

“Pray for You”
Colossians 1:1-14
July 11, 2010

Working on a sermon in the summertime has unique challenges. You’re in the office surrounded by your books and your notes and your Bible, and smiling, care-free people keep stopping by in their shorts and sandals to tell you that they won’t be at church this Sunday because they are headed to the beach or the river or the lake. You understand. In fact, you want to grab your own flip-flops and follow them when they walk back out the door into summertime. But, the work of the Lord is never ending. So, you turn and go back to your computer convinced that God will bless your efforts and you can hunker down and something brilliant will come to you, but your computer is not even your friend. People keep tweeting about sitting by the pool or facebooking about how cool the mountain air is. There you sit.

That was my predicament this week. When I finally did crack open the Good Book to the scripture readings for today, Colossians was one I did NOT want to preach and would not have preached had it not gotten stuck in my head like a bad song. I am embarrassed to tell you the reason that I did not want to preach it. But, I’m going to tell you anyway, because I think some of you will understand. The reason that I did not want to preach Colossians was because this passage is soaked with such heartfelt prayer. Paul is in prison, and he tells this little church set up by his buddy Epaphras how much he prays for them – “we have not ceased praying for you,” he says. He tells them what he prays for them, and he seems so assured and confident that God is right there hanging on every word expecting to be pleased with the fruits of his people.

When I read Paul and his passionate prayers, I feel pretty inadequate. My bookshelf suggests otherwise – it is packed with books and books on prayer. I have folders in my filing cabinet full of notes that I have used when I’ve taught classes on prayer. I have candles that I have lit once or twice to set the ambiance for prayer. I have crosses that I hold in my hands to help me focus in prayer. I have notebooks with names of people in need of prayer. I have CDs of Taize music that should help me to breathe right into some beautiful prayers. But, you don’t want me on “Team Pray Without Ceasing,” because I am not a gold medal pray-er.

I’ve got the STUFF of prayer – in fact, I’m just one big outlet mall of prayer supplies, but as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than TALK about my prayer life.” I would rather confess that I am overly fond of mixing peanut butter with vanilla ice-cream, that I secretly watch Lawrence Welk reruns on PBS, that I once walked into a glass door so hard that I knocked myself down and caused my nose to swell – I’d rather confess almost anything than confess that I am a weakling when it comes to prayer. To be a Christian and admit to prayer struggles is much is like saying I love living but I’m not a good breather.

So you can imagine how it feels to open your Bible hoping for a little inspiration, and what you hear instead is Paul...always right around the corner coming up with perfect things like: *In our prayers for you, WMCC, we always thank God.* Show off! The man thinks to thank God not for a new car or unexpected income or even a new baby. He thanks God because he has heard of this church’s faith. *We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.* And, why is that? He tell us. So that they lead lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing to him, and so that they bear fruit. How does he come up with those words right out of his heart?

This brushes up against a popular Christian question – how do we pray? How often should we pray? How do we come up with words for prayer that are fit for God’s ears? Will we

ever have the expertise to do that? Paul –as irritating as I sometimes find him to be - can help us with this – particularly if prayer intimidates you and if you feel unworthy and uneducated and unfit every time you open your mouth in prayer.

Paul was a Pharisee. We don't know much about the family he came from – I would like details. I would like to know if his father was overbearing or if his mother was overprotective. Sometimes your family can explain a lot and it would be great to have a lot explained about Paul! But, what we do know about him is that from all professional appearances, Paul was a worthy leader. Well educated. Knew the Law inside and out. With the Law in his pack, he was like Santa Claus – he KNEW whether you'd been naughty or nice, and he knew what you needed to do to fix yourself if you were on the naughty list – especially if you were one of those mixed up, messed up Jesus followers. Because of his knowledge and his rather forceful way of making a point, Paul had influence. Apparently, when Paul said, "Jump," people asked, "How high, sir?" When Paul said, "Stone Stephen," people said, "How hard shall we throw the rocks, sir?" People respected Paul – they feared him – they did what he asked of them. And, why not? Paul knew his stuff- a religious connoisseur. And, boy, could he pray...weaving biblical references and beautiful worlds into even more beautiful prayers – the kind of prayers that move you to higher ground. He was better than all of us at prayer until IT happened. Remember IT? He was knocked flat by a blaze of light so bright that it made the sun look like a flashlight sputtering with half-dead batteries. For the first time, Paul saw clearly that all of his expertise – the stuff we think we need - had not helped him. He did not have the relationship of prayer.

I can't help but think of the country song about the man who goes to church and gets a little expertise on prayer. The preacher says that it's the best thing you can do when somebody hurts you. Pray. So, the guy does – sings to the woman who has done him wrong – tells her he prays for her: *I pray your brakes go out runnin' down a hill, I pray a flower pot falls from a window sill and knocks you in the head like I'd like to. I pray your birthday comes and nobody calls, I pray you're flyin' high when your engine stalls...you get the idea. Just know wherever you are, near or far, In your house or in your car, Wherever you are, honey, I pray for you.*

Our heartbroken singer –even with his expert training – seems to miss something in prayer. Although, he obviously has unburdened his heart, and been very honest about his feelings before God. And, you could make the argument that that is an important part of prayer. There are certainly some Psalms that have similar sentiments.

But, I wonder if once things all come out and we finish talking, could that be the precise moment that we get to the heart of prayer? That is when we get out of the way and we begin to listen. When all of our words run out, when we can no longer rhyme 'near and far' with 'house and car,' and all that is left is some longing without language, some hunger beyond expression, that is when the Holy Spirit gets to work, bearing those pieces of our souls to God. You see, prayer does not limit God to our expertise or our eloquence or our brilliant thoughts or our constantly changing emotions. By its nature, prayer is just this: a relationship.

That understanding helps us read with new eyes Paul's words that "*We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*" On first read, for Paul to "not cease praying for you" conjures up visions of marathon prayer sessions where he takes turns with someone else to sleep and eat so as to never cease speaking to God. But, if prayer is a relationship, well, that touches all of life, and to pray without ceasing is to be with God when you are in worship, or when you are participating in a meeting or when you are grocery shopping, or when you are eating a tomato sandwich, or when you are doing yard work. Prayer is waking up to the presence of God

everywhere – finding the sacrament of the moment. It is bringing that presence into every conversation, every thought, every action, every word, everything that we do.

That suggests a whole other dimension to prayer —when our egos get out of the way and we connect to everything and everybody. Martin Copenhaver, a minister up in Massachusetts, writes of his seminary experience. He was nervous about going because in his words, “I was just afraid that I will be stuck for three years with a bunch of religious nerds.” Sure enough, a guy came knocking on his door wanting to know if he would like to start a prayer group. Martin had visions of being closed in a small dorm room with a bunch of people who were much more adept at praying than he was, but he could not figure out a graceful way to decline, so he said, ‘yes.’ They started meeting. They read scripture, and then shared prayer concerns. “How is your aunt doing after surgery? Is there an update on your brother’s job search? We need to pray for all those people having a hard time heating their homes this winter.” Then, they would talk to God. There’s the words, you see. But, here’s the kicker. Martin said, “Over time, what was becoming more important to me was not how God answers our prayers, but the ways in which those times of prayer seemed to usher me into the sense of God’s presence. And the people with whom I entered into God’s presence week after week were becoming increasingly important to me as well. It has been a long time since we met together in that little dorm room, but I continue to pray for the members of that group, and I know they do the same for me.”

God did not create the human spirit for expertise. It wasn’t created to be right. It was created for that kind of pure communion. That is what prayer gives us - communion. Maybe that is why Paul prayed for these churches so much – yes, he yearned for God, but he yearned for the sacred communion that happens when God’s presence washes over us and my soul touches your soul. He was sitting in prison – away from those he so wanted to minister to. But, something happened when he prayed for them. They were bound together. They did not have to be present to be a part of his relationship with God.

That’s what I’ve learned about summertime. We are not really ever apart – not with the gift of this mystic sweet communion that goes all over this earth and even beyond. So, go to your lake, your beach, your mountains. Relax. Have a little fun. But, know this. We are joined at the heart, and we thank God for you. We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. We pray that you will be out there bearing some good summer fruit – wherever you are, near or far, In your house or in your car...let us always hold each other in prayer starting now.