

Sermon for Zion, July 16, 2017

Hymns: 637 - Take My Life; 625 - Seek Ye First; 449 – Lord, Listen To Your Children Praying; 653 - Fill All My Life O Lord My God (to “Amazing Grace”)

Scripture: Daniel 6:1-13; Matthew 6:5-8.

Sermon Title: Why do we pray?

Daniel 6:1-13 NLT

Darius the Mede decided to divide the kingdom into 120 provinces, and he appointed a high officer to rule over each province. The king also chose Daniel and two others as administrators to supervise the high officers and protect the king’s interests. Daniel soon proved himself more capable than all the other administrators and high officers. Because of Daniel’s great ability, the king made plans to place him over the entire empire.

Then the other administrators and high officers began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling government affairs, but they couldn’t find anything to criticize or condemn. He was faithful, always responsible, and completely trustworthy. So they concluded, “Our only chance of finding grounds for accusing Daniel will be in connection with the rules of his religion.”

So the administrators and high officers went to the king and said, “Long live King Darius! We are all in agreement—we administrators, officials, high officers, advisers, and governors—that the king should make a law that will be strictly enforced. Give orders that for the next thirty days any person who prays to anyone, divine or human—except to you, Your Majesty—will be thrown into the den of lions. And now, Your Majesty, issue and sign this law so it cannot be changed, an official law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be revoked.” So King Darius signed the law.

But when Daniel learned that the law had been signed, he went home and knelt down as usual in his upstairs room, with its windows open toward Jerusalem. He prayed three times a day, just as he had always done, giving thanks to his God. Then the officials went together to Daniel’s house and found him praying and asking for God’s help. So they went straight to the king and reminded him about his law. “Did you not sign a law that for the next thirty days any person who prays to anyone, divine or human—except to you, Your Majesty—will be thrown into the den of lions?”

“Yes,” the king replied, “that decision stands; it is an official law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be revoked.”

Then they told the king, “That man Daniel, one of the captives from Judah, is ignoring you and your law. He still prays to his God three times a day.”

Matthew 6:5-8 NLT

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

I’m back after a week of vacation, for which I thank you. I can’t say it was a restful week because in that time, Dana and I drove to and around Ontario – over 4000 kilometres altogether. We did so in order to visit family, particularly our elderly parents, as well as brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and old friends. It wasn’t restful, exactly, but it was a priority. You know as well as I do how important it is to a relationship, to keep in touch.

The same is true of our relationship with God – keeping in touch keeps the relationship healthy, vibrant and strong. We keep in touch with God in two primary ways: we keep in touch through worship, and we keep in touch through prayer. Sunday Worship is analogous to the family gatherings Dana and I just had in Ontario; through Sunday worship, through gathering together with God’s family, singing God’s praise, listening for God speaking to us through Scripture, Sermon, and Song, our relationship with God is strengthened, deepened, maintained.

But this morning I would like to put in a plug for prayer. Sunday worship comes just once a week – for many, not even quite so frequently. But prayer is something we can do every day, anywhere, anytime. It is a reminder of who we are, of remembering whose we are, of remembering who loves us. And we need a daily reminder, a daily time, of remembering the place of God in our lives.

This is an area where, I confess, we as Presbyterians are pretty weak. Our suspicion of ritual, our more intellectual approach to the faith, has robbed us of what other denominations and, in fact, other faiths practice as a central part of their religious life. In suspecting that much of ritual is simply empty going-through-the-motions stuff, we’ve largely dispensed with the formality of daily prayers or daily religious observances. And as a result, in throwing the baby of daily contact with God out with the bathwater of empty observance, we’ve lost something important.

We've forgotten that keeping in touch with God is not just for Sunday morning. We've forgotten that we serve a 24/7 God, a God who's never closed. Relying on Sunday alone means trying to build and sustain a dynamic relationship on the basis of an hour a week. And we need more than that. And so did Daniel. The Daniel of the Lion's Den. Here's how he got that name:

Daniel, despite being a devout Jew, was working for the Persian civil service. He started out in the Interpretation of Dreams department, and worked his way up to Deputy Minister rank, and then finally Deputy Prime Minister. The Persian Governmental System worked as follows: the country was divided into 120 distinct districts, with Satraps, or local governors, responsible for each district, the Satraps reporting to one of three Deputy Prime Ministers. Daniel was doing such an outstanding job as Deputy Prime Minister that the King, Darius, intended to promote him to Prime Minister. This caused the other Deputy Prime Ministers and all 120 Satraps to resent Daniel, because then as now, lots of people hate seeing other people succeed. So they sought to bring him down.

Unfortunately (and unusually for a politician or civil servant), their best investigative reporters couldn't dredge up the slightest bit of dirt on Daniel. He had never cheated anyone, never accepted a bribe, had never been seen with Russian businessmen. He was squeaky clean. So in the grand tradition of political party infighting, Daniel's fellow civil servants ran a campaign to smear him. And the only way they could smear him was to accuse him of praying. Which he did. Three times a day.

These Satraps, you see, had made public prayer illegal (which would seem outrageous, until you remember that we more or less have done that too, in our schools, with our children, of all things, but that's another sermon). Daniel knew, of course, that praying was illegal, unless it was to the King, but Daniel decided that praying three times a day was something important enough to bother dying for, and so pray he did. Both in his home, and subsequently, in the lion's home too, where he had been thrown in punishment for this most unlikely of crimes. Happily, while in the lion's den, Daniel's prayers were heard by God, maker of lions, who preserved Daniel, that he might live to pray another day.

Now, we assume that the point of the story is that the lions didn't eat Daniel. But that's not the point of the story, that's the punchline. The point of the story is that

someone thought prayer sufficiently important as to risk death itself in order so to do. Every day.

What could be so important about prayer as to risk death doing it? Well, somehow, Daniel knew that prayer is what kept him connected with God. Living and working in a society antagonistic to God, Daniel knew that everything worth doing and everything worth being had to do with preserving his faith, with continuing to affirm and enrich his relationship with God, and the only way Daniel knew to do that, other than living in such a way as not even a team of crack investigative reporters and Revenue Persia agents could find a speck of dirt on him; the only way Daniel knew to stay close to God was to pray. And so he did. Every day. Three times. Rain or shine. Whether it was convenient, or whether he felt like it, or not. Even if it meant sleeping with a lion or two.

Jesus has something to say about this as well. Listen:

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

“When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! (Matthew 6:5-8)

Jesus was of the opinion that daily private prayer was vitally important. He demonstrated this himself, by many times going off to a quiet place to pray, as we read time and again in the Gospels. He demonstrated it by teaching his disciples a simple form of prayer, as we remember in the Lord’s Prayer. He knew, like Daniel knew, that everything worth doing and everything worth being had to do with continuing to affirm and enrich his relationship with God, and the only way Jesus knew to do that, the only way Jesus knew to stay close to God, was to pray. Every day. Not just Sunday. Every day.

So you’re thinking, “Great, now I have to become some kind of religious nut.” Not at all; what I’m saying is that we need to keep the lines of communication open for the relationship to grow. We too need a daily reminder, a daily time, of

remembering who we are, of remembering whose we are, of remembering who loves us.

Our prayers not only could be, but should be, simple. Jesus tells us so: *“Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to put up a false front before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.”* That’s all. Not a big production; a quiet prayer. Every day. Maybe a couple of times a day. “Three times!” says Daniel.

There is value in keeping in touch. Through these simple moments of keeping in touch with God throughout the day, day after day, week after week, we are building and sustaining the foundation of a relationship that will endure whatever the years might bring.

Again, I’m not talking a major lifestyle change, here, like getting up at 5 a.m. to pray (even though, as I’m reminded when in Israel or Turkey, and the Muslim call to prayer played over giant loudspeakers has me sitting straight up in bed, that many Muslims seem to manage it). No, I’m talking a minor lifestyle shift. A setting aside of some moments, each day, to pray. A shift in priority. Setting aside this small block of time each day is what we must do if we are to have a vibrant and dynamic relationship with our Father in Heaven. And if saying to God “I love you,” every day doesn’t seem that important, just think for a moment about how important it is, to the very deepest part of us, to hear it back. I don’t know about you, but the times in my life when I am at my best are the times when I am most in tune with the people I love, and the God who loves me.

It’s worth it! Put your heart into it - every day. Feed your soul - every day. Engage your mind - every day. Commit yourself to making prayer a priority in your life - every day. That would be an outstanding summer project for each of us! After all, God wants God’s children to know - every day - beyond any shadow of doubt - that their Father loves them. And when we express our love to God, with even the simplest of prayers, the circle is complete. Our relationship is strengthened, deepened, grows. Every day. Every day.

“When you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.” Thanks be to God, who loves us, and who hears us when we pray. Amen.