



Week 1: Divine Persona

Scripture: Luke 11:1-4

Psychiatrist Gerald May begins his book *Addiction and Grace* with a bold statement: “I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God” (*Addiction and Grace* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988], 1). Although we in the church live with such hope, the universality of May’s statement often is counter to our experience.

The intensity of our desire for a relationship with God is manifested in our prayer life. Prayer is our human response to the awareness of God. The disciples’ request that Jesus teach them to pray resonates with our own passion for prayer. We thirst for the same relationship with God. Jesus’ prayer encourages his disciples to think of God metaphorically. When you pray, said Jesus, address God as you would your parent.

Developing a meaningful image of God is crucial. Our series on prayer begins with our image of God and moves through some of the challenges postmodern people encounter in their relationship to God. In the end, we hope to be able to make a greater investment in prayer.

Jesus’ investment in prayer was both personal and private. Luke offers frequent references to Jesus praying, and almost always in isolated places. Matthew introduces the Lord’s Prayer with instructions from Jesus to “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matthew 6:6). As Jesus does, we also can have an intimate relationship with God in prayer.

Our image of prayer from scripture and church history is that it is personal and private. In the postmodern church, the model for prayer remains the contemplative life, sheltered from cultural influences. Spirituality, especially prayer, we see juxtaposed to culture.

Our church culture brings together several generations, each with different perspectives and different expectations. The collision of these generations creates at least four postmodern cultural challenges to a healthy prayer life.

The tragedy of 9/11 has drawn America into a world of chaos. Safety and security are tenuous. Our sense of identity has also changed. We no longer see ourselves as primarily from white European ancestry, nor are we isolated. The world has come to live as our neighbor.

Technological advances contribute to our global community. We live in an instant culture with satellite communications, computers, and mobile phones. We even follow our wars instantly on television. Fast food and credit are ways of our fast-paced life. We are an impatient people.

Technology is at the core of our culture and our expectations for the future. With space stations, moon explorations, and trips to Mars, there seem to be no limits to what technology can provide. Americans believe medical research will ultimately find a cure for all disease. Education has been the door to social improvement for the last fifty years. Our culture believes there is no problem too large for human resourcefulness. We believe human resources through technology will be able to solve all future problems.

Socially, however, relationships are changing. Families are scattered and shattered. We build relationships on how they personally benefit us.

Our prayer life is affected by the cultural impact of perceived universal chaos, instant gratification, unequivocal trust in human ingenuity through technology, and relationships grounded in personal gratification. In an instant society, we expect prayer to produce instant results. Prayer, however, runs counter to our egocentric society. Prayer is about our relationship to God and other people. “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. . . . And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:2, 4). Prayer is about a covenant relationship with God and with all of God’s creation.

Our high-tech culture approaches prayer with skepticism. In this chaotic and confusing world, human resourcefulness offers more hope than “a god” who has created this mess. Yet Gerald May is right, there is still part of our soul that believes God is the ultimate answer.

The biblical story is about translating the mysterious creator God into an intimate friend. Our creation stories in Genesis personalize God, making the creator walk the garden with Adam and Eve. Moses tried to personalize the God of the burning bush.

Jesus is God’s response, the incarnation of God and the reflection of the *divine persona*. Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In Christ, the image of and relationship with God became concrete. If we relate to God through human characteristics, it becomes possible for us to imagine God as a friend. But if our experience lacks positive relationships, it may be difficult to develop a trusting relationship with God through prayer. How can one imagine a loving God when life has offered mainly abuse, trauma, and isolation in relationships?

The most common prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, is an intimate communication with a friend, which can be difficult for postmodern people. How can we use intimate language as toward a parent when we have no model of parental love? How can we pray that we will forgive others when our personal needs have not been met? God’s created world seems chaotic rather than peaceful. How can such a God be trusted more than human ingenuity?

A major postmodern obstacle to our response to the awareness of God is our image of God. To imagine God as a divine person—as a friend—narrows the gap between the divine and the human. Only with a divine friend will a trusting relationship in prayer be possible and our soul’s sincere desire satisfied.

Week 2: Praying to an Absent God

Scripture: Luke 11:5-8

In our first sermon in this series on prayer we established the necessity of developing a relationship with God as person or friend. For many of us such an image of God is challenging.

From the time we first think about God, we are taught that God is perfect in every way. Then life experiences challenge these assumptions about God. How are we to understand God’s role in suffering, evil, and natural disasters?

God’s faithful servant Job asked similar questions: “From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer” (Job 24:12). God’s silence angered Job. “And what profit do we get if we pray to him?” (Job 21:15). The prayers of the writer of Lamentations find a similar void, “Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer” (Lamentations 3:8). In the midst of his passion, Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Each of us has been in the wilderness, struggling with an absent God.

Our society demands a broadband God who responds to our needs immediately. Any delay in response causes frustration in our relationship with God. There may also be frustration in discerning

and accepting God's response. However, a healthy prayer life is less about understanding and more about experiencing God.

Whereas my seminary training was heavy on theology, spiritual practices have become an increasingly significant part of the seminary experience. A student entering Duke Divinity School recently made it clear that she wanted her seminary experience to form her as a person of prayer (L. Gregory Jones and Willie James Jennings, "Formed for Ministry: A Program in Spiritual Formation," *Christian Century* 117, no. 4 [February 2, 2000]: 124-28). For this student, as it should be for all of us, prayer is a way of life rather than an isolated call for divine crisis intervention. Prayer is not simply a part of life. It *is* life.

Persistence in prayer is a common theme of the Gospels. In the eighteenth chapter of Luke, the story of the importunate widow suggests persistence is a characteristic of the faithful. After teaching his disciples how to pray, Jesus urges the disciples to be persistent as a man seeking bread from a friend at midnight. In the midst of our frustrations with God, we are called to maintain a relationship with God in prayer.

Leonard Sweet talks about changing his prayer life by deleting a comma. Instead of the intercessory mode of "Please, God," his prayers are now of the form "Please God," or, how can God's purposes be fulfilled in our lives? (Leonard Sweet, *Learn to Dance the SoulSalsa* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 101). If our emphasis is "Please God," rather than "Please, God," our prayers become a celebration of our relationship with a divine friend, rather than enticing God to meet our expectations.

A Native American tradition illustrates divine presence. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday he is placed in a dense forest to spend a night. Following an anxious and sleepless night, as the sun rises the boy sees the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It is the boy's father who has been there all night long (Sweet, *Learn to Dance the SoulSalsa*, 23). Like the Native American father, our God is relational and compassionate.

My favorite analogy for the relationship between God and God's creation is the flowing stream. A stream is ever changing, displaying power, caressing its banks, and gently redirecting itself as it moves forward. The water helps shape the bed and banks of the river while the riverbed gains its texture from the water. God is like the water, seeking to fill the spaces of its universe, remolding the riverbed by moving through it with a natural flow. God guides us in a similar way, gently calling us to reshape our lives in accordance with the ever flowing stream. Our relationship to God is as mutual as the water and its channel, and evident over time.

Some of the channel material and outside forces deter the flow of the stream. But the natural flow of the stream is a gentle, ever changing, eternal relationship between the water and the ground.

The postmodern person wants to build dams and create diversions. We want to control the flow of life so that it responds to our immediate needs. Whereas our part of the river may appear chaotic, the river's flow maintains integrity. When we view God as totally beyond creation it is easy to characterize God as indifferent. When we turn inward and search for God within our own souls and experience, our relationship with God changes.

I have always been intrigued with Paul Tillich's description of God as "the ground of being." Only recently have I come to understand it as foundational for my spiritual practices. The "ground of being" is inherently a natural relational image. We are never separate from our ground. God, then, becomes our springboard for relating to the rest of creation.

A healthy prayer life should move us to the deepest parts of our souls. Prayer moves us to a place where God is always present and standing with us in the midst of the tumultuous influences outside ourselves. It is also a place where the future is created gently in a dynamic relationship between the creator and the created.

The persistence in prayer called for by scripture flows naturally from our soul's encounter with God. We persist in prayer to "Please God," to celebrate a relationship that is the ground of our being and the hope for our future.

Week 3: A Time-Challenged God

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-2, 5-10

Hear the words of Bill Gates: "In terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning" (Anita Mathias, "Learning to Pray," *Christian Century* 117, no. 10 [22 March 2000]: 342).

For the postmodern person, spirituality is anachronistic. A culture with strong faith in technology does not have the patience to wait for God. God's response to our prayers may seem time challenged, or even nonexistent. A culture focused on efficiency, profitability, and instant gratification is not likely to be drawn to a compassionate God of history.

The biblical story tells of a covenant God with a covenant people. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). Although the covenant came through one person, Abraham, it was a covenant for all human descendants. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, *so that you will be a blessing*" (Genesis 12:2). The biblical pattern is that God works through individuals for the benefit of all people.

God's blessings to the whole usually come at a price for the one called. Moses, for example, was content tending his flock when God called. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. . . . So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:7, 10). After four hundred years of frustration, God's intervention must have been a joyous occasion for Israel. But their complaints for the next forty years wandering in the desert are clearly recorded in scripture and during the Babylonian exile.

The God of the New Testament is also time challenged. The disciples of Jesus spent fifty days behind closed doors for fear of their lives until God responded to their prayers with the gift of the Holy Spirit. To this day the Christian church also awaits a promised second coming of Christ.

Whereas the biblical story is about waiting for God, it is also about our inability to discern God's presence. Elijah was looking for God in the dramatic events of wind, earthquake, and fire when he discovered God in silence. Jesus wept over a city because its people were unable to recognize the time of God's visitation, and seemed angry with Philip who asked Jesus to show him God. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

The power of the covenant God comes in community. Prayer is, and should be, a personal communion with God. It is also a common experience in the covenant community, an experience of communion with other people.

A Hebrew word for prayer, *avodah*, means "to be of service" and "to work or take action for a higher purpose." Prayer has a social component. When we pray to invite God to change our environment, we also must be ready to be changed. Abraham, Moses, and Jesus each discovered that in relationship with the divine, prayer is not a passive experience. Prayer moves us to a higher purpose.

In some ways there are similarities between today's younger generations and those entering adulthood in the politically charged 1960s and 1970s. Many were, and still are, skeptical that a relationship with God would bring about racial equality, eliminate poverty, and bring world peace. These socially active baby boomers wanted to change the world and they were impatient waiting for

God to do it.

Our covenant God is a God of change, and the covenant people are called to be the agents of change. Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were change agents, instruments within the covenant community for God to heal the world.

We live with the tension between self-care and social responsibility. In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer argues that self-care is never a selfish act. It is simply good stewardship to discover and nurture the gifts God has given us to fulfill our social responsibility. Whereas fulfilling one's role in God's healing of the world can be satisfying, it can also be agonizing.

Parker Palmer's agony came in the form of depression—twice. Palmer's discovery during his depression seems valuable for our spiritual life. A counselor observed that Palmer viewed depression as the hand of the enemy trying to crush him. "Do you think," said the counselor, "you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to ground on which it is safe to stand?" (Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000], 66).

Our personal struggles may offer a way of reconnecting us with God, the ground of our being. God as *ground* is a wonderful image of renewal and safety as we gain strength to reenter the social arena. Jesus' prayer at the garden of Gethsemane, for example, was Jesus' attempt to ground himself to give him strength to face the cross.

Our most frequent prayers may seek God's intervention. We may come away from this intercessory prayer wondering why God has not responded, or unable to discern God's response.

Yet our biblical history assures us that God is faithful to the covenant community. We may enter prayer hoping for personal healing and discover that the real power in prayer is in community. Prayer is an activity of personal reflection that ultimately connects us with God and with other people. It is an activity that calls us beyond ourselves to a higher purpose.

Whereas often our human vision is myopic and time constrained, God's vision lacks limits and seeks the good of God's creation. Our prayer life reconnects us with our ground of being and calls us into community and toward the larger vision to heal the world.

Week 4: Investing in Prayer

Scripture: Psalm 63:1-8

The relationship between the author of Psalm 63 and God is clearly intimate: "Your steadfast love is better than life." Among the key elements in a healthy prayer life, the relationship with God is most important. Our relationship to God must be like that of a personal friend. Our experiences of an absent God assume God is somehow separate and distant from us. If, however, we can reimage God to be our ground of being rather than totally other, our relationship with the one who created us becomes more intimate and constant.

Prayer has a social component too. Self-renewal through the one who created the world and us moves us to a higher purpose, thus, a call from God. God's call is an instrument in the healing of the world.

Whereas the God of Genesis proclaims all creation to be good, in our postmodern culture spirituality and culture are in conflict. An improved spiritual life requires a different image of God and of ourselves than our culture promotes. Our biblical story reminds us of the faithfulness of our covenant God, a time-tested foundation for life. Without a strong basis in faith, if technology ultimately fails us our culture may be facing tremendous personal and social crises.

Prayer, too, is risky. We are transformed by prayer and moved to a higher calling to change the world.

My first experience with desert spirituality came in a two-year project in spiritual formation. Generally, I enjoyed experimenting with different types of prayer. I found centering prayer very difficult whereas scriptural meditation was more satisfying. There are a variety of ways to invest in prayer. One style of prayer is not superior to another, but one style may be more comfortable than another style.

Rote prayers, the most common style of prayer, can be public or private. “The Jesus Prayer” is a traditional prayer that repeats this phrase: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The prayer, or mantra, is repeated in rhythm. Breath prayer is a more personal expression in mantra form. Rote prayers are common in public worship. The Lord’s Prayer, the most common rote prayer, is almost universally used in Christian worship.

There are a number of prayers designed to enhance one’s relationship with God. The traditional centering prayer focuses on one word such as “God” or “love.” For *Star Trek* followers, centering prayer is similar to the Vulcan mind meld—when Spock puts his hand to one’s head and reads his thoughts—as the mind of God becomes one with our mind in prayer by discarding foreign thoughts and focusing on a single word.

Intercessory prayers invite God to change something. Intercessory prayer can be of a personal nature, seeking something for the one praying, or it can be of a social nature. We may pray for the well-being of another person, or for greater clarity of purpose, namely, to move ourselves in line with God’s vision.

Praying the scriptures, or *lectio divina*, encourages us to live in the scripture, to allow the scripture to move us. In short, the scripture prays for us.

Silence may be the most powerful form of prayer. Quakers use silence well, often going extended periods of time without speaking. In the silence, if we listen intently as did Elijah, God will encounter us in surprising ways.

Movement may be the least appreciated form of prayer. The movement of our bodies praises God, expresses suffering, or simply communicates openness. Activities such as dance, singing, celebrating the Eucharist, or even work can be forms of prayer. The activity of walking a labyrinth helps one “live” the journey and our movement becomes prayer. Prayers of thanksgiving are uplifting, not only for God but also for us. Psalm 63, for example, recognizes the power of divine relationship and divine grace. Giving thanks to God in prayer often motivates us to give thanks for other people and other things in our lives.

Finally, there are the prayers of higher purpose, which may feel more like prayers of resistance. God does call us to special tasks just as God called Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. In these prayers of response we offer ourselves to God for higher purposes.

We may be intentional about just one form of prayer, or several forms of prayer, but prayer is not an isolated practice. If prayer is a human response to our awareness of God, then prayer is manifested in every aspect of our lives. No matter what we are doing, when we are aware of God, we are praying. We began this series with an observation by Gerald May that all human beings have an inborn desire for God. The psalmist’s intimate relationship with God led the writer to exclaim, “Your steadfast love is better than life.” A healthy prayer life is possible only if we relate to God as intimately as the psalmist. God is not merely totally other, but the very foundation of our lives and of all creation. Our relationship with God brings us into relationship with all creation.

Ultimately, prayer moves us to a higher plane. The power and intent of prayer is fulfilled in community. This community is engaged in the healing of the world.

The highlight of our prayer life comes when we recognize that God desires us as much as we desire God. God’s faithfulness is related in scripture and experienced in life. Postmodern culture challenges our spirituality. But God’s desire, and ours, is for relationship—an intimate divine/human

relationship and a relationship with all of God's creation.

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