

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
John Ryan, Associate Pastor
"Fine China"
Matthew 6: 5-13
Transfiguration of the Lord
February 26, 2017

Let us pray - Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Our gospel lesson comes from Mathew, chapter 6:

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

When you were little and visited your grandparent's house, I bet they had one of these. Maybe yours was in the dinning room or kitchen. At my grandparents' house it was in the living room, in the corner. It was a corner cabinet that my grandfather had made. And in that corner cabinet was the fine china and glasses that my grandmother owned. You know the ones I am talking about. The ones that little boys and little girls can only look at through the glass fronted window. But you were not allowed eat on them. You were not allowed to touch them. You certainly could not help to clean up the table or wash them or place them in the dish washer, because you might chip or break a piece. And please, do not get that close Johnny. No roughhousing in **that** corner of the living room because you might cause a piece to fall over and break. Those fine pieces of china and stem wear only came out on fancy occasions - like Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter and were for adults only. And there were some pieces that could never be used because they were too fragile. They were to be looked at and admired. We children were never allowed to use them. For us, it was the everyday Homer Laughlin China.

I wonder if we sometimes treat prayer in the same way? I mean something that is best left to the professionals. When we open meetings here, we start with prayer. How many of us close our eyes immediately when we hear the question asked "Does anyone feel led to pray" and then say a quick silent prayer that you will not be called on? Then there is that awkward silence until the leader finally prays. Why is that? Why are we worried about being asked to pray? Maybe you feel like prayer is like fine china. Fragile and fancy. Rather than seeing prayer as something you can lead or participate in easily, you look at it like your grandmother's china. You do not think you can get anywhere near it because it is:

- Too Intimidating
- Too Guilt-inducing

- Too Confusing
- Too Formal
- Too Awkward
- Too much pressure
- And maybe too much of a waste of time.

As we continue walking through the Sermon on the Mount and cast our eyes to Ash Wednesday this week, we come to what is probably the most famous prayer of all time, the Lord's Prayer. Jesus tells us our prayers are not to be piles of empty words. **When you pray, Jesus instructs us next, already assuming that prayer is part of a life connected to God.** The Jewish Encyclopedia notes that both the practice of a rabbi teaching disciples a prayer, and the language of this prayer, place Jesus in the context of other rabbis of his time.

This prayer, like Jesus' life, begins with a focus on God. After the connection with God is made, then the petitioner asks for the essentials. Daily bread, calling us back to God's goodness to the people of Israel in the desert, receiving just enough manna each day. Next we pray for forgiveness, for forgiveness is at the heart of the prayer, and at the center of what Jesus teaches us. If the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of Jesus' teaching, and the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of this sermon, then this petition for forgiveness is at the epicenter of the gospel. Reconciliation is the point of Jesus' entire ministry, says the Rev. Mary Austin pastor of Westminster Church, in Detroit. Thus, forgiveness is at the heart of the relationship with God, of piety, and of the life in Christian community. Perhaps no other theme appears more often in Matthew's gospel than that of forgiveness. Matthew uses the Greek word *aphiemi* (af-ee'-ay-mee), which can be translated as send away, release, remit, forgive, or permit forty-nine times, nearly one third of the total number of its occurrences in the New Testament.

All of Jesus' instructions, including the Lord's Prayer, have to do with fixing our attention on God. We are not to get distracted by how other people see us, or the impression we are making. We are not to try to impress anyone with our spiritual lives, or our material goods. Jesus is calling us to a rare kind of focus on God, in all that we do.

In 1983 Mehet Ali Agca was in the midst of the crowd in St. Peter's Square in Rome. He pulled a gun out of his pocket and tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II. He was arrested and imprisoned. In January 1984, John Paul II visited the prison, and when he walked through the cell door, he told the man, "I forgive you." The papers made much of it, but one editorial writer made a significant statement. "Of course the Pope forgives the man who tried to kill him. After all, he is the Pope, and forgiveness is his business."

Forgiveness is the business of every Christian. But forgiveness is scarce in our culture, although it is terribly needed. We bury the hatchet with people, but then we keep a road map of exactly where we buried it. We put our resentments in cold storage, but we are ready to let them thaw out again whenever we need them. We take the cancelled note, tear it up and say they don't owe us anything anymore, but we hang onto the wastebasket. We talk about forgiveness more than we forgive. Forgiveness was the centerpiece of Jesus' teaching. He made it clear that we could not be in a right relationship with God if we do not make things right with our sister's and brothers.

I have a confession to make. I like to pray and often talk to God when I am out walking the dog, but I often do not take time to listen to God's reply. A few years ago, during my sabbatical I traveled to Iona, Scotland. Iona is an island of the west coast of Scotland where St. Columba brought Christianity that

country. It is, what we Presbyterians like to call a “thin place.” The place where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially thin. It’s a place where we can sense the divine more readily. The focus of my sabbatical was on spirituality, connecting with God. What better place to connect with God in this thin place.

I traveled to Iona by myself. It had been a busy summer leading youth trips and then trying to get the programs and myself ready for being gone for three months. I arrived in Iona exhausted, stressed out and ready for an encounter with God. Kinda like the one Moses had with God in the wilderness, minus the burning bush. I remember thinking “OK God, I am here! I am ready! What do you have to say to me? But then I would go onto to my next activity or hike, or book that I wanted to read. I never listened to what God might have to say to me. I wonder if the same is true for you too? I tend to want things to be neat and tidy. Like the pretty little packages you receive at Christmas or on your birthday. Instead of a burning bush, when I need an answer to a problem or want to know what is next, I would prefer a note tucked under my pillow, like the Tooth Fairy might do, to let me know God’s reply.

Sadly, I left Iona frustrated, mad and confused. If I could not discern what God wanted for me in that thin place, how was I going ever going to hear God? I wonder what would have happened if I would have left time, to open my ears and heart to hear what God’s reply was to me. Would it be kinder? To let go of those old grudges? To listen to others more? To put my faith in action with both my hands, words and money?

Frederick Buechner, in *Wishful Thinking*, write about the Lord’s Prayer and says, “In the Episcopal order of worship, the priest sometimes introduces the Lord’s Prayer with the words, “Now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say...” The word bold is worth thinking about. We do well **not** to pray the prayer lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all. We can pray it in the unthinking and perfunctory way we usually do only by disregarding what we are saying. “Thy will be done” is what we are saying. That is the climax of the first half of the prayer. We are asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want, but what God wants.”

What I wanted when I was at Iona was a conversation much like that was depicted in our drama this morning. A back and forth dialogue with God. What I especially appreciate in the drama is God’s response about God’s will being done and that God says doing God’s will is about loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. While not easy, putting God first is what we are called to do as Christians.

Prayer is real talk to a real God who wants us to be real with God. Prayer is not about being perfect. Prayer is an intimate conversation with God and then talking the time to listen to what God might be saying to you. Will you get a note under you pillow tonight? Probably not, but I bet if you take time to listen you might be surprised to hear what God is saying to you.

Prayer is never like fine china, at least not the kind that can never be eaten on or only eaten on by a select few. Prayer is for everyone. As we prepare to leave this place and many of you will go home for lunch today, what would it be like if you got out that fine china and stem wear, invite all to sit at the table and treat lunch as a feast with God. A time to talk and a time to listen to what God might being saying to you and **to us** as a Christian community.

May the road rise to meet you;
May the wind be always at your back;
May the sun shine warmly upon you face;
and the rain fall softly upon your fields.
And until we meet again
May God hold you in the palms of God's hands.