

OUTSOURCING PRAYER? Pastor Hubert Den Draak
Pinegrove, July 6, '14 - 5th Sunday of Pentecost.



As you may know we're still in the season of Pentecost. Two of the "driving forces" of Pentecost are the Holy Spirit and prayer. So here's a question for you: how would you describe "prayer" ...? Maybe the best way to describe it is "making time to communicate with the divine".

Of course as you know, there are many, many ways to pray. You can pray by yourself - or in a group (which we do on Sundays). You can pray very quietly - or very actively. You can pray by speaking - or in silence; by singing, and by moving. You can pray by making poetry or a painting; by dancing or by making music. Even doing the dishes can be a form of praying, if you do it with that intention.

If you've even been to Nepal or Tibet, or have ever watched a movie or a documentary about these remarkable Buddhist countries, you are sure to have seen them: prayer wheels. Prayer wheels are colorful cylinders, each containing a written prayer. Every time the cylinder spins, the idea is that the prayer is sent out. There are small prayer wheels that you can slowly spin in your hand (as in the picture), or a larger ones that you give a spin as you're passing it; and there are large, beautifully constructed prayer wheels that get their motion from the wind or falling water.

Prayer wheels were invented a long time ago, and were meant for the illiterate peasants who couldn't read the prayers they were supposed to say, so this was a creative way to help them out. Some scholars think that the Roman Catholic concept of the rosary is connected to that same idea. Kind of neat, if you think about it.

Now last week I received an email which jolted me to think even broader about prayer. There is an online company, "Information Age Prayer", which considers itself an electronic version of the prayer wheel. It says it is the perfect solution for religious people who are too busy to say their prayers.

For just \$3.95 a month one of their computers will say a daily prayer for you. But that is only for The Lord's Prayer. If you add morning prayers, prayers for peace or financial help, or up to five Get Well prayers, it will cost you more.

"Show God you are serious!" trumpets the site. And if you're Protestant and serious, you can get the entire bundle for just \$19.95 a month. That's a bargain. The Jewish package – a Shema twice a day, five Get Well Prayers and a Prayer for Peace – goes for \$25.95 a month. A cholim for the sick, or a kaddish for mourning cost extra. And the Catholic package, with the complete Rosary cycle of Hail Mary's and creeds, costs

\$49.95 a month. Oh, and for Muslim prayers, "the computer speakers will be facing Mecca", touts the website cheerfully.

It also says "We give you the satisfaction of knowing that your prayers will always be said even if you wake up late, or forget". Now to be fair to the company, it does not encourage abandoning your own prayers. "Our service should be used (...) to extend and strengthen a subscriber's connection with God," they caution. "Traditional prayer is an integral part of this connection and should never be foregone."

I'm not telling you all this to dis this company. But as well intentioned as I hope this is, the concept scares me. Because what we're doing here is outsourcing prayer. It scares me because I can't believe we'd ever get to a place where we would pay a company to program a computer, a device without a heart and a spirit, to do a job that we need to be doing ourselves.

The company and their ideas about prayer deeply bothered me. Now in itself, that is not a bad thing. Because it makes you stop and to ask yourself, *why* does it bother me? What *is* prayer about?

Now we can easily spend the whole day and tomorrow exploring what prayer is about, and still only scratch the surface. It's such a huge, wide, and deep topic. But this website got to make me think about what prayer is *not* about. And that's a bit more doable.

You see, prayer is not a thing to be checked off on your "to do" list: walk the dog, get groceries, put the garbage out - say my prayers. Check, check and check. And prayer is also not a matter of convenience. Truth be told, prayer is not convenient at all. There are times when I want to go straight to bed rather than pray. There are times I got so much on my mind, last thing I want to add to it is praying. And there are times when I'm just not in the right mindset to pray; when I'm too rushed, or too preoccupied, or too frustrated.

And you know, those are exactly the times we should stop and pray. Stop and reconnect with God. Yes, *when* we're tired, and *when* we're preoccupied or frustrated. When I feel everything depends on me, or worse: when I think everything revolves around me. Time for a reality check with God. Time to pray...

Another thing about prayer it is not about words that are being said by you - *or* a computer. Special words, right words or wrong words. No, prayer is about a mindset, an attitude. You can "talk" to God at any point in the day. You don't have to wait until you get home, or wait until you are by yourself, or wait till you get to church, and so on. Pray as you walk down the street. Pray in your conversation with someone. Pray as you're standing in line at the check-out counter.

Because remember, there are many ways to pray! The one thing they all have in common is, it is a mindset - if you let it be. And once you let it be and approach

everything you do in a prayerful way, you'll be surprised how much easier it gets to sense God's presence and hear God's voice in every-day life.

And when we cannot pray or think up the words to say, just remember what Paul said in our reading from Romans 8; basically, God's Spirit will fill in the gaps:

⁶⁷ (...) For if we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is.(...)"

Prayer is tricky. I struggle with it; in fact, everyone struggles with it. And that's a good thing. Because it is only by struggling with something that we can grow and get somewhere. That's why it was a good thing that I came across the website of "Information Age Prayer". It forced me to ask myself what prayer is about - and is not about.

I think it's safe to say I will never use the services offered by Information Age Prayer. But they did make me realize again how stuck we can be in our ideas about prayer. We often box our faith in inside walls of our own making, giving us a very limited view. It is only by taking away those walls (that we don't even notice anymore) that we can grow further in our faith.

Prayer cannot be defined or neatly categorized. It cannot be pigeonholed and it certainly cannot be outsourced. Paying someone else to do your prayers is like paying someone else to exercise for you, it just doesn't work that way. Prayer is not a chore you have to get through, but a practice and a mindset that will get you to God - and God to you. Prayer is a way of life, imperfect and broken as that life may be.

So let's go straight to the source with our broken lives, because we cannot do this alone, we need all the help we can get. Thank God help is there; the Holy Spirit is there, giving us the words we need to say. Filling in the gaps when we're groping for words and cannot find them. And God will listen and understand. And God will answer. Amen.