

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Susan Scott, Guest Preacher

July 2, 2017

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:26-30

Drinking in Life, Part 2

If I had to pick just a few chapters of the Bible to take with me to a desert island, Romans 8 would definitely be on the list! It is full of promises and hope. One of those promises is this: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, and are called according to his purpose.” When I was new to faith — I had a life-changing encounter with God as a teenager — I thought this meant that only good things would happen to me. I was sure wrong about that! I think what Paul is telling us, is that anything, good or bad, can be used by God to benefit me and further God’s purposes. This is not a promise about sports cars and promotions, but one of the most deeply reassuring truths when we find ourselves in unwanted circumstances, whether tragedies or just things which spark our anxiety.

Last week we looked at the examen, a spiritual practice designed to help us listen to God better. This week we are turning to another practice, one which I think is harder, but which I find very helpful when things aren’t going as I want them to. It is the practice of welcoming prayer.

Welcoming prayer is a way of welcoming God into any situation. It is based on the premise I just mentioned — that every relationship, every set of circumstances, no matter how pleasurable or distressing, can be the context for God to work in our lives. Father Timothy Koock describes welcoming prayer this way: “Each event in our lives is a gilt-edged invitation to allow God to draw us deeper into the depths of the divine heart. The welcoming prayer is a way for me to RSVP to this standing invitation.”

Welcoming prayer begins with silence. I know silence may be in short supply in your lives, but I encourage you to carve some out, even if the best you can do is turn off the radio during your commute and use that time. Welcoming prayer begins when I take the time to notice what’s going on inside of me. Let’s use an Independence Day cook-out as our example, as many of us may be attending just such an event this week. How are you really feeling about it? Anxious? Anticipatory? Resigned? Having identified your feelings, you would then spend a few moments sitting with them, looking at them in God’s presence. Why are you feeling as you are? Are you anxious that you’ll be criticized, that your potato salad won’t meet your mother’s expectations? Or are you anxious that your son will get drunk and embarrass you? Or anxious that the conversation will remain superficial and you will leave feeling no more connected than you do now? Or any of a hundred other things. You simply begin by taking the time to notice what’s going on under the surface: anxiety, resentment, hopefulness, eagerness, or any other thing, however acceptable or unacceptable it might seem to you. You acknowledge it and sit with it in God’s presence. That’s hard for some of us, and there may be times we resist this because we are afraid of acknowledging potentially overwhelming emotions.

Next, you pray. This way of praying may sound radical, but remember that Jesus is a pretty radical guy, that is, Jesus doesn’t much buy into the way our world does business. First, you pray to let go of your desire to control the situation. Just like that: I let go of my desire for control or power at the cook-out. Perhaps this will prompt you to think of the ways you would like to control what happens; the conversational topics you would like avoided, the unmannerly way your nieces and nephews behave, the way the strawberry shortcake is prepared.... You let go of all of that, of all of that needing and wanting to be in charge. Why? So that you will be free to give and receive love. As long as you are in charge, imposing your will, God is not in charge. You need to get out of the way so that God can go to work. So you begin praying by letting go of your desire to play God, to have power or control, to make this cook-

out be what you want it to be. And when we let God be God, then we can be ourselves, and that is a lot less stressful.

As if that wasn't hard enough, the next movement of the prayer is this: you let go of your desire for esteem or appreciation. It looks like this: I let go of my desire to look good, to be thought well of, to have my jokes laughed at, my stories listened to, my dessert praised ... I let go of expectation of having my needs for affection and love met in this situation. What does letting go of all that do? Several things. It frees you to give and receive love. It casts you back on God for affirmation, affection, esteem. And that's a good, secure place to be. Letting go leaves you radically available to God for his purposes.

The next movement of the prayer is letting go of your desire for security and safety. I don't think of cook-outs as being fraught with security and safety issues, but it might be simply letting go of your desire to not be asked to step outside your comfort zone in any way. Clearly, if you were praying in regard to a major medical issue or a job interview, this movement of the prayer would be more relevant.

Those are the three movements to the prayer: I let go of my desire for control, for esteem, and for security. But, of course, I'm not simply dropping those things into a void, I am releasing them to the God who loves me, whose plans are better than mine, who knows my needs, and who invites me to trust him. Having let go of those things, I then pray welcoming God into the situation.

This is a prayer of trust. It is certainly not the only way to pray, or always the most appropriate way to pray. But there are many times when examining our underlying motives and surrendering our desire to be in charge, to be recognized, to feel secure is a daring, bold, and faithful way of welcoming God.

Do you have to feel absolutely sincere in order to pray this with integrity? The person who introduced me to this type of praying assured me that I did not. It is hypocritical to pray something you don't mean in order to appear more spiritual than you are. Jesus has strong words for those who pray to impress others rather than to connect with God. But to come to this type of hard praying by saying to God, "I want to trust you. I want to know you. I want to be changed by you. I want to be of use to you. And so, as a choice of my will, still needing my feelings to catch up, in need of grace, I pray...."

And of course, praying this once is only the first time of many. This is a prayer to return to again and again, perhaps again and again throughout the cookout. It is, after all, not magic, just a spiritual practice, which invites God into our relationships and circumstances. Try it out for a while, and see what you discover.