



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – Jan. 11, 2009

For We Do Not Know How to Pray as We Ought  
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

## Romans 8:26-27

*<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Las Vegas crooner Wayne Newton tells the following story about Frank Sinatra: “A contemporary of his, another singer, brought his new album to Frank one night and said, ‘Frank, when you get some time, I want you to listen and tell me what’s wrong with it.’ Frank said, ‘I can tell you before I listen. . . .’ The guy said, ‘What?’ and Frank said, ‘Some singers are connected between the throat and the heart, which is the way it should be. You’re not connected anywhere.’”<sup>1</sup>

I tell the story because I figure this might make me the first preacher ever to have opened a sermon by quoting Wayne Newton. But I also tell it because I think Sinatra’s notion about a connection between heart and song is working the same theme as Paul’s notion about the connection between Spirit and heart and prayer.

Think for a second about how radical, how candid, how astonishing Paul’s claim in this morning’s lesson is. Here was Saint Paul, a spiritual giant writing to the Church in Rome at the very pinnacle of his career. He had already founded and introduced entire communities to the Christian understanding of prayer, and he had already penned some of the most famous exhortations to prayer in history:

To the church in Philippi:

*“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [Philippians 4:6]*

To the church in Thessaloniki:

*<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; [1 Thessalonians 5:16-18]*

And yet, here is that same Saint Paul, saying “*for we do not know how to pray as we ought.*” [Romans 8:26]

Candid, radical, astonishing words, and yet, don’t we all recognize them as true – at least true to our own experience? For instance, how often have you wondered:

“Am I supposed to pray at regular times and places or is true prayer always a spontaneous utterance that wells up at random intervals?”

“Am I supposed to kneel, or bow my head, or clasp my hands the way we now do in the Meeting House; or am I supposed to throw my hands skyward and look up to the heavens the way our Puritan forebears did; or are all these postures just human affectations that are irrelevant to God?”

“Am I supposed to pray a traditional or prescribed set of words, or is true prayer always a spontaneous declaration of the heart?”

“Am I supposed to ask for things I want for me and those around me, or is true prayer always an utterance of praise to God?”

Our questions, uncertainties and curiosities about prayer go on and on. Why? Because: “we do not know how to pray as we ought.”

In his masterwork, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, American Philosopher William James concluded that prayer is, “the very soul and essence of religion,” and that in prayer, “work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects.” And yet, asked years later if he prayed, James said, “I can’t possibly pray. I feel foolish and artificial.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if Saint Paul is right when he says “we do not know how to pray as we ought;” and if many of us can sometimes identify with William James when he said he felt “foolish and artificial” when he tried to pray; then just how are we to pray at all?

How? Saint Paul tells us how, right in the next sentence. *“We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”*

When Paul says, “that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words,” I think he’s telling us that true prayer, like most things spiritual, doesn’t start with us “knowing how.” True prayer doesn’t start with us at all; and true prayer doesn’t start with knowing at all. True prayer starts with God – with a connection between our God, our heart, and our prayer.

Paul Tillich put it this way, “It is God Himself who prays through us, when we pray to him . . . We cannot bridge the gap between God and ourselves even through the most intensive and frequent prayers, the gap between ourselves and God can only be bridged by God.”<sup>3</sup>

Saint Paul calls it the Spirit interceding for us. Paul Tillich calls it God praying through us. The Spirit initiates, and we participate; the Spirit leads and we follow; the Spirit inspires and we respond. We respond like a suitor who feels his heart warming at the sight of his beloved and suddenly finds himself gushing heartfelt expressions of devotion, or like a dancer who feels her toes tapping to the sounds of the music, and suddenly finds herself leaping from her chair and twirling across the floor.

Carol Zaleski, a Smith College professor of religion, wrote that “prayer is like courtship . . . It’s not something you can work out inwardly and then execute outwardly.”<sup>4</sup> Think of a time you fell in love or a time you danced with a beloved and see if you don’t learn something about prayer.

My first date with Amy was a few days before Christmas, 1971. It was hardly a blind date, for we had been friends for months, and I had had a crush on her for most of that time. We were studying at the University of Grenoble, and my big chance came when we traveled with a bunch of classmates to Zermatt for the Christmas break. I worked up the

courage to ask her out, and we went out for dinner and then to a little basement night club which had advertised dancing to the sounds of a band called “The Four Clevers.”

Now, I had high hopes for “The Four Clevers,” but my heart sank as they took the stage: four scrawny, long haired fellows looking perfectly ridiculous in grey lederhosen and green felt hats with feathers. “The Four Clevers” were a polka band. It looked like it was going to be a long night, and a short romance.

Well, Amy and I made the best of it, awkwardly trying to remember our cotillion Polka lessons. Grimaces and mashed toes slowly gave way first to embarrassed smiles and passable polka and then to the broad smiles and enthusiasm of picking up the beat together. You might say we were “getting into the spirit.”

When “The Four Clevers” came back after their first break, we were treated to one of the more improbable transformations in entertainment history: The Four Clevers were still wearing their lederhosen, but now they were brandishing guitars and a drum kit. The Four Clevers were now a rock band – and a pretty good one. The crowd shouted as the guitars fired up, and Amy and I found ourselves dancing happily, limbs flying, caught up in the freedom and the energy of the music and the moment. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now, I’m sure it must be self evident how my little reminiscence answers all the spiritual questions I’ve raised this morning. My point is that neither Amy nor I “knew how to fall in love as we ought.” Nobody knows how to “fall in love as they ought.” But love intercedes with sighs too deep for words. It’s love that supplies the warmth of heart, the spark in the eye, the spring in the step. We didn’t know how to fall in love as we ought, but we did need to respond after love interceded. I had to respond by asking Amy out. Amy had to respond by saying yes. We had to respond by taking the first steps of courtship together.

So it is with prayer. Maybe it’s only a vague hunger for something missing. Maybe it’s only a felt need driven by a joy or a hope or a sorrow or a despair. Whatever you feel nudging you to pray, that’s already God’s Spirit interceding with sighs too deep for words. Blaise Pascal wrote, “You would not seek him if you had not already found him.”<sup>5</sup> George Bernanos wrote “The wish to

pray is a prayer in itself.”<sup>6</sup> But it’s still up to you to respond. You still need to make some space for God to pray through you, for God to connect Spirit, heart and prayer.

Could we make space spontaneously, by simply responding when we feel the nudge? Of course, but most of us get so caught up in the rush of daily events that our minds miss God’s whispered invitations; most of us do better to set aside some time each day to respond, to set “a date” with God when we’re quiet enough to listen.

Could we make space for God while working our way through a subway station or a night club? Of course, but some of us do better when our hearts are cued by the motion of kneeling, or closing our eyes, or bowing in a quiet chapel. I don’t doubt that a saint could pray in a night club, and I don’t doubt that Fred Astaire could dance gracefully down our Meeting House aisles, but that doesn’t mean we beginners need to make it any harder for ourselves than necessary, at least not at first.

When Amy and I first stepped into our Polka, there was nothing particularly creative or spontaneous about our dance. Like William James’s attempts at prayer, our self-conscious polka felt foolish and artificial at first. But the form of the dance gave us a way to engage the music and each other, it gave us a way to get started and to move forward until familiarity with each other and with the steps, the tune, the beat opened us to the freedom and joy of dancing.

Again, so it is with prayer. There is certainly nothing wrong with traditional or formulaic prayers. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he gave them the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer formula we’re still repeating two thousand years later.

Of course, it is possible to pray a read or memorized prayer without the slightest bit of spontaneity or openness to God’s Spirit, but the form at least gives us a way to get started and to move forward. And that’s something. As one writer put it, “The first rule of prayer, the most important first step, is not about how to do it, but just to do it; not to perfect and complete it but to begin it. Once the car is moving,

it’s easy to steer it in the right direction, but it’s much harder to start it up when it’s stalled.”<sup>7</sup>

And just because a set-piece prayer provides training wheels doesn’t mean it can’t lead to deep and meaningful communion with God. Thomas Merton put it this way, “If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying . . . you start where you are and you deepen what you already have.” Some saints started with the Lord’s Prayer and just stayed with it, repeating it quietly over and over until it became a meditative doorway to transcendent experiences of infinite depth.

In the end, the issue is not whether our words are fixed or spontaneous but whether they nudge our self-consciousness aside so that God may pray through us, so that there’s room for the Spirit to intercede for us with sighs to deep for words. As Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender.”<sup>8</sup>

Expert polka dancers are so comfortable with the form of the dance that they are freed to improvise and lose themselves in the music and movement. But since nobody would ever accuse Amy and me of being expert polka dancers, it wasn’t until The Four Clevers shifted to rock that we found ourselves carried away by the beat and the moment. It wasn’t because we knew any particular steps or moves; it wasn’t because we knew “how to dance as we ought.” It was because there can come a time when the music just seems to flow through you. The clichéd way to say it would be that you are “one with the music.”

Just so with prayer. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jesuit priest Pere Hayneuve wrote, “We have never made a better prayer than when, after having made it, we do not know how it was made, since that is a sure sign that our soul was so attached to God as not to have had enough attention left to reflect upon itself.”<sup>9</sup> Or, as another saint put it, “if, while you are praying, you ever find yourself thinking about what to say next, then you are no longer praying – you are thinking.”<sup>10</sup> Surely it must be apparent that in that moment, there are no right words and no wrong words. It doesn’t matter whether you are expressing your doubts or your faith, speaking of your needs or your love, praying for others or praying for yourself. God’s spirit just seems to flow through you and you are “one with God.”

A devotional writer summed it all up with this old story. A man walking down a mountain path came upon a shepherd boy tending his father's flock of sheep. The boy was kneeling, looking up, and reciting the alphabet.

The man asked, "What are you doing?" and the boy answered, "I am praying." Somewhat sternly, the man said, "Praying? What kind of praying is this? Just saying letters, no words at all?"

The boy replied: "Well, I've never learned any prayers. But it's Sunday morning and the bells are ringing in the valley, and I thought that if I just prayed all the letters, God might hear them and put them together for me, and spell out what I ought to say.

Whatever else we may do, the writer continues, all our praying, all our preaching, all our singing, nothing ever surpasses this: simply to turn it all over to God and say, "Here it is, Lord, take it, and make it come together as it should."<sup>11</sup>

When we have done this, we will have done more than simply "prayed as we ought." We will have let God's spirit intercede for us; we will have let God pray through us; we will have let God connect Spirit and heart and prayer. We will have prayed something pretty close to the perfect prayer. **Amen.**

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1 "The Meaning of Life," *Esquire*, January 2009 at page 92.

2 Carol Zaleski, "Foolish Prayer," *Christian Century*, February 22, 2003.

3 Paul Tillich, "The Paradox of Prayer," *The New Being*, 1955 at 137.

4 Carol Zaleski, "Foolish Prayer," *Christian Century*, February 22, 2003.

5 Pascal, *Pensees*, 1670.

6 Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, 1936, chapter 4.

7 Peter Kreeft, "Time"

8 Heschel, *Between God and Man*, 1965.

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See also: "When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words than thy words without heart," Martin Luther.

"Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission one's weakness . . . It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart," Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Young India*, January 23, 1930.

"In prayer the lips ne'er act the winning part, without the secret concurrence of the heart," Robert Herrick, "The Heart."

"This finally answers the question often asked by Christians: Which kind of prayer is the most adequate to our relation to God? The prayer in which we thank or the prayer in which we get, the prayer of intercession or the confession or of praise? Paul does not make these distinctions. They are dependent on words; but the sighing of the Spirit in us is too deep for words and for the distinction of kinds of prayer. The Spiritual prayer is elevation to God in the power of God and it includes all forms of prayer.

A final word to those who feel that they cannot find the words of prayer and remain silent towards God. This may be lack of Spirit. It also may be that their silence is silent *prayer*, namely, the sighs which are too deep for words. Then He who searches the hearts of men, knows, and hears." Paul Tillich, "The Paradox of Prayer," *The New Being*, 1955.

9 Hayneuve, *Solid Virtue*

10 Anonymous

11 Anonymous