

Rev. Fred Fenton

Sermon 11/14/10 – Proper 28C – 25th Sunday after Pentecost

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Livermore, CA

Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19.

Seven Ways to Experience the Power of Prayer

Good morning. I'm Father Fred. This is my third visit to St. Bartholomew's. You are a warm and wonderful group of people, and I'm happy to be back with you again.

Bishop Gordon of Alaska liked to tell about having dinner with an Eskimo family in their igloo home. He was relieved to discover the family dog, a large husky, was friendly toward him.

When everyone sat down to eat, the dog's manner changed dramatically. He began to growl and bite at the bishop's leggings. The head of the family said, "Don't worry about the dog, Bishop. You're just eating out of his dish."

That is a true story!

The hazards of being an Episcopal bishop in Alaska do not compare with the terrible trials predicted in today's Gospel, the suffering of saints and martyrs in every age including our own. However, Bishop Gordon did have a couple of close calls.

Once, when he was traveling by dogsled across a frozen lake, the ice broke and the sled began to sink into freezing water. When the sled stopped, the dogs stopped, as they are trained to do. Bishop Gordon shouted the name of the lead dog as loud as he could, followed by "Mush!" The dog heard him, and all the dogs pulled forward as hard as they could. The sled jumped up on the ice. The bishop's life was saved.

On another occasion, Bishop Gordon was flying his small ski plane, named "Blue Box." This plane had been purchased using United Thank Offering funds. (Some of you will remember the blue cardboard boxes in which offerings were collected.) His plane developed engine trouble, and the Bishop was forced to land miles from any city.

He cranked up his SOS radio signal and began sending it out. A distant village was within range. The people were occupied with a town celebration, but one man was ill and had stayed home. Listening on his shortwave set, he picked up the distress signal. A search party was organized and found the bishop and his plane.

After he retired, Bishop Gordon traveled all over Northern Michigan, training lay readers to keep Episcopal churches open in small, rural communities that no longer could afford even a part-time priest. Everyone who knew the Bishop loved him. He was known as a "man of prayer," because his prayer life sustained him in all his endeavors in Alaska and Northern Michigan.

You and I want to be “people of prayer,” don’t we? All of us need the strength and focus that comes from a strong prayer life.

This morning I want to present seven ways to experience the power of prayer in our lives.

1. Remember that God is with us when we pray.

This is important. God is not some distant deity, unconcerned with our lives. God is present with us. Verse 19 of today’s psalm says “The Lord is near to those who call upon him, to all who call upon him faithfully.” [1]. We need to remember this each time we pray.

A family is trying to gather for dinner. Little Susie is the last to arrive at the table. A parent says, “All right, Susie, now will you please say the blessing for us. In a singsong voice Susie says, “God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food. By his hand we all are fed. Give us lord our daily bread.”

How different it would be if one of the parents asked the family members to hold hands and then offered the same prayer slowly, reverently, giving meaningful expression to the words. Soon the children would learn to pray in the same way. We need to remember that God is right here with us when we pray.

2. Pray from your heart.

Don’t just recite or read words. Pray from your heart.

A wealthy older man took me for lunch at a fancy restaurant in Hollywood. It was graduation day, and the place was packed with graduates and their families. We were seated at a table right in the middle of the restaurant.

My friend asked if he could give the table blessing. “Of course,” I replied. He surprised me by standing up and praying in a loud voice that could be heard in every corner of the room. I was furiously embarrassed.

He gave thanks for the graduates, their parents, America, the armed forces, the weather, the food we were about to eat, those who prepared and served it—just about everything he could think to pray about. I noticed a strange thing. The restaurant fell silent while my friend prayed. Even waiters bringing trays of food stopped to wait until he was finished.

The reason for this was the old man was praying from his heart. Everyone could sense that. It made all the difference.

[1] Psalm 145:19

We need to learn not just to recite or read words but to pray from our hearts--and not be embarrassed!

3. Use familiar prayers.

A woman looking drawn and tired came to the church office. I had never seen her before. She told us she saw the cross in front of the church and thought we might be able to help.

She told me her husband was an MIA in Vietnam. "I don't know whether he's alive or dead. I don't know whether he's being tortured or given reasonable treatment, whether he's hungry or fed, sick or well. I can't pray for him because I don't know anything about where he is or what he needs. Can you help?"

"Do you know the Lord's Prayer," I asked. She said she did. "What is your husband's name?"

"Jim."

"Then can you pray for him like this..."

*Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallow your name in Jim.*

*Your kingdom come in him. Your will
Be done in him, on earth as it is in
Heaven.*

*Give Jim this day his daily bread. And
Forgive Jim his trespasses, as he
Forgives those who trespass against him.*

*Lead Jim not into temptation, but deliver
Him from all that is evil.*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
And the glory forever. Amen"*

Blinking through her tears, she said, "Yes."

Familiar prayers can help us experience the power of prayer.

4. Pray in your own words.

A summer of clinical pastoral training was required of everyone preparing for ordained ministry. It was at least as valuable as anything I learned in seminary. My training was at a state hospital, where I attended lectures and visited patients on the wards.

A fairly new Episcopalian, I carried my leather bound 1928 Prayer Book with me and read favorite collects to the patients. My supervisor, a wise, old Unitarian chaplain, read the report of my activities and wrote in the margin, "Remember that some of us like our prayers hot off the stove."

After that, I began praying in my own words with patients, mentioning their concerns and praying in a very personal way for them. I could tell this was far better received than simply reading beautiful prayers from the Prayer Book.

There is great freedom in extemporaneous prayer, yet many people feel they can't possibly pray that way. It seems completely foreign to them. They may be thinking of beautiful prayers they have read, or perhaps they have a Baptist friend who has demonstrated alarming facility in prayer.

Here's the "secret" to praying in your own words. Remember that such prayer is simply talking with God. Pray to God as you would talk to a family member or friend. The words and expressions will come as effortlessly as they do in ordinary conversation. You'll find praying in your own words easy and empowering.

5. Pray with others.

My favorite teaching about prayer is found in Matthew, chapter 18, verses 19 and 20. "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Some of the most powerful experiences of the presence of Christ in my life have come when I was praying in small groups of Christians.

I attended the 110th Cursillo in the Diocese of Louisiana. It was a deep and wonderful time of prayer, Bible study, and worship. If you have not been on a Cursillo weekend, I cannot recommend it too highly.

After the Cursillo, two women I met there came to my office once a week for many months to pray and read the Bible with me. One of them later became a vocational deacon.

If you can arrange to have a prayer partner, someone who prays with you regularly, it will enrich your life.

A friend of mine, who lived alone, was trying to find a prayer partner. She often chatted with her postal delivery man and knew him to be a Christian. One day she got up her courage and asked if he would become her prayer partner. He was happy to say, "yes." After that, he stopped on his daily rounds to pray with my friend in her apartment.

Be thinking of the person God wants you to ask to become your prayer partner.

6. Pray for others.

Praying for others puts the emphasis on their needs and takes the focus off us. It is a very Christian form of prayer.

Visiting in a convalescent hospital, I talked with a woman who had been a very active member of her parish. She was one of those people who are involved in everything and really make things happen. She told me, "I feel so helpless. I'm no good to anyone. I'm just lying here waiting to die!"

A copy of The Los Angeles Times was lying on her bed. I said, "The newspaper there is mostly full of sad news about people. From cover to cover, it has stories of individual heartache and mournful events around the world. Why not make the newspaper your intercession list? All those people need prayer. You could pray your way through the paper each day and become a vehicle for God's grace in their lives."

She brightened and said, "I suppose that would be something I could do."

Some people find praying for others becomes a real burden. Their prayer list becomes too long. One way to deal with that is to list all the names and causes you are praying for on 3X5 cards and take them with you when you go out. Modern life involves a lot of queuing up.

Instead of waiting impatiently in that line at the post office, take out your 3X5 cards and pray for some of the names on your list.

7. Practice Listening Prayer.

One day, a parishioner came into my office and said, "Father Fred, I pray all the time, day and night, but God never answers my prayers. I think prayer is an illusion."

"God is not a puppet on strings," I replied. "His ways are often mysterious to us. Here's what I want you to do. Stop praying!" She looked surprised. "Find a time each day to just sit and be quiet. Do that for at least five or ten minutes. Give God a chance to speak to you. Then come back in two weeks and tell me how it went."

She was back in a week. "I did what you said, Father Fred. It made me angry to just sit there, doing nothing. Four days of it. I nearly lost my mind. Then, on the fifth day, the room filled with grace."

We need to practice listening prayer. We need to set aside our worries and concerns and open our hearts and minds to hear what God wants to say. We often talk so much when we pray God can't get a word in edgewise.

It helps to have a regular time and place for listening prayer. A visual reminder like a cross, a prayer book, or a lighted candle may help you remember the presence of God.

I think it is a good idea to be reading your way through one of the Gospels. You can read just a few verses each day, enough for a connected thought, and then let God show you how that message applies to you and what you can do in response.

Here, then, are seven ways to experience the power of prayer in your life. First, remember God is present when we pray, Jesus is here; second, pray from your heart; third, use familiar prayers; fourth, pray in your own words; fifth, pray with others; sixth, pray for others; seventh, practice listening prayer.

As we continue our worship this morning, let us pray from our hearts and give thanks for the God who is with us and loves, accepts, forgives and cares for each one of us.

Amen.