

WOE...INDEED

Isaiah 6:1-13
Luke 5:1-11

What Happens Next?

Let us pray.
Can we have prayer together?
Would you pray with me?
Can we pray before I go?
Let us open with prayer.

And my personal favorite: All in favor of the motion to adjourn, stand for prayer.

In countless ways, in diverse places, and under all sorts of circumstances, day after day, we invite one another to pray. Let us go to the Lord in prayer. Let us unite our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray...

Then what? What happens next? What happens when we agree that prayer is in order, that this would be a fine time and an appropriate occasion for us to pray? What do we expect? What do we do?

One of the most vigorous debates of the English reformation pitted the Presbyterian Scot John Knox against the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer. Their disagreement centered on prayer. Specifically, teaching the Christian faithful of the British Isles how to worship and pray together, sincerely and authentically, free from the tyranny of Rome and its prescribed orders and actions. You may remember some of the history of that period; King Henry VIII was not much of a theologian, he was a lover not a fighter; so beyond declaring marriage no longer a sacrament and therefore dissoluble, he pretty much left the bishops and church hierarchy alone. Reform of the faith and practice of the Church of England was left to Henry's successors, most notably his son Edward.

It was young Edward and his royal protectors who sought to inoculate Britain from Roman influence and establish protestant religious habits in the hearts of the British people. Central to that project was recasting worship in the image of English Protestantism. That was Thomas Cranmer's job. Cranmer was raised and ordained a Roman Catholic priest who broke with Rome when Henry declared Britain a protestant nation. His first pass at reforming the Book of Common Prayer amounted to little more than a translation of the mass into English. It did not meet the expectations of the more reform minded church leaders who surrounded the boy King. So Cranmer was asked to revise it. To make it recognizably protestant this time. To make the break with Roman tradition, practice and authority more obvious to the worshipping congregation.

In 1552 this revision was in its final stages. Almost ready to go to press, to be adopted by the King and the Church as the official service book for all of England, Scotland and Ireland; their guide for living the Christian faith together. King Edward was ill, he was in failing health, time was short. The boy King would not live to the age

of adulthood, he would never reign over England without a Lord Protector as his chaperone. The Tudor family tree was complicated. Henry had lots of children by lots of women. The line of succession was not clear, but the throne would most likely fall to his Catholic sister Mary upon Edward's death (though Lady Jane Grey would enjoy a glorious nine day reign). If the revision to the prayer book was not completed before Edward's death, the prospect of a lasting Protestant presence in Britain was in peril. So of course it was at precisely this moment that Knox and Cranmer came to blows over, of all things, what posture the church should mandate for the congregation at prayer.

Cranmer was a committed kneeler. Any of you who have done time among the Episcopalians or their Anglican cousins the Methodists will no doubt resonate with his affinity for humbling yourselves before the Lord in this way. When you hear "Let us pray" you instinctively reach for the kneeling bench and fold your hands. Knox, on the other hand, was a committed libertarian as to posture for prayer; he was not convinced that compulsory kneeling amounted to anything more than a presumptuous show of false humility. The worshipper, Knox believed, should be left free to assume whatever posture seemed appropriate at the time; to mandate or privilege one posture over another would constrain that spirit and grieve the Lord. There are five traditional Christian postures for prayer, Knox argued, the Lord receives prayer from those sitting, bowing, standing, or prostrating themselves, as well as those who kneel.

It seems a rather inconsequential detail over which to hold up the establishment of the English reformation in the villages and parish churches of the countryside. It seems an odd place to start a month long reflection on our own practice of prayer today. But Knox and Cranmer knew that this was something worth thinking about, worth debating and fighting over. It was something worth getting right, even if it meant that the revised Book, free of compulsory kneeling, would only be adopted for about 9 months before Mary repealed it and had it burned. This debate is not finally settled until Elizabeth I restores the Anglican church and its prayer book and strikes a compromise position that is still in practice today.

It is worth debating and getting right because what happens next, what happens to us when we accept the invitation to unite our hearts in prayer is important. It reveals what we expect prayer to accomplish. It establishes who we understand ourselves to be in God's presence; and who we understand God is who hears us pray. What we believe is about to happen; what effect we expect our prayers to have - is shown forth in how we present ourselves to God as his supplicants. What will result when the Lord opens our lips and our mouths begin to proclaim things? How will this exchange change us, change our world, change God? Who are we to initiate a conversation with that sort of consequence?

Let Us Pray

Let us pray... It is an invitation to go somewhere, to join hands and hearts and enter into the presence of the one in whose presence we live our every moment. It is an opportunity to engage more fully and intentionally the one who engages our lives and our history in the living power of the Holy Spirit. It is a request to accompany one another, to go together into the presence God, to be exposed to the power of his holiness

and be blessed by the magnitude of his love.

Anyone who has read much of the Bible at all knows better than to do that casually; to presume to waltz into God's presence filled with self-confidence or a sense of entitlement; as if prayer were some sort of divine ATM Machine that we could approach in full confidence that our account is not overdrawn and our every request will be met in full. The Bible reminds us time and again not to assume that God owes us a hearing. On the contrary, prayer is a privilege that we have not earned and do not deserve.

Isaiah and Peter both knew this; they knew the appropriate posture for prayer; they knew the disposition of the soul before its Lord, they knew better than to blithely invoke holiness on their own behalf. When it comes to appropriate posture for prayer they are our teachers. We would do well to imitate their humility, their awareness, to learn their holy fear.

Authentic prayer starts when we realize that we have no right to pray; that we are rousing a God who has proved mighty and powerful in ages past; that in prayer we have to do with something far greater and more consequential than anything in this created realm. Genuine prayer begins with our sudden awareness that we are unclean, living among the unclean, unlikely correspondents with the almighty God.

Woe, Isaiah says when he realizes where he is. Woe, he says when the gravity of this presence is made known to him. Woe he says, for this is not what he planned, not where he was headed when he left the house that morning. Woe, because this is not a good thing for a tainted, fallen, defiled human being to discover. Woe, I am not worth this audience, I am not righteous enough to make a request of this being, Woe, Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinner. Woe, indeed.

If we are to pray then we must be willing to see ourselves in this same light. We must learn to say Woe with Isaiah. To expose ourselves to the penetrating light of God's holiness. If we are to accept the invitation to enter God's presence, to have him open our lips that our mouths may proclaim him Lord, then we must know that we are rousing holiness itself and be humbled by that knowledge. That is the posture of the soul at prayer.

Only a soul so positioned can receive the ministry of God's spirit that addresses us when we pray. Only a heart that knows its defilement can expect God to do something about it and intervene in the world to work justice, mercy, and peace through us despite it. Only those who have learned to say Woe with Isaiah, can truly cultivate the expectant heart of the prophets and apostles. Only the heart that has cried woe, can offer, Here I am, send me! No one who enters into God's presence blithely, casually, presumptuously, really expects God to hear and respond to their needs.

I sometimes like to imagine what would happen if God suddenly chose to answer the prayers of the huddled cheerleaders. If God rent the heavens and descended from on high to come to the aid of their horribly unreliable placekicker. How their expressions would change if the hand of God tore away the roof of the Superdome and the raiment of the placekicker was transfigured before them, shining bright like the sun. Would they be astonished? Assuming it didn't happen to Tim Tebow, I think we all sort of expect that kind of thing to happen to Tebow one day. If it was some more ordinary

human, like a placekicker... would that be amazing? Do you think they would say Woe then? Do you think they would recalibrate their expectations and consider that just maybe there are causes of greater moment in this world than this one game, this one kick, on behalf of which they might invoke the power of God?

The heart at prayer is not filled with fear, it is not cast out of God's presence, Isaiah and Peter are not consumed by God's wrath. That's not what happens next. What happens next, for the heart that has learned to say Woe, for the soul that know that it is broken, a cracked vessel not capable of holding whatever it is God is pouring into us - what happens next for the humbled heart, is healing. Strengthening. Instead of being consumed, they are restored. They are cleansed, commissioned and sent; they are changed, the world is changed, the purposes of God are advanced, and his name is magnified through them. So it is with the God who receives the prayers of the sinful; who hears the cries of the defiled; who does not ignore the pleas of the unworthy.

That is who we are when kneel, or bow, or stand, or fall prostrate before the Lord in prayer. That who we are when we accept the invitation to seek the presence of God in prayer. That is who we are when we cry Woe... unclean.. unworthy... undeserving, but available for God's compassion, for his grace and mercy and peace, to be planted in us to bear fruit for his kingdom. We surely are not up to the task, we surely don't have what it takes to be and do what God requires; but here we are. Enlist us. Claim us. Use us. Send us. Make us useful for your name's sake.

When we get to that place, when we assume that posture, when we bow at the foot of that throne; then we're really praying. And then anything is possible.

All power and honor and glory and praise be to the Lord of Hosts.

Amen.