

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

This morning, I would like to focus on the Epistle that we heard from St. Paul's first letter to Timothy. In it, he's urging us to a life of prayer. But first, we might ask a fairly basic question. What is prayer? I think that prayer is simply focusing while we talk and listen to God. It's the essence of faith when we believe that there is a God who loves us and delights in hearing what we have to say. It's also a two-way street because God listens to our concerns and celebrations and God answers us through the voice of the Spirit. It's not an audible voice, of course, but it's more like the voice of our conscience prompting us to do this, or not to do that. Through prayer, God's Spirit awakens in us a consciousness that inspires a thought and nudges us to act according to God's will.

I read about a pastor who tried to explain prayer in a children's sermon one Sunday morning. He said that his premise was that talking and listening to God is like talking over the telephone and he told the children that prayer was like when Grandma calls. He said, "You can't see her, but you know that she's there. You can say anything that you want and she'll hear and understand because she just loves to hear your voice."

He had brought a phone from home to use as a prop for his sermon and set it on the floor. He asked if anyone wanted to try it and was hoping that one of the older children would volunteer. He hoped that they would do a little play acting to demonstrate the concept to the younger children. Instead, a three-year-old raised her hand. Well, he didn't think that he had much choice and so he handed her the receiver and

said, "O.K., here you go. Just say anything you want to and God will be listening." Susanne put the receiver to her ear and just sat there. He prompted her again. "Go ahead, Susanne, just say whatever comes to your mind." Still, she just sat there. The clock was ticking. The congregation was waiting and Susanne was stuck so he finally asked her, "Is anything the matter?" She gave him this pitiful look and said, "But Grandma didn't answer the phone so she probably wasn't at home." So much for that idea. No matter how we might try to explain it, prayer is talking and listening to God.

There are the several forms of prayer such as centering prayer that we'll practice this morning, supplications, intercessions, and thanksgivings. Supplication includes praying for ourself as well as praying for others, and that leads to the reading from his letter where St. Paul says, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone

That can be kind of a tall order. Praying for those who we love can be hard enough but praying for those we don't know can be even harder. At various times, I've told friends that I'll be praying for the person but, all too often, something would grab my attention after a couple days and I might forget all about the person's situation. I meant well, but I'd get distracted by some personal matter, or get carried away by the news of the day.

In earlier times, we would regularly spend most of our vacation times on Maui and our home church when we were there was the Church of the Holy Innocents in Lahaina. The church was destroyed in the fires and I made an inner vow to pray for the people of the area and for the parishioners in particular. That lasted about a month or so and then

something else demanded my attention. I still pray for the people as they rebuild but not as often.

I don't keep an individual prayer list but know that it's a handy way to stay focused. It doesn't need to be elaborate and I guess that I could keep a list on my phone. Whatever works and the point is that when we say, "I'll pray for you," we should do our best to follow through. Praying for others is important, and sometimes it can be nothing short of miraculous.

I read about a young woman named Kathy who had a friend in the Dallas area who was about to lose her home in foreclosure. So, Kathy told the friend that she would pray for her. Kathy prayed that a buyer would come along who wouldn't take advantage of the situation. Later, she got a letter from the friend who told Kathy that she'd had an offer on the house. A man called out of nowhere and asked if her house was for sale. She didn't know how it all had come about because the house wasn't even on the market. The bottom line was that the offer was legitimate and the friend was able to sell her house and avoid foreclosure. Kathy realized that the moment that the man called was practically the same as the moment that Kathy had started praying. She thought that it was amazing!!

But, sometimes, it seems like Grandma's not at home when we pray and nothing happens and our prayers seem to get lost in the ether net.

We might pray for a loved one to be healed or find peace but the person dies anyway. Or pray for a friend who is struggling with addiction, but nothing changes. Does God answer some prayers, but not others? I think that there are probably three answers to prayer: "Yes", "No", and "Not Now but maybe later in God's time". At times, our prayers may be answered years later.

Whatever response we seem to get from our prayers, I like to think there's a bigger picture than we know. As St. Paul said, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face." Some things are beyond our knowing and often, it's in retrospect that we see how our prayers were answered. So, we should pray boldly and trust that God hears us and will bless those who we pray for according to God's will and in God's time.

Praying for others is never a waste of time even when our prayers seem to go unanswered. Our willingness to walk through a difficult time in prayer with someone we love means more to that person than we'll ever know.

But St. Paul would have us go beyond praying for those who we love when he told Timothy to "pray for all people." It's a lot easier to pray for some people than it is for others. We've probably all come across people who are less than kind and loving. We're told to pray for those people who rub us the wrong way just as readily as we pray for those who are closer to us.

St. Paul also tells us not to stop there when he tells us to pray for our enemies, as well. Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew when He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven".

Pray for your enemies. Pray also for those you don't even know. That's actually easier than it sounds. We do it all the time. We just observed the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 attacks which was also the 21st anniversary of my father's funeral. Many of us prayed again for the victims, for the brave first responders and for the airline passengers

who gave their lives that day to save others who they didn't know. I also said special prayers that day for my father. Emotionally, for me, the two events are inextricably mixed together.

Praying for others, especially those you don't know, is one of the hallmarks of Christian love. It links us with others across every conceivable barrier. We may not share the same culture or speak the same language, but we share a common humanity. Just as Christ died for the sins of the whole world, praying for others over the scope of the whole world brings us that much closer to living as one in Christ. So, pray for all people, whether we know them or not.

There's one more point that I would like to make, and it's the most important point of all. In praying for others, we should pray that they may come into a saving relationship with Christ Jesus. As St. Paul wrote to Timothy, "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all-- this was attested at the right time."

To come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ is to drink from the well-spring of the living water that will never run dry. As we heard in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John, "Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Jesus also said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

In a way, it's similar to the old proverb: "If you give a man a fish, he can eat for a day; If you teach a man how to fish, he can eat for a lifetime."

To pray for others to come into full knowledge of the truth is to pray that they will experience for themselves the wonder of God's love, the strength of God's Spirit, and the confidence of knowing that God's grace will be sufficient for their every need.

No matter how we slice it, the tangible stuff of this world can never make our life complete. True happiness and lasting peace can only be found in knowing the presence of God in our heart. Once we know that Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins, that we are children of God and that nothing can ever separate us from God's love, we can face the future with confidence, knowing that God will be with us and see us through.

So, pray for others ... all others. Pray not only that their physical needs will be met but more importantly, pray that they will come to know God's never-ending love for us. And, as we pray for others, know that others will also be praying for us.

Thanks be to the God of love who hears our prayers and Amen