

Conversations with God
Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024
Rev. Brian Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church.

6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **3** But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^[a]

5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **6** But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^[b]

16 “And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^[a]

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust^[b] consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust^[c] consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

The longest chapter of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is on prayer, which is amazing because the *Institutes* is extremely long. The copy I have is two rather thick volumes. The fact Calvin devotes so much time to prayer in his theological masterpiece shows how important prayer was to him. Calvin refers to prayer as “conversation with God.” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.4-5)

As Presbyterian theologian Donald McKim states, “Calvin sees prayer as absolutely essential for the Christian.” ¹

¹ Donald McKim, *Coffee With Calvin* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 28.

Jesus shows us in the gospel reading tonight the importance of humble, respectful prayer. He is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, of the importance of private prayer. He tells us to pray to God, the God we cannot see face to face.

My hope is that we make prayer a key part of our 40-day Lenten journey that we start today, and to devote ourselves even more to the prayer that Jesus is talking about, private prayer, the prayer he describes as going into your “room and shut the door and prayer to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” As the *Book of Common Worship* tells us, “Lent is a time for growth in faith—through prayer, spiritual discipline, and self-examination in preparation for the commemoration of the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus Christ.”² Tonight I want to focus on the prayer part of our journey to grow in faith.

At the beginning of the year, I preached about making a commitment to worship in 2024, which is public or corporate prayer. Now I’m making a pitch for the private prayer Jesus mentions in the gospel today.

In the time of Jesus many people of prayer were “hypocrites—actors—and they went where they could find an audience,” writes George Buttrick in 1951. They would go to the synagogue and loudly say their prayers.

² *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 233.

Private prayer, Buttrick writes, “is essential—the burning center of life.” Buttrick writes that, “The door must be shut against the distractions of the world, lest we bring to God a divided mind.” A person “must be where he cannot pose or pretend: Thy closet...thy door...thy father—he, the person stands before God stripped of every disguise and dissemblings of life drop.” The person makes their confession freely and fully, offers gratitude for mercies he has never merited, and draws strength for a destiny newly understood.”³

It is in this private prayer where I have my conversations with God. Where I tell God what is weighing on my heart. The sins I have committed, the places in my life I need help with. I do confess the main sins I have on my heart on Sundays when we take a moment of silence to confess our sins after the prayer of confession. And I pray throughout worship, where I try to be as heartfelt and focused as I can, to commune with the Lord.

But it is in private prayer, sometimes when I am writing, where I pray the deepest. It is the place where I place my worries and concerns, the fears that I have. Where I express my doubts about many things. It is the place where I complain to God and cry out in frustration to God over all the things that don’t make sense to me and that I don’t think are fair. It is in these times where I cry out prayers of “why is this happening?”

³ George Buttrick, Commentary on Matthew, 1951, 307-308.

Or “how long will I have to suffer with this?” “Or how long do they have to suffer with this?” This is the time where I have the most conversations with God.

So many books have been written on prayer it is mind-boggling. Ultimately there is no right or wrong way to do it, we just must do it. We must do it publicly and in private.

Where we humble ourselves to God. Where we take the time to do it, to have that private conversation with God. Where we check in with the Lord, where we tell God we don't understand God's majesty or the Divine plan of the Holy One.

The fact Jesus made time in the Sermon on the Mount to talk about private prayer signifies how important it is. Here in these forty days of Lent we have an opportunity to look at ourselves and take stock of our lives. How we are doing. The places where we are falling short. What we can do to get better. To take that private time and focus on our relationship with the Lord and how we can get closer to God. To have those tough conversations with God as we examine our lives.

Our relationship with God is the most important one in our lives, for from it flows everything in our lives. As long as we keep that relationship first and central in our lives, we have the opportunity to live in peace and joy. We can also move closer to acceptance in our lives when times are difficult, and we can then keep moving ahead, one step at a time.

As Don McKim says in his book *Coffee With Calvin*, “Sometimes we pray and nothing seems to happen. In the midst of difficulties we may be tempted to give up and throw in the towel. At these times we need hope. Calvin reminds us that in the Scriptures people persisted in praying. In the psalms we can often see that David and other believers, when they are almost worn out with praying and seem to have beaten the air with their prayers as if pouring forth words to a deaf God, still do not cease to pray [Ps 22:2].⁴

This Lent, let us focus on our private prayer life, the way Jesus told his disciples.

⁶ “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.^[b]

Amen.

⁴ Donald McKim, *Coffee With Calvin*, 85.