

UNBROKEN CHAIN OF PRAYER

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

August 23, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20

Prayer is something many of us learned early on. Just about every mother or dad has taught their child to do what their mother or dad taught them to do, offer up a prayer at day's end. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. God bless mommy and daddy and Spot, and that funny lady we saw today, and Uncle Harry, and Mrs. Shobodo who's having her brain operated on. And, oh yes, God, if you could keep my big brother out of my hair for just one more day, I'd really appreciate it."

We pray to end the day. Or we offer a prayer to begin it. We may pray at a meal. Or after a close call on the L.I.E., "O God." Which isn't much of a prayer, but at least we've named the one most needful on such occasions.

We pray, but only occasionally, and not many of us really pray without ceasing, nor do we pray with the kind of perseverance that Paul suggests in his letter to the Ephesians.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

If this sounds familiar, it is because it is a theme that Paul strikes elsewhere as well. In his first letter to the Thessalonians¹ Paul says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Pray without ceasing, quite an undertaking.

There is a Franciscan Convent in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, led by the good Sisters of Perpetual Adoration who have taken the call to pray without ceasing seriously. Since 11:00 a.m. August 1st, 1878, day and night, at least two people have been praying before an altar in the chapel of the convent there. It is a way, the sisters say, of maintaining awareness of God's presence in our lives and keeping vigil for the community, the city of La Crosse, the church, and the world. Day in and day out, in the midst of the seasons of sun and heat, falling leaves and blowing snow, budding flowers and awakening earth... at noontime, and daybreak, in the afternoon and in the middle of the night they are praying. They say nobody else has been praying so continuously in the United States as have these prayerful sisters. And I believe it. 131 years... it's a long time on your knees.

But I'm not sure that that is exactly what Paul urges us to do either in his invitation to the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing, or in his letter to the Ephesians, the text for today; *Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.*

Most of us pray irregularly. Maybe we give thanks in the morning as well as at night. Or maybe we might say a prayer before going into a meeting, in the hopes that the deal may be cut or the agreement reached.

I've seen some of the Mets make the sign of the cross before they stand at the plate at City Stadium, and boy do they need it. I once knew a criminal lawyer who said he prayed before he went in court to defend a client, because in some cases that's about all he had going for him.

The Deacons in this church pray, they pray for the sick, and for people in need, and they pray for all of us. Maybe they are the most dedicated of pray-ers in the church, I don't know, but I know that someone is praying for us every day who is a deacon.

Soldiers pray, sometimes out of hurt and grief and loss of innocence, if innocence there ever was. You pray when the call comes at night and the police have your son and there's been a problem and you're supposed to come down to the precinct and see about it.

Preachers pray when they can and when they are able and when they must, and sometimes when invited to dinner and seated at a table that has not had a prayer said over it in years; but then we pray at other tables as well, laden with bread and wine, where God's name is often spoken.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication, Paul says. Not a bad idea. I pray sometimes when I have no idea what I'm doing, or what I should say. Sometimes I have prayed in a hospital hallway before going into a room where life and death hang in the balance... for wisdom that is better than I have, and words that are more eloquent than the ones I know. Sometimes my prayers are simply silence, and the silence expresses the fullness in my heart.

I think I have told you that when I was a boy there was young woman who took care of us four children in my family while my father was ill. My mother had her hands full with a dying husband, and she needed help with her four young children. So Mary Kerner came into our life and she looked after us and helped my mother for a year or so during the last of my father's illness.

After my father died and she was no longer needed to care for us, Mary decided that she wanted to enter a convent and become a nun. I was five years old at the time. Over the years I would hear something about Mary, she would write a letter to my mother or to my aunt telling them what she was doing.

One winter at Christmas time, I was back home visiting in Missouri. I was in seminary at the time. I was perhaps 24 years old, so nineteen years had passed since the last time I had seen Mary. She was now Sister Mary Kenneth, no longer Mary Kerner, the woman who had taken care of us as children, the woman that I suppose as a five year old I had driven to a nunnery for some peace and quiet.

Those were the days when nuns still wore black habits, with wide brimmed, sweeping hats, much bigger than a ten gallon hat, the kind of whipple and headdress that you might see in a Vermeer painting. Mary had that same smile, that same sense of peace and presence, and a kind of holiness about her that was unmistakable.

While we visited that evening, Sister Mary Kenneth told me that she had prayed for me every day of my life and she was so glad to see me because it gave her a new idea of the man I had become, and the outcome of her prayers.

I wasn't quite sure what to say to her about her prayers, I felt suddenly kind of vulnerable and exposed, but I have never forgotten that every day of her life and of mine, until hers came to an end some years ago, she prayed for me.

Pray in the Spirit at all times, Paul says, in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

I wonder for whom you are praying. Who are the ones who are so with your heart that they have made your heart tender, or broken it, or worry it? Who are the people so dear or so troublesome or so important to you that hold them before God in prayer?

And who are those people you have casually said, "I'll keep you in my prayers, and then have forgotten to mention in your prayers, because really you don't pray all that much, or at least not more than once a day, or once a week at church, or on a rare occasion. "I'll keep you in my prayers," you say but then forget, life being what it is, so hectic, so frenetic.

A minister friend of mine had this pretty well covered. He often promised prayers to his friends and parishioners, and I'm sure at one time he was very good at recalling the people who were in his thoughts. But as the years went on and the promises of prayer mounted and the memory of the old fellow started to fail, he took an easy way out and started praying each day a prayer "for all those for whom he had promised prayers," (that was his phrase), a kind one size fits all prayer that covered everyone to whom he had made a commitment.

I make lists and pray. And I pray his prayer as well, now that the years are mounting. And I pray that I don't forget those that I have promised that I would remember in prayer.

But who are you praying for? Your son, or daughter, a neighbor, your partner, your husband or wife, or friend? Are your prayers mostly about you, or mostly about others? Nothing wrong with prayers for yourself, incidentally. Sometimes those are the only prayers we have, and if we don't pray them we cannot get to the others. So pray all the prayers that you have.

Maybe you're praying for peace. Aren't we all? Maybe you're praying for a child who is disturbed, not mentally at peace or whole.

Maybe you're praying for someone like Roxroy Salmon our Jamaican sanctuary friend who was to report for deportation this week, and did not report. And while you might say, "Well that's not right." I wonder if anybody here has ever been in his shoes, having to make a decision between being separated from his family and loved ones, his wife and children and mother, and never be allowed to see them again in the home and land where you had raised your children and blessed your marriage, and lived your life

for all these years, or whether you should turn yourself over to an authority that means to take you away. If your family was going to be taken away from you forcibly, which is to say that *you* were going to be taken away forcibly, what would you do? Maybe only prayer would help you know.

Maybe you're praying for healing, for peace of mind. For just a name for this sickness you have. Maybe you're praying for patience, or clarity about whether to stay married or not, or get married or not, or whether or not to support those who cannot marry. Maybe you're praying not to flunk out, or at least to last the first semester, or to just hold body and soul together long enough to find another job.

Maybe you're played out with prayer, don't know the language very well anymore, rusty at it, like a Spanish class you took in high school, the vocabulary of which doesn't come to mind very easily because you use it so little.

Maybe you're not speaking to God right now. That happens. But when the time is right... perhaps when you are ready... God will be listening, I'm sure of that.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Whatever other hesitations we may have about prayer, one of the most difficult aspects of it is that it seems so much like monologue, and not so much like dialogue. And that, of course, is because most of us think that prayer is about speaking, when in truth prayer is most essentially about listening. It is speaking the truth, yes; it is interceding; it is pleading and asking and complaining and bartering and fighting sometimes, and resisting, and thanking, yes... but its real heart and center, its core and essence is listening.

Prayer is the silence after the storm, the quiet after the cloudburst, it is as the clearing to the climber when the tree line ends and the horizon can be seen unimpeded. For prayer connects us with something larger than ourselves, it is our way to something greater than we are, a connection with the holy, which is, after all what we most desire, even though we may not know it.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

I wonder why it is that Paul, in the final analysis is so urgent for us to continue in prayer, even when it seems like such a solitary thing to do? Maybe it's because of what he knows about God. He knows that God never gives up on us, even though we may have given up on God.

I think about those nuns in that convent in LaCrosse, Wisconsin who day in and day out, in every season and occasion of life, in the coming and going of time have stayed at the one task that they have maintained as if the world depended on it, praying to God, interceding, and offering thanks, and praising, and listening and waiting, with their fingers fiddling with rosary beads, and the hours spent silently rehearsing the psalms, and

turning the pages of their prayer books and mumbling prayers. What does it take to be such a person who prays without ceasing like that? Endurance? Piety? Stubbornness? Strong knees?

Maybe its all of those things. Or maybe it's something quite different. Maybe its just the possibility, the faith, maybe just the hope... that every prayer that is offered... is also heard.

Pray, then, in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

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¹ 1 Thess 5:17