

Prayer

by Virginia Schurman

Virginia Schurman's sermon emphasizes the transformative power of prayer in deepening our relationship with God and community.

Scripture: Isaiah 65:24, John 15:1, John 17:21, Acts 1:14, Romans 8:26, Ephesians 6:18, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Revelation 3:20

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Virginia Schurman emphasizes the importance of prayer in the life of the early church and how it remains central to Friends today. She delves into the various facets of prayer such as love, adoration, thanksgiving, surrender, confession, and guidance, highlighting the transformative power of daily communion with God. Schurman encourages Friends to make time for inward retirement and waiting upon God, fostering a deep dependence on His help and guidance. She explores the concept of prayer as a relationship with God, drawing parallels to Jesus' prayer life and the transformative nature of abiding in Christ through prayer. Additionally, Schurman discusses the role of prayer in the Meeting community, emphasizing its significance in worship, discernment, and intercession.

Transcript

"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." Acts 1:14

Just as prayer was central to the life of the early church, it is central to Friends today. Prayer has many facets -- love, adoration, thanksgiving, surrender, confession, transformation, guidance, supplication, intercession, cleansing, purification, healing, forgiveness, praise, and the quiet joy of being in the presence of God. Prayer is daily communion with God, in which we come to know Jesus as Friend, Teacher, and Lord. This daily practice has been important to Friends through the centuries, as exemplified by London Yearly Meeting's query: "Do you make a place in your daily life for inward retirement and waiting upon God that you may learn the full meaning of prayer and the joy of communion with Him? And do you live in daily dependence upon His help and guidance?" Many Friends through the years have taken a time aside each day for retirement, a time of quiet prayer, often reading a Bible passage followed by quiet prayer and reflection. Friends have been encouraged through the years to turn to God throughout each day and night in inward prayer, worship, and surrender, always endeavoring to place God at the center of life, and praying to abide in Christ's Life and power, and under the guidance of the Inward Teacher.

"In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Praying

Many have become accustomed to thinking of prayer as a monologue that we direct to God. Prayer is actually something that God does in us. "Prayer is a gift." When we turn to God in prayer, we turn to One who is already within us and waiting. One who seeks us first, and will teach us how to pray. "Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear" (Isa. 65:24). "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). It is important to "open the door" by taking time aside regularly for prayer, taking time for retirement daily. Usually a set time each day is helpful. Some Friends find it helpful to go to one place in their home or garden to pray.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He prayed a prayer which is sometimes called the "Lord's Prayer." He prayed this prayer, not to be used as a form or as "vain repetitions" (Matt. 6:7), but to share important aspects of prayer. This prayer brings before God all things, large and small -- from the coming of the Kingdom to daily bread. It begins and ends with adoration. Jesus begins the prayer with "Our Father which art in heaven," grounding prayer in relationship with God. Prayer begins with worship -- "Hallowed be thy name." Jesus prays for the coming of the kingdom, and asks that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. He asks for personal needs, forgiveness, and deliverance, all under God's care and love.

As modern people, we may be struggling with many questions about prayer. How can we influence God? Should we try to do so? How can we pray rightly? What are we to think when our prayers appear to go unanswered? It is important to begin to pray, no matter where you are in regard to these questions. It is known from experience that prayer brings us closer to God, so don't wait until you have solved these questions to pray. London Yearly Meeting encourages Friends "reverently yet daringly to make fuller experiment of the life of trust and consecration through prayer, that they may know relief from the burden of anxiety and perplexity and realize the joy of health and victory, whereby they may become centers of radiant energy for the help and healing of others."

Everyone who prays comes to times of dryness -- times when God is seemingly absent. It is as if one is forsaken by God. One feels and senses nothing. One feels abandoned and deserted. This can occur over long periods of time, or occur from time to time, almost as seasons, alterations in times when we know God's presence and then God's seeming absence. Perhaps these times are given to us to teach us that we can't manage God -- that God is not a puppet on a string that we can manipulate. As our trust in inward feelings becomes shattered, we can learn faith in God alone. God works in us during these dry times to produce detachment, humility, patience, and perseverance. These are times for trusting in God and patient waiting.

"Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2).

Prayer as Relationship with God

As in all things, we have a perfect example of prayer in the life of Jesus. He shows us how a life of constant prayer enables one to live in a close and transforming relationship with God. It is evident that prayer was very important in Jesus' relationship to God. There are frequent references in the gospel accounts to Jesus' prayer life. He often sought a place for solitude and took time apart for prayer. He

prayed during important times in His ministry such as the temptation in the desert, the Sermon on the Mount, His healing ministry, His transfiguration, the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the Cross. These times in prayer were important to Jesus in communing with God. They drew him closer to the Father, whom He called "Abba" or "Daddy," indicating their intimate relationship. Jesus' prayers enabled Him to center His life in God and to know and do God's will in His life and ministry. In prayer, He became one with the Father's will.

In Jesus' final discourse with the disciples just before His betrayal and death, He invited all people to enter into this same close relationship. He prayed for the disciples and all of His other followers, "That they all may be one as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (John 17:21).

Jesus explained what it meant to be one by using a familiar example from the natural world, the vine and the branches. He said, "I am the true vine ... abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (John 15:1,5). In prayer, we learn to abide in the Vine, and have such a deep and close relationship with God that our whole lives are transformed by becoming more and more attuned to God, and to God's desires for our lives and for the world. To abide in Christ is to remain attached to the Root, to draw all Life from Him, to bring our minds, hearts, and souls into Christ's Life, to draw all wisdom, Life and strength from Him, and to live under His guidance, Life, and Power.

By abiding in Christ through prayer we become new persons, remade into the image of Christ (Gal. 2:20). As Christ lives more and more in us, we bear fruit and become Christ's presence and love in the world (as individuals and as the Meeting community). "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love" (John 15:8-9). Through prayer, we learn how to bear fruit by becoming open to God's leadings and being given the strength to follow them: "Ye are my Friends if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14).

Jesus prayed to the Father to send the Spirit of truth who dwells with us and in us (John 14:17), who will teach us all things (John 14:26). As part of living in this transformed life under the guidance and direction of the indwelling Spirit, the Spirit teaches us how to pray. Spirit led prayer becomes one of the ways for this transformation of life to take place, as well as one of the fruits of this transformation. The Inward Guide teaches us so that we know how to pray: "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And He that searcheth the hearts knoweth, what is in the mind of the Spirit, because He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27).

As our lives become more and more led by the Inward Teacher, we will be "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" (Eph. 6: 18). Jesus said, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7). If we are abiding in Christ and Christ in us, we will be in accord with the mind of God, and all that we hope or pray for will conform to His will. This is what is meant by praying in Jesus' name (John 14:13). It is in prayer that we learn to relinquish our will so that it becomes one with the Father's will, just as Jesus did in His Life. As we live out this transformed life under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit, our whole life becomes a prayer. We come to live for God, loving God above all, letting God take over our lives, opening ourselves to His Love, and living out His will. This is the meaning of "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

Prayer in the Meeting Community

Prayer plays an important part in the life of the Meeting community in its relationship to God, to Meeting members, and to the wider world.

Prayer is important in both Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Business. The prayers of all uphold and undergird the worship. The Meeting is helped when Friends come to the Meeting in a spirit of prayer, which is strengthened by their prayers throughout the week. Prayers for individuals and for the Meeting itself help the Meeting to become centered, so that a true spirit of worship arises. Some Friends pray for each individual in the Meeting as a way of centering. There are also prayers for the Meeting as a whole and for this particular time of worship -- that it may be centered on God's presence and open to God's direction and guidance. Prayer undergirds vocal ministry -- prayers to be attuned to God's guidance for those giving the message and for those receiving it.

In Meeting for Business, it is this deep sense of prayer which is needed to find God's will for the Meeting. Very difficult subjects have sometimes been resolved when extended time has been taken for prayer.

Vocal prayer during Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Business is an important part of the worship. When the silent waiting worship is living, the worshipers seek to discern each other's needs, to bear in their own hearts the sufferings of the wider world, and to feel the call to dedication in the service of the Kingdom of God. Silent prayer may then lead also to vocal prayer. Vocal prayer can unite the whole Meeting in praise and dedication to God, and to God's purposes. Those feeling a leading to pray, wait for the Spirit to pray through them, and then kneel to pray the prayer inspired by God.

Intercessory prayers for those in the Meeting community are an important way of sharing Christ's love with each other. "In intercession we share with God our deepest desires for others . . . we can have no right desire for others in which God has not forestalled us. It was His desire before it was ours. . . . All intercession is a self-offering, a self-giving, a longing that what we ask for others may be done, if need be, through our selves." Sometimes we learn in prayer that we can do nothing for the person and the situation, and through prayer, learn the trust to place the person and the situation in God's hands.

Prayer and The World

Prayer is the basis for helping to bring in God's Kingdom of peace, righteousness, and justice. It is through prayer that we find the guidance and strength to be God's presence in the world. This is exemplified in the life of John Woolman, an 18th- century Friend, who was active in many concerns for bringing God's love and justice to slaves and slave holders, the poor, native Americans, and animals and the creation. Woolman found the guidance, strength, and courage to do God's work in these areas through prayer.

For others, it is through prayer that they learn that prayer itself is the way they are led to care for the world with God's love. For example, some find their ministry in praying for the homeless, for children, for the unemployed, and for others in need.

"But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." Acts 6:4

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