

“When You Can’t Pray: Removing the Obstacle to Prayer”

Date: July 17, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 6:5-15; Mark 9:14-29

Occasion: Prayer series

Theme: Prayer, difficulties praying

What a very interesting story. A father is deeply concerned about his son and brings him to Jesus’ disciples to be healed. The text tells us he had a spirit that threw him on the ground, convulsing and foaming at the mouth. It sounds like epilepsy. Apparently, the disciples tried to cast out the demon, but they could not. Jesus comes upon the scene, asks a few questions and immediately commands the spirit to come out of the boy, and he is healed.

Afterwards the disciples ask Jesus why *they* couldn’t heal the boy themselves. Jesus replies, “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.” Now I don’t know about you, but I find Jesus’ answer to be unsatisfactory. Do you ever argue with Scripture? I do.

Did he think they hadn’t already tried praying? Honestly, I find this scripture to be less than satisfying. How often have we tried prayer and for some reason, it doesn’t “work?” We get frustrated, and many times people give up.

Disappointment with the results of prayer is one obstacle that keeps a lot of people from praying. But there are many others. People have lots of reasons for why they find it hard to pray. We all know we *should* pray. We all know that prayer is a good thing; we’ve been told that many times. But there are often obstacles to prayer.

Now, sometimes people make up excuses because they just don’t want to do it. I don’t want to address *that* issue. Instead I want to talk to the person who *wants* to pray, but finds it difficult to do so.

You see, I believe that prayer is simply responding to God reaching out to us in love. If our heart is hardened against the love of God, that is a different issue.

But what about the person who wants to pray, who is responding to the work of God in their heart, but is stuck? There is an obstacle that's making prayer difficult. Somehow they're being blocked in their prayer life. They want to; they just can't do it.

I've been impressed with the work done by Mary Coelho, who was the coordinator of the spiritual direction program at General Theological Seminary in New York City. She wrote an article about this and she mentions several obstacles to a life of prayer.

One reason she gives for our frustration in prayer, is our woundedness. Some people may be dealing with feelings of rejection, being unwanted or unloved. They may believe they haven't been loved sufficiently in the past.

It was such a painful experience, they dare not open their hearts to the vulnerability of a loving relationship, even one with God. Actually, a wounded person may find it impossible to allow herself or himself to be open and vulnerable, which is what we do in prayer.

But for such a person, there is hope. As that person becomes aware of the wound, as they begin to accept it and acknowledge it and let it be a part of themselves, instead of denying it or burying it deep in their soul, God's love can begin to heal the wound.

If we find it difficult to pray, we might ask ourselves, is it because I don't feel worthy of God's love and attention? Have I been rejected, hurt, neglected, unloved in the past? Finding trustworthy people to talk to, about our woundedness, also brings healing.

A second obstacle to prayer is the need to achieve. Some of us have a high need to achieve and we turn prayer into a project. We will always be disappointed if we turn a loving conversation into a performance. We're always measuring, evaluating, judging, criticizing our prayers, wondering if we've measured up to some ideal standard.

Instead of making prayer a performance, the high achiever can learn to relax. Instead of being the performer, such a person is invited to spend more time in prayer listening, waiting and being patient. That can be hard for a Type-A personality who is always working on achievement.

Sister Melanie Svoboda, in her book *Everyday Epiphanies*, writes: "Sometimes our best prayer is monosyllabic. "Lord!" or "Help!" or "Why?" she says, "In the traditional English translation of the Lord's Prayer, there are only 56 words and 40 of them are monosyllabic: our.. be... thy... name....will be done on earth...give us this day... bread.... Lead us not."

Sister Melanie continues, "Maybe Jesus was trying to tell us something. When it comes to finding the right words in prayer, shorter is good, fewer is better."

If you find yourself judging your prayers, wondering if you have *achieved* a level of spiritual maturity because of your prayers, lighten up a bit. Relax. Try listening more. Shorten your prayers. Quit trying to impress God, or yourself, or anybody else.

So far we've talked about two obstacles - being wounded and the need to achieve. A third reason for disappointment in prayer may be an unwillingness to be patient with ourselves, and the process of

learning to pray. We want to be “good” at praying, and we don’t want to practice to get better. We just want to be a good prayer, right away. In America, we believe that if we just put our minds to it, we can do anything. We make things happen, “if we just put our minds to it.”

Some people have that same attitude about prayer, and become frustrated when things don’t change fast enough. We need to be patient in our prayer lives and not expect things to happen in the spiritual realm as quickly as they do in the material world.

Be patient with yourself. There are no shortcuts or tricks in the life of prayer. If we want to grow in virtue, grow in grace, and see the work of God in our lives, we will have to be patient. We don’t always see quick results. It is much like ascending a mountain: slow, arduous work that takes time. It is not a quick sprint to the top.

A fourth obstacle that Mary Coelho identifies is the lack of gratitude. We may feel disappointed in prayer when we fail to celebrate and be grateful for the ways in which God has already blessed us. Sadly, it seems easier to focus on our struggles than it does to celebrate and enjoy the small changes that God has already brought about in our life.

We need to sing more, dance more, and celebrate more. It helps if we can loosen up, relax a little more, and laugh at ourselves and at the world. These are all ways of being grateful and saying “Yes” to life. Laughter is a wonderful prayer that expresses gratitude.

I think most of us want a deeper, richer, more satisfying prayer life. But often times there are obstacles to praying. Learning to

identify the obstacles is the first step in allowing God to remove them. I have another hand-out I'd like the ushers to pass out at this time. I invite you to look at it, read it over, and in some of your quiet time with God, examine some of the possible blocks *you* have to prayer.

And then, maybe you could find someone else with whom you could share what you learned about yourself. If you'd like, give me a call and let's get together and talk about it. Self-knowledge, self-awareness is an important part of growing in our prayer life.

Finally, I just want to close by commenting on the response of the father in today's Gospel lesson. I find his prayer to be one of the most honest prayers I have ever heard. And I think it is the answer to the obstacle that many of us have.

The father asks Jesus to help his son, "*if he can.*" Jesus replies, "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Now listen to what the father says; I think it is a beautiful prayer: "I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief."

For all of us who struggle, may it be our prayer as well: "Lord, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief." Amen!

"When You Can't Pray: Removing the Obstacles to Prayer" by Mary C. Coelho in *Review for Religions*, March 1981.

Everyday Epiphanies: Seeing the Sacred in Everything, by Melannnie Svoboda, SND. Twentythird Publicatiion: Mystic, CT. 2003, p. 9. "Monosyllabic Prayer"