

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
September 25, 2011
©2011

Why Do We Worship the Way that We Do? -- II. Prayer, Praise and the P.I.T.A. Principle

(1 John 1:8-10 NRSV) "8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

(James 5:16 NRSV) "16 ...confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

(Luke 18:9-14 Eugene Petersen's The Message translation) [Jesus] told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: "Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people - robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.' "Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'" Jesus commented, "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

One of the sweetest and most generous people I have ever known was a woman who was in my first full-time church out of seminary in the wilds of the west Texas desert. Let's call her Norma¹ She would do anything for you. She loved kids. She had a fun sense of humor. On her front porch she had a big rock labeled "*Turn Me Over.*" And, of course, who could resist? When you turned it over, the other side said "*Thanks, that feels much better.*" But she had a habit that always made me have what I'll call a theological cringe. Whenever she would get annoyed or frustrated or angry with someone, whenever someone hurt her or her family in some intentional or unintentional

¹This is not her real name.

way, she would say *“Oh well, I simply shot a great big prayer right at their forehead. I’m a prayer warrior and prayers are my arrows.”*

A number of years ago, I was the pastor of a small country church in Indiana where the church had been and continued to be in some serious, long-standing conflict. One night at a rather tense Elders meeting, one of the Elders at one point said, *“I think we need to pray together.”* Sounded good. But then he began, *“Lord, we pray that you would chastise and rebuke our pastor for his wrongful ways”* and he concluded by saying that we would now all pray the Lord’s Prayer together in hopes that it doing so would *“smite our pastor.”*² This is one of the only times that I recall ever refusing to pray the Lord’s Prayer for whether that preface was directed at me or had been directed at someone else, it simply seemed a wrong use of prayer. My wife Barbara reminded me the other day that our children sometimes used to ask her to pray for them to do well when they had a test that day at school. Barbara would say that she would, but at the same time reminded them that God had a lot less work with if they hadn’t in fact studied for the test!

Prayer. No topic seems more common. There are over 250 verses in the Bible that refer to prayer. Jesus is often portrayed as praying, telling parables about prayer, or telling his disciples how to pray. Prayer is inextricably intertwined in the Christian tradition and the Jewish tradition out of which we come. And yet no topic is harder. We wonder how “prayer works.” We have all heard prayers we found offensive. We have all seen folks use prayer as what looks to be simply a package for their political views –whether from the left or from the right, liberal or conservative. Who hasn’t appreciated when a good friend tells us that she is praying for us, but, at the same time, who hasn’t felt condescended to when someone else says in response to our situation,

²Again, for privacy’s sake, some details slightly changed.

with a bit of a sneer in his voice, *“Well, I’ll pray for you then.”*

This morning, in this second part of our four-part series on why we worship the way that we do and what the significance of the various parts of our worship service is, let me offer a few thoughts on this tricky topic of prayer as it is a part of worship together Sunday by Sunday. We can’t answer every question on the topic, but we can nonetheless look together briefly at the function that prayer has in our Order of Worship. Last week I talked about those opening and closing moments of worship – Prelude, Call to Worship, and Announcements– and said that their job was to remind us that God is offering in this hour **to re-define us**. That is, we come to worship defined and shaped by so many other things – family, friends, work, worry, pain, loss, fear – and we need to be reminded that our **first** definition, if you will, is that of child of God, gifted and graced. And then, do you notice what the first moment after that is? Well, after we sing our opening hymn we usually have some sort of Invocation, but what it really is is a **Prayer of Thanksgiving**. And that is so right. Because having taken up God on His offer to redefine us, we are moved to gratitude for life itself, for life that is lived always in the care of God. I once knew of someone who was an atheist, and after a particularly harrowing experience in which he nearly lost his child but didn’t, he said: *“I want to thank somebody, I want to thank somebody, but I don’t know who or how”*³ But we who count ourselves Christians **can** thank somebody and the Invocation, with its emphasis on thanksgiving is to remind us that WE know whom to thank – God! Not our own wits, not luck, not karma, but the God who is always seeking our good. And in that vein, then, the other thing that the Invocation with its tone of thanksgiving does is to set our hearts in the right attitude to receive God’s comfort, inspiration, and leading – and to praise God for these things. I’ve shared with you preacher Gardner Taylor’s

³My dim memory – if it is indeed a memory – believes that this is originally a story in one of the Rev. John Claypool’s writings.

profound line about gratitude before, but it's worth repeating: *"I have never known anyone who was truly grateful who was at the same time small or petty or bitter or mean or greedy or selfish or who could take any pleasure in anyone else's pain."* If the opening moments of worship are God's offer to re-define us, then that Invocation is our **response** to that offer, in essence saying to God: *"Thank you. I am Yours. First and last, I am yours. And I do want my life to be changed, I do want to be one of those people who indeed would try to never be petty or mean or bitter or selfish because I am so grateful for who I am and Who You are. Help me make it more so in this hour of worship."*

Which leads us to our next point about prayer in the context of our Order of Worship. Some Sundays, instead of an Invocation, we have a responsive Prayer of Confession. Now, some folks don't like this; some folks have questions about why we would have such a thing. Like: why do we confess our sin at all? Well, first of all, scripture suggests that we do so. But, second, I think that both John and James in our readings for today counsel us to confess our sin for the same reason that we must experience Good Friday before we can truly appreciate Easter. That is, our lives **are** marred by sin. Some of it, probably most of it, we didn't intend to do. Yet we did. Some of it is the fact that we benefitted from the hurt that others suffered, again whether we ever intended to or not. I was once very startled and chagrined to see a very unbiased documentary about race relations. In this documentary, which, again, had no axe to grind, dozens of white men and black men – all nicely and similarly dressed and groomed – were covertly filmed in a shopping mall. None of them shoplifted. Yet by the study's end, it turned out that the black men were six times more likely to have been stopped by security on "suspicion" of shoplifting. I, with my white skin, didn't cause that state of affairs, or surely intend it, but I **have benefitted** from it. I need to acknowledge that, confess it, for without doing so it will be impossible to

change.

But third, we confess our sin to God because of that fact that some of us, some of you, are sometimes prone to think that you are a greater sinner than you really are, or that such sins are yours only and other people are better. But to confess *together*, to acknowledge *together*, reminds us that no, in fact, all of us share a common human condition and you need not think yourself worse than is really the case! But fourth and most importantly, we confess our sin, we acknowledge together because a confession of sin never, ever happens without at the same time offering an assurance of God's mercy in the face of sin. Did you hear how John put it: *"If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* Now notice what this doesn't mean: it doesn't mean that **unless** we confess, God is **unwilling** to forgive us. God **wants** to forgive us, God does not **want** us trapped by that which hurts us, God does not **want** us mired in regrets and what-if's to the point that our lives are stunted. But if we don't **acknowledge** that we have indeed sinned, that we have indeed done things that we regret, then it's *impossible* for us to experience or accept that forgiveness. You have all known people who have done something hurtful and who, instead of acknowledging that, became more and more defensive, more and more unwilling to see their behavior in its true light. It's impossible for those folks to know forgiveness because they can't acknowledge their need for it Together in worship, most every Sunday morning, though, we do acknowledge our need together – and we can then be forgiven and freed.

And that is what allows us to move on with the rest of our worship in a way that truly has the chance of transforming and renewing us. How many of you have had a gyros sandwich? Those of you who have had this wonderful Greek concoction know that the thing – tzatziki, meat, onions – is held together by a pita pocket. Well, in this

rest of our time together this morning I want to offer another kind of pita, an acronym actually, and it too is something that can wrap the whole experience of *prayer* together. P.I.T.A. [spell out] – Praise, Intercession, Thanksgiving, and Ascription. These are the marks of the kind of prayer that we offer in worship on Sunday. They are what guide me when I offer the Pastoral Prayer.. And if you are wondering how to pray yourself, or if you are wondering how to make your prayer life more satisfying, I would suggest the same P.I.T.A. principle to you – see if you can make your prayers have these four elements. Not every prayer needs to have each one, but these – along with confession – are things none of which we ought to ignore either. So let me say a brief word about each, and you can see if this might be helpful to your own praying:

Praise. You may have heard the modern praise chorus called “Let’s **Just** Praise the Lord.” It’s a catchy tune, but the problem with it is this: we never **just** praise God, just like we never **just** praise other people, just for the sake of praising. We always praise for some **reason**. So when we pray in praise to God, it takes the form of “God we praise you **because** _____.” And that “because” spells out something that God is or has done, for us or for someone else, something that is **worthy** of praise. This is in part a reminder to us to praise God for the right things and it is also a reminder **not** to praise ourselves for something which actually is God’s accomplishment! Have you heard the joke about the man who was very late to an appointment downtown in the big city? Round and round the block he drove, looking for a parking space. He began to despair and feel desperate. And so he prayed, “*O God, please send me a parking space.*” And, just then, a car starting leaving a space, right in front of the building where he needed to go, and he could see that there was even time left on the parking meter! And the next words out of his mouth were this: “*Never mind, God; I found one on my own.*” Now, I actually don’t think that God much operates in the sphere of parking spaces; I think God is at work on more important things. But the story is a reminder that

we should never praise ourselves for things that are actually **not** our accomplishments. For example, we are who we are because we have been the beneficiaries of the love and kindness and leading and teaching of so many people. **That** is a gift of **God**, not something of our own doing. And God is worthy to be praised for placing those people in our paths.

Intercession. In today's bulletin, I have included a quotation from the great writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. His quote about prayer sums up what he has learned in a long and sometimes unspeakably hard life: *"God does not need our prayers. We need them. We need to be able to pray in sincerity and beauty. And the prayer should not be against somebody but always for somebody."* **The prayer should not be against somebody but always for somebody.** Every worship service that we have and every prayer that you or I pray ought to have a prayer for someone else. We don't do that because God will be unaware of the needs of these folks if we fail to do so. Our prayers are not memos to God about what God needs to know. But our prayers for other people always serve to open **us** up – for both sin and the complexity of our lives always are tending to want to narrow us, to diminish our empathies. But in our prayers for someone else we are reminded that indeed every person is our neighbor and that some of those neighbors are suffering – and we can do something. Our prayers for someone else, some other situation in God's world, help keep us from being apathetic, help keep us from being jaded, help keep us from what one person has called "compassion fatigue."⁴

Thanksgiving. I've already spoken about this element of prayer earlier so let me move on to:

⁴The Rev. Johnny Wray and perhaps others.

Ascription: This is a fancy theological word that you and I don't use in "regular" conversation. But it's really a simple concept. It simply means to **describe** something. The best way I know to talk about it is with an analogy: very often people who write letters to one another sign off those letters with what, in fact, are **ascriptions**. "*I am sincerely yours*" is to rather formally **describe** myself. Or sometimes those closing phrases of letters describe the **recipient**. A lawyer friend once told me of a letter his client wrote to another person which closed with this ascription: "*You, sir, are cheating scum; very truly yours.*" In our prayers it is always worth closing with an ascription that describes both us and God: "*Oh God, we are the sheep of your pasture and You are our Shepard.*" "*Oh God, we would be lost and wandering without you, but You lead us safely home.*" "*Oh God, even in our anxieties we would be at peace, because everything and everyone is safe with You.*" You see how this works? One prayer discipline for you to practice might be to close **your** prayers with a simple description of who *you* are and Who *God* is. *I am this, and God, you are that.* It's a way of focusing and clarifying what is really important about our lives, which, as I put it last week, is to know **who we are and Whose we are.**

That's a lot of words, a lot of stuff. But it's really very simple. The old saying that you've all heard is "prayer changes things." But the first thing that prayer changes is **us**. Prayer can move us from isolation to intimacy, from confusion to comfort, from hopelessness to wholeness. Try it this week: along with confession, wrap your prayers up in this P.I.T.A. principle – praise, intercession, thanksgiving, and ascription. It may indeed change things; it may indeed change you. May it be so. Amen.