

Uncommon Prayer

Year B, Proper 21 – James 5:13-20

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 27, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

This morning, we're going to do a little experiment. I'm going to ask you a question, and when you get the answer, I want you to raise your hand. Don't blurt it out, or anything, this is an *individual* exercise. Just raise your hand when you've got it. Are you ready? What is the seventh letter of the alphabet. <wait> Okay, it looks like everyone's got it. You can put your hands down. Oh, don't be all that pleased with yourselves, it wasn't a real toughy, you know. I could have asked you the capital of Uzbekistan. Now, raise your hand again if, at anytime in that little exercise, including the split second after I said the word, "alphabet," raise your hand if you heard the alphabet song, you know, "A, B, C, D, E, F, G." Ah, I thought so. That's the way most of us learned our A, B, C's. By singing that song over and over, we made the basic building blocks of our language a part of our thought process, a part of who we are.

Are you ready to try a couple more examples? Join me when you catch on. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God... Okay, one more, then I promise we'll get to the point of all this. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven... That's enough, I suppose – we're all going to pray it in a little bit anyway, and I suspect most of you won't need a Prayer Book to help you through it.

The point is that there are some things that we have said and *re*-said, some songs that we have sung and *re*-sung, some *prayers* that we have prayed and *re*-prayed, until they are not only in our remembrance, they are a part of who we *are*. I've got to tell you, that it was for just the kind of ready-made prayers that we have in the *Book of Common Prayer* that my Sunday School teachers back in the little Missionary Church I grew up in believed Jesus had spoken his injunction in Matthew 6:7 against the "vain repetition" of the prayers of the heathens. It was for such predetermined, repeated prayers that my teachers in the Missionary Church condemned the Hindus and the Buddhists, and most *especially*, the Catholics. And I have no doubt, they would have thrown us Episcopalians in that lot too, if they had *known* about us.

Now I studied this sort of thing, and I've got to tell you, vain repetition could not have been any further from the minds of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and the other reformers as they set about the task of producing the first English *Book of Common Prayer*. The reformers didn't take their prayers at all lightly, because for fifteen hundred years the prayers of the Church were not *in* the tongue of the people. This was the chance to insist that our common, public prayer would *mean* something to each individual attending the liturgy, that our common prayer would no longer be merely *attendance* but *participation* by each and every person in the worship of Almighty God. Yet how often do we let our worship become something much less than that?

In this morning's reading from the end of James' letter, he just about catalogues the awesome *power* of prayer – for protection and relief, for joy and celebration, for healing and for forgiveness. Yet if we're honest, we have to admit that, at least from time to time, we let our prayers become distinctly *powerless*. Some outside disturbance creeps in. Some pressure from home or work. Some suddenly remembered problem or temptation. And before we know it, our mouths are reciting the words of our prayers on *auto-pilot*. A, B, C, D, E, F, G...

The problem is that for some in the Christian Church, that sort of numbness of mind has become the norm, rather than the exception. The prayers of our liturgy, whichever liturgy that might be, those prayers, as beautiful and moving and thought provoking as they are, end up in our

minds and in our mouths – but have ceased touching our hearts. We let the prayers go in one ear and out the other, while our minds are busy thinking about the party last night, or the latest problem at work, or whether we can beat the Presbyterians or the Baptists to the *Cracker Barrel* for brunch. We ask for God’s guidance and God’s blessing and God’s strength, and then go out and do it our *own* way, and on our *own* terms, and in our own *strength* anyway. We finish our liturgical duty, smile at our neighbor, and head out the door – untouched – as if we hadn’t prayed at all.

I suspect *that* is what James meant in *last* week’s lesson, when he said, “You do not have, because you do not ask.” “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.” And I’m *sure* that’s what my Sunday School teacher meant by “vain repetition.” We might just as well be reciting our Social Security number, or quoting from the phone book, or singing the Alphabet Song for all the good it’ll do our souls. Whether it’s the beautiful sound of the Middle English prayers of the *Book of Common Prayer* or the scripture filled, conversational prayers of my youth, whether they are offered in the beauty and grandeur of a place like St. Paul’s, or in our living room at home, whether we are praying as part of a congregation, or whether we are praying alone in the dark quietness of the night, if our prayers don’t communicate from our own *heart* to the heart of our Father in heaven, they are nothing more than vain repetition, and empty mutterings.

So what do we do about it? It’s simple really. If we let the prayers and the petitions and the praises of our worship soak in beyond the top layer of our minds, and into our hearts and into the depths of our lives, then there is nothing *vain* about the repetition of our prayers. Then in our prayers, we join with the thousands, the *millions* of times that the same prayers have been prayed before. Then those prayers join us to the great cloud of witnesses who have prayed in the past, and those that will come after us. Then the repetition of those prayers becomes anything *but* vain.

If we refuse to merely block off an hour each Sunday morning for prayer, if we refuse to put a fence around our worship, if we refuse to keep the liturgy segregated from the rest of our lives, then we can carry the purpose, and the *power* of our prayers with us as we go out these blessed doors and into the living of the rest of our lives. If we let our prayers touch our hearts as *well* as our lips, then our common prayer will become distinctly *un*-common. If we let our prayers, individually *and* in common, become part of who we *are* rather than just something we *do*, through them Christ can transform us and enliven us, to do the work that we as Christians have been given to do: to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to *everyone*. And that can make all the difference in the world!

From page 833 of the *Book of Common Prayer*, let us pray: Almighty God, who pours out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and of supplication: Deliver us, when we draw near to you, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and hearts on fire with love we may worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.