

“Listen before You Pray”
Exodus 3:1-6, Romans 8:26-27, Luke 18:1-8
October 20, 2019

Whenever I saw Sam Franklin - or his modern successors - up in the gallery tugging on the rope that signaled to all who could hear that worship was about to begin, I am reminded of a saying about prayer. It comes from C. H. Spurgeon, who was one of the great British preachers of the 19th century. In fact, he is still known as “The Prince of Preachers,” at least among the Baptists. The way Spurgeon saw it, “prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly; others give but an occasional pluck at the rope; but [and here is where Sam comes in] he who wins with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might.”

Yet, I’m not sure this tells the whole story about prayer. Now, I do not mean to suggest that Sam’s bell-ringing skills left something to be desired, or that Spurgeon had it wrong. But at best, this saying about prayer is not quite complete. For prayer, at its base - and at its best - is not just a one-way street. It is not just us trying to get heaven’s attention.

Maybe Spurgeon got his image from the New Testament gospel lesson this morning about the woman who so nagged the indifferent judge that she finally got what she wanted from him. Jesus explains that if that kind of persistence could move a cynical, insensitive and unsympathetic judge - who normally would not care two whits about a poor woman and her complaint (which in his exalted eyes might seem less than insignificant) - then how much easier it would be for us to understand that OUR persistence in prayer towards someone who is believed to be our caring, generous, and sympathetic heavenly Father would get results just as fulfilling, satisfying - and in half the time.

But again, I find that this describes only part of the story. Indeed, when most of us think about prayer, we picture ourselves getting to a quiet place, closing our eyes,

focusing our thoughts on the realm of the Spirit, and then somehow trying to communicate our wishes, our needs, our desires, our thanks, our praise to our Creator. Yet, there is a lot more to it than that. And I think that the Jewish scriptures show us a more complete picture of what prayer is really all about.

In this day and age, if we think of prayer as more than a one-way street, we think of prayers going from us to God, and answers coming back - in the form of events, feelings, opportunities opened, doors closed, and so on. Rarely do we think, like Joan of Arc centuries ago, that there are actual voices to be heard or conversations to be carried on with the Great Beyond of the spiritual world. Most people these days tend to discount that kind of thinking, that God actually talks back to us. And if we have had that kind of experience, where we have sensed a voice or felt a personal presence, we don't talk about it much for fear that like Joan of Arc, we might get burned - not that matches and gasoline would be used today, but that others would tend to avoid us or think we were soft in the head. In fact, when Susan and I were first getting acquainted with each other in divinity school in Scotland, she was shocked when I volunteered to her that when I talked to God, God would talk back. Our budding relationship almost ended right then and there.

Well, the ancient Jewish notion of prayer is even more radical - and more dangerous (socially speaking) - than that. For in the Old Testament, prayer is not only a verbal two-way street between us and God (like what Joan of Arc said she experienced), but very often it is not humans, but rather God, who starts off the conversation.

Now, we might ask ourselves, is that really prayer? Isn't prayer supposed to occur when we, like Spurgeon, endeavor to make our thoughts known to God, and not the other way around? But if we really think about it, chances are God already knows what you are thinking, or feeling, or going through, or putting up with. God would still like to hear about it, but in the final analysis, it's Old News to the Almighty. But look at it another way: do WE know what is on God's mind? Do WE know what God is thinking, feeling,

going through, or putting up with? Chances are, we don't. And so it is often through prayer that God informs US of what He has in mind for us and for our world.

This stands prayer on its head, does it not? No longer is it a question of informing God (with apologies here to Janice Joplin) that we need a new Mercedes. Instead, it's more a question of getting directions from heaven about where we need to be, and where we need to go. The mode of transportation, in such an instance, may be secondary. And, if God wants to get you somewhere by having you walk on water, a Mercedes or a Porsche may ultimately prove irrelevant. So before you put in your order with the heavenly hosts for a new set of wheels, you might want to wait a moment to give it a second thought.

When was the last time we prayed and asked for more responsibilities instead of that new set of wheels? Or, when was the last time that most of our prayer-talk was about what we could do for others, as opposed to what we wanted God, or the church, or other people to fix up for us? When was the last time we allowed prayer to become a revelation of the divine Mind rather than a product of our own mind: a litany that reads more like a shopping list than anything else?

Someone once noted that "to pray is to change." The question is, what actually changes? The world? Hopefully. The fix we are in? Maybe. The attitudes of others towards us? Conceivably. But what hopefully changes the most is ... ourselves. And why is that? Because in prayer, we are not just ushered into the presence of the One called the Almighty and the Eternal, which would leave most of us dumb-struck. But that divine presence - if we are listening - reveals the purposes and aims which God intends for us to undertake.

In prayer, I'll bet there's a lot better chance of God getting us to change our minds than us getting to change God's; that there is a lot better chance that God's Word, rather than ours, will have the final say. Prayer is not used to get God to see things our way, but

to allow ourselves the special vantage point of eternity through which to view, and re-view, our own motives, our own actions, and our own thoughts.

At the burning bush, Moses did not initiate a discussion with his Creator. It was quite the reverse. When Isaiah had his vision in the Temple, it was Holy One who called out to him, and not the other way around. When the Lord had something to say to the Israelites in the time of Jeremiah, it was the King of Heaven who sought out the young man to be His prophet. It certainly was not Jeremiah who sent his resume to heaven as an application for the post of prophet in ancient Israel.

Instead, it is God who more often than not initiates contact with us, who reveals Himself first of all to us, who calls us by name before we call upon His Name.

How does that initial Word from God come to us? Beyond the shrubs in my backyard, I have not heard of any burning bushes lately, and the witnesses of those who claim to have heard God speaking English, except in the movies, are few. But sometimes God does speak clearly.

After a farmer-boy heard his prosperous father pray fervently for the poor at family devotions, the child commented: “Dad, I wish I had your silos, because if I had your harvest of grain, I could answer your prayer for the poor and the hungry all by myself.”

Have you ever been an answer to someone else’s prayer? Has God spoken to you? Has God answered your prayers before you have even asked them? Has God revealed Himself in His goodness and mercy and bounty to you? To reverse the thoughts of the Prince of Preachers quoted at the beginning of this message, maybe the Almighty has been ringing a few bells in our ears, trying to get our attention, for God has plenty that He wants us, that He needs us, to hear.

Let us pray: