

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 24, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
"Praying More - Like Jesus"

*"After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and (prayed),...." [John 17:1a NRSV]*

A recent nationwide poll included this item: "I would like for my pastor to preach more sermons on the topic of \_\_\_\_\_." The preferred topic, by a landslide, was prayer.

Now most Christians, caught in an unguarded moment, would probably admit that they "ought to pray more." We all intend to pray, we want to, but something always comes up and another day has gone by without prayer. Bothered by our guilt, we say again and again, "Now today I'm going to start a regular prayer discipline!" But again and again, whether by "omission or "commission", the world creeps in and frustrates our best laid spiritual plans.

Jesus was a man who prayed. He prayed often, hard, and, according to John's Gospel, sometimes long! Today's lesson is a good example. In it Jesus is praying for his disciples just before he was arrested. On many other occasions, the Gospels relate how "Jesus withdrew for prayer...." His prayer life was the key ingredient that undergirded him. He even prayed on the Cross, first for his enemies and then for himself. After his resurrection, he promised that his prayers for us would continue, even though he would no longer be physically present with us. When we hear this, it often makes us want to walk out of church, gritting our teeth with a new resolve to pray more - like Jesus.

By the following Saturday, however, we are back in the old patterns, ready to come to church and learn yet another new way to pray, or at least find a handle that will help us to hold fast to our discipline. We are tired of feeling guilty and genuinely want to strengthen and expand this area of our lives. So here are four suggestions that I and other Christians have found most helpful in developing and maintaining a vibrant prayer life. Some, or even all, of these you may have heard before. But like the soil in a garden, prayer life needs to be "tilled up" every now and then, even though it gets easier each time you do it! So try them again and see if they work.

**Suggestion # 1: Pray regularly.** In other words, set aside a regular time every day which you devote to prayer. This is your private time with God. Treat it as the most important appointment of your day. Be creative with that time. There is no set way you must use it. For example, in our house we have a rule: whoever cooks does not have to clean up! You can no doubt immediately guess who most often does the cleaning part of our domestic engineering! Actually, I enjoy getting up in the morning and doing the dishes while the coffee is brewing. It gives me time to organize my thoughts and to pray about the day ahead. Often it is not enough time, so I go into my room after clean-up, light a candle, and finish my meditation. On the occasions when I do the cooking and don't have to clean up, I simply sit in my room with my coffee and do all of my prayer time there. In warm weather the meditation moves outside, and I enjoy communing with nature

as well as with God. There is no set pattern of action, only the time is regular.

***Suggestion # 2: Find a comfortable but meaningful posture for prayer.*** First, it needs to be emphasized that God doesn't care about your prayer posture. You can be sitting, standing, lying down or standing on your head! It doesn't matter - God doesn't care. However, our posture when praying may make a considerable difference in the level of our concentration, and God probably *does care* about that! For example, some people may pray right after they get in bed at night. I always felt that was kind of like an "afterthought", like giving God the "leftovers" of the day. It's too easy to become drowsy and lose your concentration. Even God might have trouble interpreting a snore!

Instead, find a comfortable, creative position that will enhance your concentration. Many veteran "pray-ers" still find kneeling to be the best position for them. Others have adopted an eastern pose, such as sitting cross-legged. Some do lie down but use an outside stimulus such as music or a recorded mediation to keep them alert and mentally active. There is no rule, only a disciplined position that is right for you.

***Suggestion # 3: Get yourself in the mood for prayer.*** Musicians warm up their instruments before a concert. Athletes stretch their bodies before a competition. It is said that Einstein "warmed up" on some advanced calculus before working on his Theory of Relativity. Why should our spirits be any different? Especially in these times of stress, why not get ourselves in the mood, and "warm up" for a good prayer session?

My "warm-up" for my short morning session is very simple; a cup of coffee and Forward, Day By Day. You can use any devotional reading; there are countless numbers of them. Some people use the Bible itself, choosing a chapter at random, or following the lesson cycles in the lectionary in the back of the Prayer Book. The point is, most of us are like batteries; we need a "jump-start" every now and then. We need a regular outside resource to keep up our "charge." Choose one that suits you and get in the mood for prayer.

***Suggestion # 4: Be yourself when you pray.*** Sounds too simple to be true, doesn't it? But if we really believe in the definition of prayer, that it is a "conversation with God," then why put on airs? Why not just be ourselves?

For example, I grew up and was even ordained under "The King's English." The 1928 Book of Common Prayer was etched in my mind. So was the KJV of the Bible. At first, it was real hard for me to pray in any other language. Then I came to realize that if God truly hears all prayers, then language doesn't matter at all. If it did we English speaking Christians would be a minority. So I started talking with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit (I make no distinction) as I would with my sister, my son, my wife, or anyone, really. Oh, I might "clean-up" my prayer language a little. I might even slip in a "Thee" or a "Thou." But then again in crisis I can get pretty "bottom line" with God. In terms of language, I can *really* be "myself." So can you.

However, there is a caution here: being yourself with God also means being *honest* with God. You may find that your prayer discipline isn't working. Be honest with God and say that! "Lord, I'm tired, and I really don't want to get up this morning and pray!" If you're angry or depressed - tell God! If you would rather be doing something else, don't pretend. Share

**it! God can take it! Then, when you really are ready to sit down and talk with God, you'll find it so much easier after having been honest with God.**

**Jesus was honest with God. We can see it in our story. He went to the garden after supper and prayed. He asked that "this cup be taken from (him)." Did Jesus want to die? Of course not! Did Jesus want to put his friends through all this stress and turmoil? Of course not! So he was honest with God his Father. And at the end he was able to overcome it all and say, "Not my will, but yours be done."**

**There is a lot more to prayer than this. We could not cover it all even in a week of workshops. But to get you started again, and again, and again, simply remember these four suggestions: pray regularly; find a posture for prayer; get yourself in the mood for prayer; and be yourself as you pray. To put it another way, don't just make prayer a *part* of your life; instead let it *be* your life!**

**One final thing about prayer. Scripture tells us that God hears every prayer. Jesus told us that God also answers every prayer. The problem is that no where are we told when and how. Perhaps, then, there really are four answers that God gives to our prayers: Yes. No. Wait a while. I have a better idea!**