

Pray This Way
Matthew 6:1-18
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
6 February 2011

I enjoy the television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Larry David, the main character, is a classic anti-hero. He does not exhibit the virtues. In fact, quite the opposite. But neither is he evil or a villain. He illustrates our human foibles, our temptations, even our sins. But in a way that calls for mercy and grace, usually extended by his wife. There is an episode that is a great illustration of one part of today's gospel.

Larry has donated money to a non-profit to add a new wing to their building. Generosity actually does seem to be among his motives, though he is also looking forward to the adulation he will receive. At the ribbon cutting reception, he is proudly observing his name on the wall, but there is a problem. A second wing was also constructed at the same time. And the donor name on this wing is "Anonymous." Larry overhears some people talking about how wonderful it is that anonymous didn't have to receive any attention for giving money. Suddenly Larry's conscience is in turmoil and his guilty feelings begin to take control.

There is next a fun twist. It just so happens that Ted Danson, playing himself, is the anonymous donor. But Ted, who is at the reception, has whispered his secret to a small handful of people. Enough that word spreads around the room that Ted Danson is in fact anonymous. Larry then overhears people praising Ted Danson for giving the money anonymously. Larry seems to be the only person to perceive the hypocrisy in giving the money anonymously, but then letting everyone know so that you receive the double credit.

In the rest of the episode Larry wrestles with all the complex motives involved in his act of generosity. And I think it is a pretty honest portrayal of humanity.

Jesus is challenging his disciples with his ethical vision of a radically transformed community. This vision has implications for how we deal with anger, with lust, with lies, with violence. It is a challenging ethic. In today's passage Jesus discusses the spiritual practices that help us to develop the habits of character which will form us into the type of person Jesus wants us to be. He focuses on three key ones -- almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

In doing so, Jesus warns us -- even these spiritual practices can be performed in such a way that they do not form our Christian character. There is a way that even these practices can become self-involved rather than other-regarding.

The post-World War II German pastor Helmut Thielicke told a story of once being cared for by a nurse. He admired her self-sacrifice, her commitment, and her hard work. For twenty years she had worked the night shift at her hospital and had acquired a reputation of doing her job well. One day Pastor Thielicke asked the nurse how she had the strength to keep doing the job. Her answer was, "Well, you see, every night I put in sets another jewel in my heavenly crown, and already I have 7,175 in a row."

Thielicke writes that his gratitude to the woman completely disappeared. Suddenly he felt like she didn't care for him at all, that her eyes didn't really see him as another person to relate to and care for, because she was too focused on her heavenly reward.

We should not engage in good deeds because of some reward or some selfish, smug, or self-congratulatory desire. We shouldn't even do good deeds out of obedience or duty. Rather, Jesus thinks that we should be motivated by love . . . particularly love for the person in need.

For scholar Anna Wierzbicka Jesus' meaning can be explained in a series of simple sentences:

it will be good if you do good things for other people because you think:

“bad things have happened to these people

I want to do something good for these people because of this”

if a person does something good for other people because this person thinks like this
this is good for this person

something good happens to this person because of this

So, our acts on behalf of another person ought to be motivated out of our care and concern for them as unique, valuable, and worthy individuals. When we think and behave according to this love impulse, then, intrinsically, good things will happen to us.

These three specific spiritual practices help us to develop the proper sort of attitude in piety. Almsgiving, praying, and fasting all help to quiet our negative impulses, they, thereby, draw us out of our self-involvement, and, in the process, develop within us love and concern for other people. Almsgiving prompts us to consider the needs of others. Praying teaches us solidarity with others. And fasting disciplines our own bodies and teaches us how to escape self-indulgence.

Jesus is not concerned with our correct performance of some ritual; he's concerned with our motive. Prayer, for instance, isn't really about the words you say. The eighth century bishop Isaac of Nineveh claimed, “Our Lord did not teach us a particular sequence of words here; rather, the teaching he provided in this prayer consists in showing us what we should be focusing our minds on during the entire course of this life.”

Our talking might actually get in the way. Prayer really begins in silence.

Mother Theresa taught that lesson in her writings. But maybe most directly in a great story told of her.

. . . an interviewer asked her, “What do you say when you pray?” She answered, “I listen.” The reporter paused a moment, then asked, “Then what does God say?” and she replied, “He listens.”

Prayer is an attitude that we cultivate of spending the entire day in the presence of God. Whether we are working, playing, cooking dinner, or taking a walk, we can develop the habit of doing everything we do in the presence of God. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, in her book *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, writes of prayer:

My favorite definition of prayer is “the practice of the presence of God” – that is, to dwell secure in knowing ourselves to be loved and to be in love – open toward God, oriented toward God, struggling with God sometimes, out of authentic longing for understanding and a right relation, and in conversation with him, bringing all that happens to us back into that conversation.

The prayer Jesus teaches us here in the Sermon on the Mount is a prayer that, among many other things, creates solidarity with the rest of creation. The Lord’s Prayer hopes for a transformed world. It anticipates the fullness of the reign of God. And it commits us to being part of that transformation.

Through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other spiritual practices, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit to be present with us, to empower and comfort us, and to transform us. We learn to let go of our individual fears, anxieties, and uncertainties. We learn to let go of our ego. We learn humility and gratitude and love.

And as we let go and learn, we are transformed. We become people who are more compassionate, more just, more peaceful, people who forgive and accept forgiveness, who build communities of the reconciled . . . in other words, we become participants in God’s reign coming on the earth.

Let us, then, pray, as our Savior taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.