> ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὐ μὴ ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν βοώντων αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπὶ αὐτοῖς; <sup>8</sup> λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν αὐτῶν ἐν τάχει. πλὴν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν ἄρα εὕρησιν τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; <sup>9</sup> Εἶπεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τινὰς τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐφ' ἑαυτοῖς ὅτι εἰσὶν δίκαιοι καὶ ἐξουθενούντας τοὺς λοιποὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην. <sup>10</sup> Ἄνθρωποι δύο ἀνέβησαν εἰς τὸ ἱερόν προσεύξασθαι, ὁ εἷς Φαρισαῖος καὶ ὁ ἕτερος τελώνης. <sup>11</sup> ὁ Φαρισαῖος σταθεὶς πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ταῦτα προσηύχετο· ὁ θεός, εὐχαριστῶ σοι ὅτι οὐκ εἰμὶ ὡσπερ οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἄρπαγες, ἄδικοι, μοιχοί, ἢ καὶ ὡς οὗτος ὁ τελώνης. <sup>12</sup> νηστεύω δις τοῦ σαββάτου, ἀποδεκατῶ πάντα ὅσα κτῶμαι. <sup>13</sup> ὁ δὲ τελώνης μακρόθεν ἐστὼς οὐκ ἤθελεν οὐδὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐπάρει εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, ἀλλὰ ἔτυπεν τὸ στήθος αὐτοῦ λέγων· ὁ θεός, ἰλάσθητι μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ. <sup>14</sup> λέγω ὑμῖν, κατέβη οὗτος δεδικαιωμένος εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ παρ' ἐκείνον· ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὑψῶν ἑαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται, ὁ δὲ ταπεινῶν ἑαυτὸν ὑψωθήσεται. <sup>ii</sup>

There is a woman who once worked as a medical professional. She studied her discipline in college, earning a Bachelor's degree. She worked in the field for twelve years. She was active in continuing education, always looking for ways to sharpen her abilities. She became accredited by her professional society. She was at the top of her game and respected by her peers. Then she took fourteen years off to stay at home full-time while her children were growing. She is thinking about going back to work now, but is frightened. The field has changed: technology has exploded in the past fourteen years. She has changed: her daily focus has been on diapers, schools, public television for kids and youth sports. She remembers how spending time with peers was so helpful: talking about the latest developments, reviewing cases they had addressed, consulting with one another when they faced particular challenges. Not having had that for some time, she now finds herself afraid to do what she once did quite naturally, and quite well.

The same is true for our faith.

- We are called by our baptism to be Christ's representatives in this world.
- We have been entrusted with the ministry Jesus first commissioned his disciples to accomplish. Our task (in Jesus' last words to the disciples and in Saint Peter Lutheran Church's mission statement) is to make disciples of the entire world. That is a daunting task.

It isn't easy to encourage family and friends and co-workers to become disciples of Jesus, much less imagine how to be supportive of that throughout the world. It may not be as technical as working in a medical professional, but making disciples of others demands that we first be disciples, and that takes a daily focus, in order to be able to do what we are called to do.

That is why **a disciple of Jesus Christ is one who has a daily discipline of reading God's Word and spending time with God in prayer.** Our Lutheran tradition is rooted in a strong and central belief in the power of God's Word. Bible reading – whether personal or in a group setting – can be a transforming experience. (Martin Luther used to take no credit for the Reformation, he claimed that while he went about his business, *the Word reformed Germany.*) We can't be the Christians God needs us to be, apart from spending daily time with God's Word. Likewise with the discipline of prayer. As we spend intentional time each day in prayer, lifting up our fears and joys, our triumphs and defeats, we find that our spirit is strengthened and our relationship with God is deepened. We become more able to hear that *still small voice* of God that speaks to us.

At Saint Peter, our central interest is in being disciples of Jesus Christ, and making disciples of Jesus Christ. What is your daily practice of discipleship like? How have you carved out time each day for prayer and Scripture? How does that prepare you for the ministry God has called you to carry out in your life?

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

What does the habit of daily prayer and Bible reading look like in a believer's life? Those who have grown in this area find it helpful to establish a regular time for devotion (before others in the household arise, after the kids go to school, during lunch break, after dinner, before retiring at night...).

They stick to this regular time of meeting with God, and let very few other priorities infringe on it. They keep a record of those people and concerns they want to keep in their prayers, and pray for them persistently (St. Luke 18:1-8). They offer a broad spectrum of prayers, soliciting God's help, seeking God's will, thanking and praising God – lifting up all of life in prayer.

They are intentional about what they read, and how they reflect on their reading. They often use a daily Bible study resource (the daily lectionary on pages 179-192 of the Lutheran Book of Worship, a "Through the Bible in a year" program, or some other structured way of choosing which passages to read). They read from a good study Bible, and occasionally use other resources (like Eugene Peterson's "The Message" or Walt Wangerin's "The Book of God").

1. What does my current devotional life look like?
2. What are my greatest challenges in having a daily time of devotion with God?
3. Whom might I ask to have devotions with me on a daily basis (or to check in with me each day to see if I am doing my devotions)?
4. In order to strengthen my devotional life, in the coming year, I plan to:

<sup>i</sup> St. Luke 18:1-14, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Luke 18:1-14, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.