

OAKRIDGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Too much of a Secret

Acts 17: 22-34

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Prayer is present in every faith: Every one of the world faiths practice prayer. Communicating with the divine is one of the pillars for most of the world religions. Philip Yancey in 'Prayer, does it make any difference' said that atheists even find a way to pray. Advice was given to atheists in Russia at the time of communism. The advice went like this: at a time of difficulty or when one doubts their abilities, one was encouraged to think of Stalin and then be assured that things would go better. As Christians we take prayer as vital to our faith, because Jesus prayed. Prayer is so vital to our faith, yet in our busyness, prayer is forgotten. Prayer is often minimized because the close presence of God is too much of a secret in our Christian practice.

In Acts 17: 24ff, Paul is saying to the Athenians that their 'unknown god' is the God that we know in Jesus Christ. *"The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor, he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places they would live, (27) so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him –(28) though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being."*

Prayer is the way we search for God and become aware of God. As the scripture says in verse 27, God created the people and everything in creation that his offspring would search and even grope for him and find him because he is not far away. Actually, in Him we live and move and have our existence! In other words, he is totally with us!

Humility in prayer: The majority of the world's population seems to have a desire to know God. Prayer is the avenue to make this happen. However, too often the prayers raised up are self-centered and materialistically oriented. Philip Yancey states on pg. 29 that in prayer he shifts his point of view away from his own selfishness. Prayer also reminds us about how fleeting our life is. Psalm 8 also reminds us in these words, *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"* Prayer exposes for a few brief moments what humans would rather ignore: The fact of their state of fragile dependence. On the other hand, people too often see God as someone they cower before, not as someone like Jesus – who is worthy of our trust.

A relationship, not a transaction: Prayer practiced as a transaction rather than a relationship can diminish into a practice that is more of a duty than joy. One could "say their prayers" daily but do not get a sense of a loving God who wants an intimate relationship with them. Sometimes people pray with the thought that God is a far off deity who is aloof and may or may not choose to answer the prayer. The prayer then takes on more of a transaction of making God feel good with the hope that this God will respond by acting in such a way which is

favourable towards the person praying. Yancey states on page 55 that the fact of the matter is that we do not have to bang a drum or bring an animal sacrifice to get God's full attention - we already have it! From our scripture today from Acts 17, we read about a God who desires a close relationship with his children (*for in Him we live and move and have our being – verse 28*). Our image of God more than anything else determines whether we will enter into a relationship with God. The image of God as a loving father is clear in these words of Psalm 103: 11-14, "*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.*"

Making room for God: Giving God room in one's life can be so difficult in a world that demands more and more of our time. Yancey highlights a man by the name of Anthony on page 52. At 49, Anthony was dealing with the death of his father and a divorce (among other challenges). Through these experiences he learned more about himself, and his need for a more spiritual life. He was trying to fit in with the stereotypes of society and it led to unhealthy behaviours. He decided to be more open to God – for prayer and reflection, long walks, and spiritual reading. He decided to ask himself questions each day to help him focus on the spiritual instead of the material parts of his life. Here are the questions: How can I slow down? How can I simplify things? How can I bring silence into my life? How can I savour the moment? How can I speak up and tell the truth? How can I establish roots and rituals? How can I shed my armour and masks? How can I soften my approach to life? How can I serve the community? As J. Heinrich Arnold said, "Christian discipleship is not of our own doing, it is a matter of making room for God so he can live in us." It is not so much a matter of trying harder, but it is more about allowing God to live and move and have his being in us.

Jesus calls us friends (John 15: 12-17). The thought of God who created the universe and its orbits, and at the same time calls us his friends is a concept difficult for us to comprehend from our limited perspective. When we think of our very good friends, we know we can tell them anything and they will not think less of us. This is possible because we have a trusting relationship with them. We know through Jesus Christ that 'friendship' with God is offered to each one of us. The Pharisees scoffed at Jesus because he was a friend of 'sinners'. The first line of the song, "*What a Friend we have in Jesus all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer*" reminds us how we strengthen our friendship with Jesus in prayer.

Unequal partners: Philip Yancey says that our relationship with God is like a relationship between Microsoft and a high school programmer. We know what happens in an unequal partnership – one partner dominates, and the other remains quiet. God, however, invites an honest flow of conversation. We can pray to God with lament and even anger because he values honesty in our relationship with him. We see this clearly in the writing of the prophets and in the Psalms! God wants to hear it all. God desires that we are aware that he is close!

It is too much of a secret in our world that God is with us. Let us search for him – he is not far away. Amen.

(Philip Yancey: "Prayer: Does it make any difference?" Zondervan, 2006.)

