



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – February 1, 2009

A Good Heart to Heart  
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## Matthew 6:5-8

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup>“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

We each care about how we appear to others. Like diligent gardeners, we each cultivate our public persona, carefully watering, nurturing and pruning to present an appealing, or at least an acceptable self to each other. We each trim and hedge our little public garden so as to seem happy but not giddy, confident but not cocky, interested but not intrusive, and so on.

And just as we each have this public garden, so we each have a private garden, a garden of the heart.<sup>1</sup> Our garden of the heart lies down below the pruning reach of our super ego; underneath the “how do I look” superficiality of our skin; deeper than the “I can do it” strength of our muscles; and locked behind the garden gate of our ribs.

It is a wonderful, mysterious, unruly and sometimes scary garden. Blossoms of attraction still bear the scars of unrequited loves. Myrtle of family affection is sometimes tangled with briars of old slights. Vines of care and concern sometimes curl chaotically into outsized fears of sickness, injury or death. Pools of sexual yearning sometimes spill over into unseemly fantasies or forbidden lusts or maybe even dry up, leaving a corner of the garden seemingly parched and lifeless. Sturdy trellises of rationality sag here and there under the weight of entangling anxieties or neuroses. Cypress trees of joy are sometimes hedged about with thorns of anger. This garden of the heart is rich with color, throbbing with life, baffling with unpredictability.

It would be too simple to call this garden the unconscious, for we are aware of much of it. With a bit of introspection we can see the flowers even if we can't see the roots from which they grow; we can see the pools even if we can't see the springs which feed them; we can see the rocky outcroppings, even if we can't see the ballast below the soil.

And it's not enough to call it just one part of our personality. The garden of the heart is the very center of our personality: the home of our greatest hopes and joys as well as our greatest fears and burdens. It is commonplace at the same time that it is exotic. For every one of us has our garden of the heart; but we focus on our own only occasionally, and we glimpse each others very rarely indeed.

It may be true that we spend most of our time tending and displaying our well-mannered public garden, but we all know where we must go when overwhelmed by loss or anxiety or confusion. We must go to the garden of our heart. Sometimes, when we are very fortunate, we may even take a companion. We go to a trusted loved one - a parent or sister or friend - and we say we need a “good heart to heart,” a talk that is heart-felt, unvarnished and direct. When we have finished we say we have “poured out our heart,” we have, “bared our soul.” We have pushed away the overgrowth and unlocked the gate and welcomed our friend into the garden of our heart. And there, in that place beyond pretense, beyond contrivance, there in that private place of ultimate vulnerability, we lead them down the path to the roots of our pain. And somehow in that place where heart speaks to heart, somehow in the miracle of love, we find that sharing our pain with our friend brings a measure of healing, restores a measure of peace to the garden.

Three Sundays ago we spoke of prayer as a dance with God, a dance in which we need only pick up on God's tune and follow God's lead. Now we see where God wishes to lead us: down from the mannered public garden to the garden of our heart.

Last Sunday we spoke of prayer as a conscious contact with God, a conversation in which we learn to be still so that we might listen as well as speak. Now we see that after we listen for God's still small voice, we must then listen for the whisper of our own heart.

Having invited God into the garden, we sense God's spirit stirring in the scarred stump of an old rejection or a new bramble of anxiety and we respond by offering them up for God's healing touch. Paul Tillich taught that whatever words we use to utter our prayer, the decisive content - even if it is a silent content, even if it is a hidden content - lies in our surrendering a fragment of existence to God - lies in our heart entrusting its deepest concerns to God's care.<sup>2</sup> Like the good heart to heart with a friend, prayer is a good heart to heart with God: heart-felt, unvarnished and direct.

So Jesus warns us not to pray like the hypocrites, "for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray go into your room and shut your door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." [Matthew 6:5-6.] Oh, we can make a show of our prayers, but that's the stuff of public gardens, not gardens of the heart. And the very concern to look pious, to appear faithful, draws us away from the gateway to our soul.<sup>3</sup>

And Jesus teaches not to "heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." [Matthew 6:7-8.] Again, gathering together pretty phrases, pruning out impious thoughts is the work of the public garden, not of the heart's garden. And prayer is not a matter of informing God anyway. God knows every inch of your heart's garden better than you do. God's healing springs not from your articulation but from your trust, from your willingness to take your heart felt concern to God's altar where you can look it over together. Jesus counsels prayer that is heart-felt, unvarnished, direct.

Now we see what Paul meant by prayer that begins with God's spirit, moves through our Spirit and returns

to God. ["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." Romans 8:26.] As we feel moved to pray, we invite God into our heart's garden. Perhaps, as we fall silent before God's presence, we sense God's Spirit stirring up the thorns of a broken relationship with one of our partners down at the firm's office. And as our thoughts wander to the way he betrayed us, we can feel the anger rising in our face.

Before, we might have swept the anger under the prayer rug. "No those aren't worthy thoughts and feelings, I know I'm supposed to love my enemies. Quick, let's pray about something else." But now we let it flow, we follow God's lead. We lift it up in all its messiness. "O God and father of us all, this guy at work really has me steamed. I know I'm supposed to love him, but I just can't. I need your help. I need you to help me understand his side of the story. I need you to help me pray for him. O God, I don't want my days darkened by this anger - I bring this relationship to your altar." Heartfelt, unvarnished and direct.

With time we learn again the old truth that you can't stay angry at someone you are praying for, and we feel God's Spirit drawing us up from our limited perspective to give us a God's eye view of the dispute. With time God clears away the brambles to reveal a path to reconciliation.

Or perhaps we feel moved to pray for tenacity to finish a project that has been snagged by long tendrils of procrastination, but our prayer is overtaken by resentment about how we got stuck with the job in the first place. Don't push the resentments away! Lift them up! Maybe God is telling us that our procrastination grows out of our ambivalence about the job itself. "Dear God of all creation and vocation, I need your help with this job. I bring my resentments and ambivalence and procrastination and place them on your altar. Help me to embrace my vocation with all the energy and skills you have created within me." Heart-felt, unvarnished, direct.

We each have our own style of communication, our own way of speaking, and so we will each have our own way of praying in the garden of the heart, but just how heart-felt, unvarnished and direct prayer can be was brought home to a young chaplain named Ann Hallstein on her

first day at what was then called Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Harlem. She was summoned into the emergency room by a resident who explained that a two-year-old boy had been shot in the head and had no chance of surviving. The team was working on him while his teenage mother and her little sister sat in the next cubicle. When Ann entered the room, she saw the two teenage girls clinging to each other, wailing and shaking uncontrollably. She sat down without a clue what to say. Any words that came to her mind seemed not only insufficient but profane. What could anyone possibly say to comfort a child whose own child lay dying?

While Ann fumbled and tried to react in some appropriate way, the door flew open and a neighbor of the two girls, a large woman weighing something north of 300 pounds, blew in, filling the room with her presence. She grabbed the two sisters up, her massive arms crooked around their little necks, calling them her babies. And then, in a voice full of confidence, she summoned Jesus. "Jesus! Get down here! Come into this room and comfort these babies! Jesus, Jesus, get in here now, there's nothing anyone can do but you."

As Ann looked on with wonder, she felt the energy in the room change; calm came over all of them, and the young girls stopped crying and shivering. The neighbor continued to hold the girls close, rocking both back and forth as Ann stepped forward and joined in the group hug. As they swayed together, Ann lost all sense of time or place. All she felt was the love of this woman, and the love of God she had so forcefully called into the room.

The neighbor hadn't wasted a second fussing about in the public garden of appearances. She had yanked open the gate to the heart's garden so forcefully it fairly flew off its hinges. Moved by God's Spirit, she had lifted the entire tragedy up and placed it on God's altar with utter confidence. There was no "happy ending," in human terms, but God had been called with heartfelt, unvarnished and direct prayer, and God had blanketed those shivering girls with God's presence and blessed them with God's peace.

Can we learn to pray with such force and power?  
Only as we come to trust the God who makes the

following promise in the 55th chapter of Isaiah (55:10-13.):

- <sup>10</sup> *For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*
- <sup>11</sup> *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*
- <sup>12</sup> *For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. **Amen.***

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<sup>1</sup> Jalalodin Rumi (1207-1273) wrote of the garden of the heart in his great poem, *The Spiritual Verses (Masnavi-ye Ma'navi Book 1)* :

"The garden of the heart is green and moist with buds and blooms of jasmine, rose and cypress.

The boughs are hidden by a mass of leaves, a mass of flowers conceals the plain and palace.

These words that come from universal mind are scents of cypress, roses, hyacinths.

Have you smelled roses where there are no roses? Have you seen foaming wine where there was none?

The fragrance is your guide and your companion, it bears you up to Paradise."

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 at 277.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Anthony of Padua, "He prays best who does not know that he is praying."