

“Stop Talking”

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Prayer is elusive. And faith is, at best, hard to define.

In Richard Foster's book, *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home*, he defines 21 different types of prayer. Intercessory, sacramental, petition, formation, forsaken, and radical prayers. The list goes on.

When I have tried to explain how to pray in children's sermons, I often boil it down to the PRAY acronym: P = praise God! R = Repent. A = Ask for your hearts' desires. And Y = Yield to God's will. It sounds simple, but practical application comes in and even I feel a little stumped sometimes. How do I pray? What does God want to hear from me? What does it mean to live a life of pray? What is God's expectation of me if I am going to claim to live a life of faith?

Even a more basic question: what does it mean to be a person of faith? We do a lot of discussing this, especially at seminary, but even there the answers are not always clear. This morning's scripture readings give us real insight into what I believe are three main elements of living a life of faith. First, in the gospel reading for this morning, Jesus -- preaching from the sermon on the mount -- shares with us His vision of how we should be a people of faith:

(Gospel Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

¹*"Beware of practicing your piety 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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

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. ⁶But 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.*

¹⁶*"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.*

Jesus choosing to highlight three parts of a faithful person's life to illustrate how to we should live: prayer, fasting, and "alms giving" (which is combination of giving money to the poor and doing acts of charity). In all three, the message is the same. Jesus tells us, do these things in private. They are not public acts, they are not something that should be done for show. Almsgiving is responding to a world in need (both through giving of monetary gifts and of giving of your time to helping the poor), and again Jesus says, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand gives". Prayer is the ultimate intimacy that we can have with God. It is inherently a private act, so naturally Jesus would tell us to pray behind closed doors. Fasting, a spiritual discipline common in Biblical times, is also sometimes Jesus urges us to do in private, and not in view of the public eye.

In her book *Soulfeast*, Marjorie Thompson explores what fasting might look like in our current culture. In a culture that lives in plenty and focuses on consumption, Thompson asserts that fasting is more about abstaining than it is about denying, and goes so far as to say that perhaps the hardest thing to abstain from in our society is from over-packing our schedules. I like this idea of fasting: that we can slow our pace by abstaining from too much activity. Thompson goes on to say that prayer and fasting done together can be a powerful combination in building a relationship with God, stronger than either one done alone. For all three – alms giving, prayer, and fasting, -- this scripture lays out a solid recipe for building a spiritual relationship, which is I think the beginning of living a life of faith. I don't believe Jesus was simply chastising his followers for public shows of piety; I think he was reminding them that the essence of spiritual disciplines is about building a private relationship with God. It is the first step.

Our second scripture reading for this morning piggy backs on Jesus' warnings of living a publicly pious life. And be forewarned – the writer of James is known for a particularly radical social justice view of the gospel, so this scripture isn't for the faint hearted. Here is what the author of James writes as advice for the early church:

¹⁹*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*

²²*But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing.*

²⁶*If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

There are two gems in this message that I believe are relevant for us today. The command to care for the orphans and the widows in their distress is something we need to listen to carefully. In Biblical times, the orphans and the widows were the people in the community who did not have family. The culture of that time was such that families cared for the needs of their extended “tribes”. The widows and the orphans were the ones that were left without family, and therefore without anyone to care for them. They were the ones in their community without a safety net. They were the marginalized, which is how I think we should think of this passage today. Who are those in our communities that are left without a safety net? Who are the marginalized in our communities today? It is often those who have been hit with unforeseen circumstances, those who don’t have anyone to turn to: when the house is hit by a tornado, or the downsizing happens, or the cancer hits when they have no health insurance. All of these circumstances are bad; but they can be exponentially worse when there is no safety net to fall back on – no family to call, no friend to step in, no couch to crash on. When we interpret this scripture for today, orphans and widows can (and should) be interpreted as broadly as possible. What is the translation? Again in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates this scripture into “Reach out to the homeless and the loveless in their plight.” This is the second part of the recipe for living a life of faith: helping those in need. And again, the author of James echoes Jesus’ statement that this should be a private act as well.

The second gem in this scripture, I believe, is the part that calls us to “keep oneself unstained from the world”. This is our third morsel of truth for living a life of faith. Again reading from *the Message*, Eugene Peterson interprets this passage as “guarding against the corruption of a godless world”. This is both a message of challenge and a sign of hope for us. It is a challenge to live in the world, and not be mired in cynicism when look at the sometimes bleak world view that our televisions project. It is a challenge to guard ourselves against it. But it is also a scripture full of hope, because when we succeed in living in the word, but not of the world, we transform into a people of hope. We can become beacons of hope in the midst of the corrupt and godless world we see. Our life of faith can shine for others to see, and we can bring hope to the world that cynics sometimes try to dominate with their doom and gloom worldview. Being hopeful is a third, and important principle. Foster optimism.

So, what does it mean to live a life of faith?

It’s means stop talking.

Stop talking about our religious views, our Christian tradition, and church doctrines.

Instead, let’s start listening to each other’s faith journeys. Let’s build a dialogue of shared stories that teach us how to be in relationship with God and each other. Let’s listen for God’s voice to speak to us and cultivate a prayer life.

Stop talking.

Stop talking about our political agendas, our policies for the poor, our rights and responsibilities.

Instead, let's put our words into action. We can help orphans and widows by rocking babies in crisis nurseries and serving meals in elder homes. Let us be a voice for the marginalized in our world.

Stop talking.

Stop talking about the cynicism we see around us. Stop talking about the bad economy or the bleak future. In the face of uncertainty, let us claim the optimism that comes with a deep and abiding faith. Let us anchor our hope in a way that keeps us "unstained" from the world around us.

And as we do these things we will live into the call of a life of faith. May it be so. Amen.