

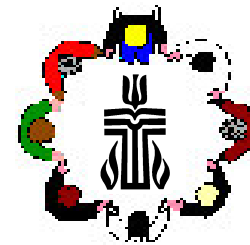
Reference

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1966. Psalm: The Prayer Book of the Bible. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press.

“Let Us Pray”

Sermon by
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Matthew 6:1-21

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 6:1-21

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).

As you know if you've been here at Trinity with us this Lent, we've been studying the life and theology of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who was so committed to Christ that he was executed in a concentration camp by the Nazis during World War II for his commitment.

It seems clear to me, as I stand here today reflecting on Bonhoeffer's life, that the "treasure" of his heart was clear—*Jesus Christ* was the treasure of his heart, so much so that Bonhoeffer dedicated his entire life to following Christ—even unto death. Bonhoeffer believed that following Christ meant *obeying* Christ, because he believed that Christ was the revealed will of God. So, for Bonhoeffer, "doing" the will of God was simply a matter of discerning where Christ was in any given situation, and then acting in accordance with the love that he knew was Christ.

And so Bonhoeffer spent a great deal of time in prayer, because he knew that prayer was the means by which God speaks to us and directs us in doing God's will—in following Christ. And, he not only spent a lot of time *doing* prayer, he also spent a lot of time *writing* about prayer, to help others learn how Christ was calling them to obedience.

So I thought I'd share with you this evening some of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on prayer, and since Bonhoeffer is able to express himself a *lot* better than *I* am able to express him, I thought I'd share with you tonight

what Bonhoeffer had to say about prayer, in his own words. He based his teaching on prayer on the passage from Matthew we just read—the passage where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and so he does, by teaching them the Lord's Prayer.

And so, with no further ado, the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"Lord, teach us to pray!"

So spoke the disciples to Jesus. In making this request, they confessed that they were not able to pray on their own, that they had to learn to pray. The phrase "learning to pray" sounds strange to us. If the heart does not overflow and begin to pray by itself, we say, it will never "learn" to pray.

But it is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God.

Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with God, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ.

The disciples want to pray, but they do not know how to do it. That can be very painful, to want to speak with God and not to be able to, to have to be speechless before God, to discover that every call to him dies within itself, that heart and mouth speak an absurd language which God does not want to hear.

And so we must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because his father speaks to him. He learns the speech of his father. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. By means of the speech of the Father in heaven his children

learn to speak with him. Repeating God's own words after him, we begin to pray to him. We ought to speak to God and God wants to hear us, not in the false and confused speech of our heart, but in the clear and pure speech which God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.

In response to the request of the disciples, Jesus gave them the Lord's Prayer. Every prayer is contained in it. Whatever is included in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is prayed aright; whatever is not included is no prayer. All the prayers of the Holy Scripture are summarized in the Lord's Prayer, and are contained in its immeasurable breadth. They are not made superfluous by the Lord's Prayer but constitute the inexhaustible richness of the Lord's Prayer as the Lord's Prayer is their summation.

Thus the Lord's Prayer becomes the touchstone for whether we pray in the name of Jesus Christ or in our own name. It is the prayer of the Christian church. It belongs to the Lord's Prayer.

On the night of his arrest Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He prayed to know the will of God. He prayed for the courage to *do* the will of God. He prayed to connect himself to God and with God so that through his prayer he would be joined together, as One, with God.

Today, as Bonhoeffer so eloquently pointed out, we pray for the exact same reasons that Jesus prayed. We pray to know the will of God. We pray for the courage to *do* the will of God. We pray to connect ourselves to God and with God so that through our prayer we will be joined together, as One, with God.

Tonight, as *always*, let us pray, in the way that Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father"

Amen.

Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."

(Matthew 26:42)

