

Pastoral Letter for the April, 2020 OVPC Newsletter

Sisters and Brothers of the congregation of Ocean View Presbyterian Church, Friends, and Visitors to this page, Grace and Peace to you in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is odd, from the point of view of the church year, that the peak of our isolation and social distance from one another will not be occurring in Lent, the classic season of introspection and self-examination. No, it will occur in the season of Easter, the time of joy in the saving action of Jesus in the world. You and I know, of course, that the church year is an artifice, seeking to regularize the Gospel events of 3 (or 4, per John) years into a coherent whole every year. We do, all the time, know the whole story, how it began and ended and what seasons and perils and growth and disappointment are included along the way. We live into parts of the story deliberately in the seasons of the church, making the Gospel story more and more our own. We will celebrate as an “Easter People” when we are all back together; in the meantime, we have many opportunities to live our faith a little differently. I want to focus on one.

A place of very happy memory for me is Emery House, a retreat house in West Newburyport, Massachusetts run by the brothers of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, a monastic society of the Episcopal church. I have been on retreat there both in the main house, and in one of the guest cottages. Those cottages are quite small and quite spare (also quite simple and quite beautiful), yet each makes room in one corner to have a deliberately set prayer space. In that space there is provision to sit, or kneel (or stand), to read, and to focus. The sense of austere calm is palpable; like in many places on Emery House’s grounds, the sense of being in a “thin place” is very real. Yours truly is a very distractable pray-er, who does much better when walking, yet I was able to avail myself of this quiet space, and a lot of quiet time, to deeply reflect not only on what I had learned each day, but on my relationship with my God.

Matthew 6: 5-15 is often subheaded “**Concerning Prayer**”; there we are invited to go into our “room”, or “closet” (the Greek word is *tamieon*, and means “inner” or even “hidden” room), close the door, and pray to our Father in heaven in secret; there we will be heard. Jesus was not offhandedly condemning public prayer; after all, Jews prayed three times a day, and might very well not be at home. No, He was condemning the manner in which some people prayed publicly: to receive attention. Prayer is not about the magnification of ourselves, but the magnification of God. We are to look to God, and not the one praying; a lesson many televangelicals would do well to observe. We offer ourselves up humbly in prayer, knowing God sees our distress, whether for ourselves or for others. Private prayer is where we can be most fully available, and vulnerable, to God’s will (and if you turned in your Bible to this

passage while reading here, you will have noticed that this is where Matthew offers Jesus' teaching on prayer in general that we know as the Lord's Prayer. We pray it publicly, but its private power is not to be foregone!).

So, after all this preamble, what is my point? Simply this: set up and use your prayer space; or, go there and use it still more, in this time of personal and national and global stress. If you are unfamiliar with where or how you best pray, now is a great time to explore that question. As I said earlier, I (and many others) pray best alone outdoors. But I would risk to say most folks do better indoors, in a place they can count on not being interrupted. That means expressly telling others in your household about what and where your practice will be, so they will know to offer respect and quiet to you. My own Pam already has her own sacred space; it coincides with where she prefers to read, and she just separates the uses. In her reading chair she does her devotionals every morning, at a time when a bumbling, noise-making me will not disturb her.

What works for Pam will not work for everybody, though; many of us need a sense of deliberate purpose and difference to enter into our quiet, attentive state. So, a basic prayer space, like the ones at Emery House: it should *already* be a space of quiet and calm; you should *already* like to be there. A seat, or a kneeling bench, should be there – and it should be comfortable and aesthetically pleasing to *you*, its user. A rug is nice – keep it small and simple, and yes, beautiful. A candle or candles, if you like them. Favorite pictures, if you pray visually (and don't be afraid of icons – they work for many people!). Art paper, if you pray in color. It goes without saying, a Bible – again, your favorite. Devotional books you love and return to. And, *if it helps you*, a source of quiet, non-verbal music. All this can take up a 4X4 corner in a room, or grow out to a bit bigger; a warning is that if it becomes a *room*, with many objects, you will likely become distractable. By the way, a window is nice – if it's high or shaded, so you won't just watch what's going on outside! [Someone among my readers is going to turn out to be that person who enters into meditation by watching the world until its all one thing, and they are at peace!]. I wish you joy, and peace, and love in this, your prayer space!

Please remember that formal, public prayer, with its more or less cultivated language, is a deliberate practice of inclusion; it toes a careful line between personal and collective expression, and has a language all its own. Practiced well, it can say a lot for a lot of people; it can be beautiful, but can also feel impersonal. Your own prayer life is intensely personal, and does not require a formal language, or a formal stance. Rather, private prayer requests the giving of your inmost self, however it is possible for that to occur. Groaning, nagging, arguing, blaming, entreating, accusing – it's all within bounds (and to be found in your Bible). Just so long as it is honest; just so long as it opens us to God's tender care and careful repair, it is prayer.

We have seen the “pure” and the “perfect” idealized all our lives; God does not want these, anymore than God wants bulls and rams and birds offered as sacrifices. These create distance from God, because they are transactional (go back to that passage from Matthew!). God wants prayer that is honest, broken, inarticulate and needy. God can work with our brokenness and neediness; it’s much harder to crack through our pride. It’s been said that the greatest prayers we can offer are “HELP!”, and “THANKS!” – and there’s a lot of truth in that. But an engaged, reciprocal prayer life has so many rewards, including what those two prayers really seek: a recovered companionship and mutuality with God, the one Eden knew. Pray for that.

Go, then, into your room, and pray to your Father who is in secret; may our God bless you in every way!

In Christ, Pastor Terry