

AGAPE CENTRE

SUNDAY OCTOBER 22, 2023

11.00 AM

Sermon by Ruth Patterson

Readings: Psalm 46; Matthew 6: 5-15

Edwina Gately: Be silent, be still

The reason I started with that reflection is because the best definition of prayer I can come up with is that prayer is a love relationship with God – a giving and receiving of love – in whatever way we choose to do that. There are many different ways of praying, as you know, and there are no ‘right or wrong’ ways to pray. The way you choose to pray is between yourself and God and no prayer goes unheard. Having said that, there are certain methods or practices of prayer that can help us to tap into that Infinite Love which is surrounding and upholding us at all times – even at this very minute. We may not be aware of it but it is very real nonetheless. One method of prayer, a form of Contemplative Prayer, is what we call Centering Prayer, a method which is as old as faith itself. In the last decades it has resurfaced, encouraged and made fully accessible by the teaching of some remarkable people like Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr and others. I believe this is the way Jesus prayed when he slipped off to lonely places to ‘be with’ the Father. In fact it seems to be largely the way he communed, had relationship with the Father. In the Gospel reading this morning he talks about this practice – entering the secret place of love and communion. There are so many ‘unspoken’ things, secrets, in the Gospel narrative that we can’t help having questions about and wish we knew more, wish that someone had filled in the gaps a bit. But the gaps leave us with mystery, a mystery that cannot be known or understood at the level of the head. However, if we enter the intimacy of silence, we may begin to tap into something far more rewarding than a head knowledge about Jesus.

We will begin to know him at a level beyond the head and our roots will go that little bit deeper into the soil of God's marvellous love (as Paul tells us in Ephesians 3). Not everybody is happy or comfortable with silence for all sorts of reasons which need to be respected. But this fear of silence can sometimes lead people to talking all the time so that their prayer leaves no room for listening or becoming aware of that third dimension, that sense of the holy all about us and within us. Others are silent because they feel inadequate, having the mistaken notion, as I indicated earlier, that there is a 'right' way to pray and they would get it wrong. For whatever reason there are many in our churches, our faith communities who have not often been exposed to silence.

I have the feeling that, in every age, God gifts his church, that is the people of God, you and me and countless others, with specific gifts for the living of particular times in the history of the world. In the last third of the twentieth century it was the gift of the charismatic or renewal movement. Today I believe it is this gift of centering prayer. The world is on high alert just now, full of terror, anguish, despair and all kinds of suffering. Is there even going to be a future for this beloved planet? We could echo the words of the psalmist about nations in chaos, kingdoms crumbling, earthquakes, floods and fire destroying whole regions. And then come the words, "Be still and know that I am God."

When I deliberately choose to set a time aside simply to be still in the presence of the Beloved, of God, what am I doing? I am saying that this relationship is important to me, so important that I am willing to take even a little time each day to do what appears to be nothing, to simply turn up, to nurture this relationship and let God be God, a time when I'm not telling him what I think he should be doing, or bring a plan that I have already worked out and ask him to rubber stamp it. This practice is apart from the usual way I pray – and I know those more

'normal' prayers are very important too. But this is coming with no agenda, simply to be in the presence of the one who loves us, who is always present, always the 'I Am' here for us in this moment. And each time we deliberately sit to be with God in this way, what we are doing is consenting to his presence and action within us. We may not be conscious of what is happening and we certainly don't spend the time checking our spiritual pulse to see how we're doing, but actually there is a quiet process of transformation going on within. The fruits are seen often by others rather than by ourselves, which I think is very healthy. We don't need to know, simply to be faithful. All over this island, all over the world individuals and groups are engaging in this type of 'being with' God, and each time they do I have the strong conviction that there is a shift in the unseen world towards inclusion, unity and peace. Of course this type of 'being' prayer does not replace but rather enhances our 'doing'. Both are necessary and we need to hold them in balance. It was after such prayer in the 'secret place' that, again and again, Jesus emerged to teach, to heal, to challenge and to bless with great power and authority.

Without going into the details on the specifics of how we pray in this way – if you are interested I would encourage you to attend the workshop here on November 28th - let me reiterate a few pointers as to what Centering Prayer is and is not which can be found in more detail on a leaflet that should be available at the close of this service. Centering Prayer is not a technique but a way of cultivating a deeper relationship with God. It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation. It is not limited to the 'felt' presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God's abiding presence. It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer but simply resting in God's presence beyond thoughts, words and emotions.

I would like now to return to the gospel passage specifically. You may have noticed that Jesus, after talking about the secret place, about that intimacy and communion of silence, goes on to tell his friends not to keep babbling on because God knows exactly what we need before we ask him. And then he gives us the template par excellence in the prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer. We know it so well that it is easy to rush through it without realising what a remarkable prayer it is. At the end of every gathering of Centering Prayer we pray this prayer very slowly, with pauses between each phrase. I think it is highly significant that Jesus then immediately comments on one of those phrases. "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others your heavenly Father will not forgive you your sins." For me this is not a threat or something to be fearful of. It is rather highlighting one of the central characteristics of Centering Prayer which is that it is a prayer of letting go – letting go perhaps of those things or attachments which, usually unwittingly, have assumed the place of God in our lives, letting go of old resentments or hurts, releasing a flow of forgiveness. If we are holding on too tightly to certain things or negative feelings then God, who never forces his will upon us, is not 'free' to act, to relate fully with us. And forgiveness is a power that we have not even begun to tap into yet – a power that could change the world. As we do this, as we sit in the presence of the One who loves us totally just as we are, we are letting God be God – perhaps something that he has been yearning to be for a long time – in your life and in mine.

Edwina Gately: Reflection