

“Languages of Prayer”  
James 5:13-18  
September 30, 2018

Back in the School of Languages and Linguistics, where I took so many of my college courses, they defined your native language as the language in which you count and do sums, and the language in which you pray. Of course, when they spoke of language, they meant English as opposed to French or Russian or whatever. And to test out the theory, I asked my mother what language she prayed in. Sure enough, even though she had lived in America many years longer than she had spent in her native country, she still prayed the Lord’s Prayer in French.

But there is more to the idea of native language than what you grow up speaking at home or in your town and country. For the language of the soul goes beyond mere words.

There is, for example, the language of fear. It is universal to all people, but some persons speak Fear better than they speak anything else. Whether it is because life has dealt harshly with them, or because they find exploiting the fears of others very effective, those who speak Fear remind me of the dogs who cringe their heads at even the mere hint of the touch of a human hand.

And so, some people when they pray do so in the language of Fear. Do you remember the story of Jonah and the whale? When God whips up a storm at sea, the sailors on the ship where Jonah has stowed away pray for mercy. They prayed in the language of Fear, and it was Fear that moved them to throw Jonah overboard – which is how he ended up being swallowed by the Very Big Fish.

At one time or another, each one of us will know the language of Fear well enough to be able to pray in it quite fluently. The question will be, what kind of prayer is appropriate in such a case? Jesus prayed in Gethsemane in Fear. Fear

itself is nothing to be ashamed of. But when we pray in Fear, we need to realize that a very real answer can be the one that was given to Jesus himself before Calvary – rather than remove what is making you fearful, you may be told to confront your fear, just as Christ confronted his cross.

Another language of prayer is the language of Helplessness. Like the language of Fear, it can lead to both appropriate, and inappropriate, prayer. There is the story of Lillian Baylis, who founded the Old Vic Theatre Company in London. Chronic financial problems beset her productions, and she had no qualms about asking divine aid in resolving them. It was said that at one particularly stressful moment she was overheard to pray, “O Lord, send me a good tenor – cheap!” I can only imagine the number of choir directors through the centuries who have echoed such sentiments!

Would God seriously entertain such a request? Well, not too long ago we were praying for an organist...

The Rev. John Versteeg put it this way once: “Prayer is not a labor-saving device, but a task-producing one. For when you really pray you have to do something about it. You get off your knees to get onto your feet. For prayer makes you feel a Presence that disturbs you with the toil of elevated tasks.”

In fact, if we take this to its logical conclusion, we may end up in agreement with Saint Benedict, who founded an order of monks in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The motto of his order is simple: “To labor is to pray.” Far from avoiding trouble, prayer seeks to overcome it.

Yet, some of us become confused about what is the real task ahead of us, what it is our labor is trying to accomplish. And that, in turn, can confuse the issue of why we pray. It also points up confusion in what we worship, and whom we worship. Because chances are, we pray for what we worship.

Many people pray for different kinds of things. As a society before the Depression, we Americans in effect prayed for a chicken in every pot. The Marxists prays for a dictatorship of the proletariat. The politician prays for power.

Is this really prayer? In a way, it is. A materialistic society prays for bigger, somehow confusing the notion that bigger means better. A society based on privilege and rank prays for the status quo. Oh, the One Percent may not actually get down on their knees and fold their hands and go through the motions, but they might as well.

So what is the thing that we worship? Surely it is better for a gardener not to pray for a bigger garden, but for finer seeds. Or perhaps for a student to know one subject deeply, rather than to know smatterings of nothing about everything. Or for the artist to produce one masterpiece, instead of dozens of valueless canvasses.

In fact, just about every wish, every effort we make, is akin to prayer. Maybe that is why Jesus took prayer for granted, and never addressed the question of why people should pray, but rather HOW they should pray and what they should pray, and (most of all), to whom we should pray.

There's a story about LBJ having lunch one day with his press secretary, Bill Moyers. As Moyers was saying grace over the food, President Johnson shouted, "Speak up, Bill, I can't hear you." Moyers replied quietly, I wasn't addressing YOU, Mr. President."

Whom do we address in prayer? It might depend upon what language of the soul we are speaking in. For prayer is only one of many ways in which we address our god – whether that god be one of our own making, or of unknown mysteries, or of the Spirit.

We may address our God in faith, but faith without prayer risks being little more than a theory or a conviction – a mere opinion. We might address our God in worship, but worship is merely an external act of form and ritual if it does not

include prayer. We could address our God in moral action and ethics, but without prayer mere morality has little spiritual depth. And without prayer, which is a living communion with our God, the gap between ourselves and our Creator remains almost infinite.

But perhaps the greatest reason for praying, for addressing our God, was expressed by Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the giants of the American pulpit in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He said, “True prayer ... is always an endeavor to release the divine purpose through the one who is praying.” Whatever that purpose is, and however it can be made a living reality to this world, becomes known when we open our hearts to God. Maybe that realization is what led a poet to say that prayer, among other things, is an education: an education in what God wills for the creation.

Expressed in another fashion, it has been proclaimed that “He prayeth well who loveth well; he prayeth best who loveth best.” For in the end prayer at its best can only be an expression of love – love for our world, our God, and yes, even for ourselves. And love is the greatest language of all, the language that Jesus spoke not only fluently, but exclusively. Let us pray that love might become not only part of OUR vocabulary, but be expressed in all our thoughts, words, and deeds, as we live a life of prayer.