

September 19, 2010
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Timothy 2:1-7
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia
The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

How DO you pray?

How do YOU pray?

We all do it differently and for different reasons, different circumstances and, even among Episcopalians, with different words.

I've read a lot of books in my life. I was an English major, so there's a whole library's worth that I've read, divinity school tomes, books on how to fix things like the front door or my life; more recently, there have been books on infant nutrition and then potty training. When I can't figure something out, when I need more information or need a new skill, I hit the shelves.

And I have some good books about prayer, how to practice it, different types for different situations, how to teach people to pray, books to inspire prayer.

The Bible in fact tells us a lot about how to pray. Like all those instructional books, we get all kinds of instruction on how and when and what to say. There's even what to say when we don't know what to say in Romans 8: we do not know how to pray as we ought so the spirit of God intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

There are all kinds of places to look for models of prayer. I continue to find myself deeply impressed by the Muslim tradition of praying five times a day. That sort of discipline feels foreign and unattainable to me.

Have you ever prayed with a child? Or just listened to a child pray? I highly recommend it. There is the sheer entertainment value because, as we all know, kids do say the darnedest things. But, like in so many other matters of great importance, you can learn a lot by listening to a child pray.

Indulge me for a moment. Kevin and I take turns putting our 4 year old son to bed. The bedtime routine is consistent and predictable and includes a prayer every night. But what Eli chooses to pray about is all over the map. A few months ago, I wrote this one down:

*Hi God,
Thank you for the rocks.
And thank you for the trees and their roots.
And thank you for the dirt and water and the sky.*

*Thank you for that little bug we saw that looks like a grasshopper but probably isn't.
And thank you for handlebars on bicycles.
And the fan on the ceiling. And blue.
Aaaaaaannnd the front porch.
And chips.
And thank you for Mommy.
And handlebars. Oh wait, I already said handlebars.
Amen.
Oh and thank you for buttons. I love buttons. Amen again.*

Admittedly, this is a bit more esoteric than some of his more normal ones, but it is in deed how he prays: uncensored, he prays for his world and everything in it.

There is plenty of information out there, Bible and elsewhere, to tell us how and why and when to pray. Truth is, we have no excuse for not praying every day, every hour, even. We can pray in our words and in our movements, in our actions and in our inactions.

In our reading this morning from first Timothy, Paul is giving us further guidelines. This time, we are being instructed on WHO: supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings [should] be made for everyone.

Everyone.

Everyone.

Think about that.

If we are to pray for everyone, we should pray for our friends, our family, those who love us and those we love. But we should also pray for those we can't or won't love: people who fly airplanes into skyscrapers; people who abuse children; people who drive drunk; politicians we don't agree with; religious fanatics who preach hate. We have to pray for them, too.

And, Paul doesn't mention this part, praying for our enemies doesn't necessarily mean praying for their conversion to our ways. Dear God, please let them think how I think. We are called instead to pray that God be revealed to them in whatever way God chooses such. God, says Paul, "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

And when we pray in this way, when we pray for our enemies, for those with whom we disagree, for those that it is so easy to hate, when we pray that they, too, might be in right relationship with God, what happens? Are our enemies changed? Maybe. More likely, we are changed. We may come to love those who challenge us, those we think we hate.

Christ's saving work happens all over the world, in many forms. The power of God to change hearts and minds is limited only by our own ability to extend our hearts to those who don't, on the outside, seem to deserve it. It is not up to us to determine dessert, just to open our hearts in prayer, to encompass the world with it. We don't have to agree, but we do have to pray. For forgiveness in our own hearts, for understanding among God's beloved, for love to conquer all.