

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
May 16, 2010
John 17:20-26

“Paying Attention to God”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Malcolm Gladwell has written a fascinating book about who succeeds in life and why. **Outliers: The Story of Success** is chock full of insights and compelling theories. In the book, Gladwell says that there is one narrative usually told about extremely successful people—a story that focuses on intelligence, ambition and pluck. But, he argues, if we want to understand why some people achieve greatness we should look *around* them—at such things as their family and their place of birth. Gladwell believes the story of why some people succeed is more complex and more interesting than it usually appears.

According to Gladwell, there is a certain level of whimsy and chance involved in people becoming an expert in a field or successful in some endeavor. But Gladwell also analyzes how hard people work and study. And one of his theories about success is what he calls “The 10,000-Hour Rule.” Gladwell believes that to become proficient at a task requires a critical minimum level of practice—in fact, he says that there is a magic number needed to attain true expertise in something: 10,000 hours.

Neurologist Daniel Levitin is quoted in **Outliers** as saying, “The emerging picture from [research] studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being an...expert in anything. In study after study...this number comes up again and again. No one has yet found a case in which true expertise was accomplished in less time.”

I have been thinking about Levitin, Gladwell and the 10,000-hour rule and I think there are notable exceptions to this theory. It seems to me that there are cases when 10,000 hours of practice is NOT ENOUGH to achieve mastery. And there are cases when 10,000 hours is WAY TOO MUCH.

For example, it occurred to me that 10,000 hours is not enough when it comes to parenting. After 10,000 hours of parenting, the child you are parenting is just over one year old. That means a mother or father has been parenting for about 13 months. At that point, parents are still pretty bewildered. Plus all the tricks they learned about getting a little one to eat and coaxing them to sleep through the night are useless when at 15 that same child won't stop eating and cannot get up in the morning. After 10,000 hours of parenting, a mother or father is at the beginning of a steep learning curve. When applied to parenting, the 10,000-hour theory is not enough hours! Learning to parent probably requires 10,000 hours in each new phase of a child's development.

I can also think of something that many think is hard to do but I believe is easy to master in much less than 10,000 hours. That is learning to pray. I believe we are born knowing how to talk to God, which is praying, and we can master that "skill," if you want to call it that, with far less than 10,000 hours of practice.

I thought about Gladwell's 10,000-hours-to-mastery theory when within one month two separate parishioners told me they did not know how to pray. "I try but I just don't think I know how. It feels like I try and fail," one person said to me. Another person said, "Could you run a series or offer a workshop or something on how to pray? I don't think I know how to do it right."

I have an important message for you today: you all know how to pray. You are praying already and you are doing it right. There are no fancy techniques. It does not take 10,000 hours of practice to become good at praying.

Let's think together about what prayer is, what it isn't and when and how we pray. In today's Scripture reading we hear Jesus praying aloud. The passage for today, John 17:20-26, is a portion of a long prayer in which Jesus prays for the disciples. As you may have noticed, Jesus' prayer is conversational and loving. It is like Jesus is talking directly to God who is right there with him. Listen to these lines from Jesus' prayer for and about the disciples, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me...so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

By praying aloud, for his disciples, in front of his disciples, Jesus is leading them in prayer AND teaching them to pray. Notice that Jesus—moving toward a violent and horrible death on the cross—prays not for himself but for his disciples. He prays for love and strength among those who will shortly betray and forsake him when his time of suffering comes. And yet, in love he prays for them. Also notice that Jesus does not pray that his beloved companions will be protected from pain or shielded from suffering. He prays that they may have unity with one another. He prays for them as a group, praying that his followers will show unity and love the way Jesus experiences unity and love with God who he called Abba, Daddy. In the long prayer found in the Gospel of John, Jesus prays for the group unity of the disciples, that they will love one another, that they will stay together. In other words, he prays that the world will be able to look at the behavior of his disciples and their life together and see him through them.

Today's reading from the Book of John allows us to listen in as Jesus prays, and we are listening in as Jesus is having one of his final conversations with his Abba—for Jesus is on his way to the cross. It is poignant to realize that at this point Jesus chooses to talk with God about his followers, essentially about us. In the lengthy prayer in John, Jesus is both praying for us and teaching us about prayer. He is modeling what a heartfelt prayer sounds like, he is showing us that prayers need not be flowery, just genuine and sincere. Jesus' prayer does not follow any formula or prescription. It is even a little wordy and rambling, but that is because it is conversational: Jesus is just talking to God. And he is talking to God like God was right there—because of course God was right there. One lesson we can take from overhearing Jesus praying is that when Jesus prays AND WHEN WE PRAY, God is right there.

Why are you intimidated about praying? Why when I close meetings or gatherings at church and I say *would anyone like to offer vocal prayer* do people look down and mutter “no way, you do it.” Why in the last month have two parishioners told me they don't know how to pray? Why have we been convinced that praying is hard? You were born knowing how to pray. It is talking to God with focused attention, an open heart, a willingness to be truthful, and a readiness to be loved. Henri Nouwen once wrote: “Prayer means entering into communion with the One who loved us before we could love.”

According to the **Oxford Dictionary of the Bible**, prayer is “the act of communicating in words or in silence with the transcendent God.”

You can do that. You already do that. You don't lack skill, you lack confidence. If you are having trouble praying you are working too hard at it.

Sure, there are fancy names for certain kinds of prayers. In Divinity School we learned that there are five categories of vocal prayer: adoration or praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition. But I am not even going to define or elaborate on those five categories because they don't matter. What matters is that you feel comfortable praying, that you pray often, that you enjoy praying, that it comes naturally to you. I don't care which category your prayers fall into, and I am quite convinced that God doesn't either.

Marcus Borg says that prayer is primarily about "paying attention to God." I like that description. We are in prayer when we are paying attention to God. Paul tells the early Christians in Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). That sounds hard but I think it is possible. It does not mean that we walk around reciting vocal prayer. I think it means paying attention to God, being aware of the presence of God all day, throughout the day. If we do that, we are praying without ceasing. If we start paying attention to God when we wake up in the morning and we pay attention to God throughout the day, we are essentially praying without ceasing. We are essentially living inside a prayer.

Borg's description of prayer as "paying attention to God" and Paul's advice to "pray without ceasing" are echoed in the book **The Study of Spirituality** by Kallistos Ware. He writes, "...the actual saying of a prayer...is only a means to an end; what really matters is the unceasing remembrance of God."

Many of us are living inside a prayer because we are paying attention to God throughout the day. We are "praying without ceasing" when our lives reflect Ware's directive: what really matters is the unceasing remembrance of God.

Anthony, a 4th century monk who lived in the desert, once wrote that "a prayer ...is not perfect until the one praying no longer realizes that he is praying."

That sentiment is in harmony with what theologian Frederick Buechner believes about prayer. Buechner says, "Everybody prays whether they think of it as praying or not." Listen to his expansive description of prayer. "The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h-h-h that sometimes floats up out of you, as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the sky-rocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing with over your own life. ***These are all prayer in their way.*** These are all spoken not just to yourself but to something even more familiar than yourself..."

Everybody prays, Buechner says, whether they think of it as praying or not. And your prayers are as personal, unique and totally you as your fingerprint. You don't pray like I do, nor should you. I don't pray like you do, nor should I. You have YOUR own relationship with God and you talk to God in your own way.

Mother Theresa was once asked how she prays and she said, "Oh, I just listen." The interviewer then said. "You just listen? Well, what does God say?" "Oh," Mother Theresa said, "God just listens."

That is how Mother Theresa prayed and I find it so touching. But it is not how I pray. I yack. I talk to God, like Jesus talked to God, I'm wordy and I am ramble like God is right there and cares about my yacking. Sometimes my prayers are long. But sometimes they are just a few words. Probably the most common prayer I say, and I say it throughout the day, is simply: "I see you." I say that aloud when I hike up Mt. Tom and I see the brook by the trail, the birds overhead, the deer tracks, the view of our beautiful valley when I reach the top. I say "I see you" over and over as I hike. I also say it quietly when I look at your faces, when I see Marcelle, Parker, Cora, Tatum, Richard, Esther, Nicholas, Norma, the triplets. I believe I am seeing the face of God and I quietly say, "I see you."

My dear ones, do not make praying something that is too lofty or too hard, something you have to learn or master, something that takes 10,000 hours of practice before you are good at it. Learning to pray takes about 10,000 seconds. You know how to pray. Praying is talking to God with an open and available heart. It is paying attention to God, remembering God. It is listening. It is sitting with God and letting God talk to you.

Father Maurice Proulx says, "We do not pray TO God, we pray WITH God."

I think you were born knowing how to pray. Children know how to pray and they with pray ease and a lack of self-consciousness. When Sasha was little we would take hands and pray before dinner. I said the prayers some evenings, Sasha said the prayers some evenings. He was direct, self-assured and matter-of-fact....no self-doubt, no how-do-I-do-this, no equivocating.

I remember one evening when Sasha was young and we three sat down at the dinner table. "It's your turn to pray," I said to Sasha as we took hands. Sash closed his eyes, bowed his little head and said, "No guns. No bombs. No grabbing toys."

Like Jesus, Sasha expressed what was on his heart. We are invited to talk to God, to express what is on our hearts.

It's not important HOW we pray. What's important is THAT we pray. Marcus Borg says praying is paying attention to God. What's important is that we pay attention to God. Then praying will take care of itself.

Remember: you do not need to make your prayers long or lofty. This week, when talking about prayer with our Annie Turner, she reminded me of the words of wisdom offered by Meister Eckhart, the 14th century philosopher and mystic. Eckhart said: "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is 'thank you,' that would be enough."

O God, thank you.

Amen.

DO NOT COPY