

1. Secret Piety
With Christ in the School of Prayer
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

I'm starting today a preaching series called WITH CHRIST IN THE SCHOOL OF PRAYER and today's message serves as an introduction. In your bulletins is an outline of the titles and texts as well as some additional reading that I know could be of benefit to you. So I hope you will work together with me. I'll work hard on my end and if you work hard on your end, we'll all draw closer to our Lord over these next nine weeks.

At its simplest, prayer is conversation with God. Since humans are created in the image of God and made for eternal fellowship with God, we might say that prayer is our native language. Unfortunately many of us have forgotten the vocabulary and no longer feel fluent when conversing with God. We find prayer language hard now and don't practice it as frequently or as faithfully as we should. There was a time when I was reasonably adept at reading the New Testament in its original Greek or even some of the Old Testament in its original Hebrew. But over the years I've neglected those languages and can no longer use them without huge effort. Many of us may find it likewise with praying: fluency, confidence, and even desire have dwindled away.

I want to reawaken in us a love for our native tongue. I want for myself and for you a rediscovery and a fresh enjoyment of what it means to learn and relearn from Jesus how to pray. His school of prayer is open today and we begin with a text that points at a manner of life called *piety* in which we come to prayer. The dictionary defines *piety* as "devotion to religious duties and practices."¹ In other words, piety has to do with how we live in order to pray. Let's read it in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6.1 (NRSV)

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

I want to focus on just this single verse as our text today as we reflect on our secret piety. But I also want to read three additional paragraphs from Matthew 6, paragraphs that contain Jesus' own examples of a secret piety.

Matthew 6.2-4: "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

¹ "Piety," *Websters New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1983 ed.

And Matthew 6.5-6: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

And finally Matthew 6.16-18: “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Why are we good?

“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” In the examples that Jesus gives, we are told three times that God who sees in secret will reward us. But all of that starts with the words of the text when Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” We begin relearning our native tongue by understanding what Jesus says here and we can do that by asking a single question: why are we good?

Why are we good? Why do we go about trying to live godly lives? We may think that we do it because we want to please God. But if we honestly examine ourselves, we may discover that our goodness, our piety, and our attempts at holiness come from more selfish reasons than we readily care to admit.

The text warns against a piety that we perform, effectively if not consciously, for any audience other than God. Nobody sets out to be a hypocrite. We don't plan or prepare for that. It's just that we slip into situations or habits where we practice our faith to impress others — children, fellow church members, or people in the community. And if we're not careful, the need for human approval subtly becomes the idol to which we bow down and worship.² We think we are serving God. In reality we may be serving our need for approval.

I fear the church often aids and abets this problem. To do what we need to do as a community of faith, we constantly need members to volunteer to do all kinds of things: teach, cook, clean, lead, sing, give — to name some. And in various ways the church tries to appreciate and honor those who do things. Yet in the very honoring, we may be subtly encouraging the practicing of piety in order to be seen by others. So the church may worsen the problem of doing good to be seen by others. Why are we good? It *may* be to love God. But it may also be, and in reality often is, to be seen and noticed and appreciated by others. What others think of us can seem so important.

In a book called, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott, one of my favorite writers, talks about her hair. She has always had, to say the least, frizzy hair. All her life men and boys have asked her if she has stuck her finger in a light socket. Much of her life

² Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 189.

was spent in trying to make her hair appear less frizzy. She says that “industrial-strength mousse” was her remedy of choice for many years.

When Ann first attended St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California, she wore her hair as she had for many years — “shoulder length and ringletty.” It was that way, in any case, if there was an absence of wind, rain, or humidity. Lamott writes: “In the absence of weather, with a lot of mousse on hand, I could get it to fall just right so that it would not be too frizzy and upsetting — although ‘fall’ is perhaps not the right word. ‘Appear to fall’ is close. ‘Shellacked into the illusion of “falling”’ is even closer. Weather was the enemy. I could leave the house with bangs down to my eyebrows, moussed and frozen into place like the plastic sushi in the windows of Japanese restaurants, and after five minutes in rain or humidity, I’d look like Ronald McDonald.”

As usual with Anne Lamott, when writing about hair or other mundane things, she is really writing about her relationship with God. For she asks, “Can you imagine the hopelessness of trying to live a spiritual life when you’re secretly looking up at the skies not for illumination or direction but to gauge, miserably, the odds of rain? Can you imagine how discouraging it was for me to live in fear of the weather, of drizzle or downpour? Because Christianity is *about* water.”

Then she goes on to talk about baptism, about falling into something elemental and *wet*. Most of life, Lamott insists, is about staying dry, looking good, not going under, being in control. “But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that’s a little sloppy because at the same time it’s also holy, and absurd. It’s about surrender, giving in to all those things we can’t control; it’s a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get *drenched*.... And in the Christian experience of baptism, the hope is that when you go under and you come out, maybe a little disoriented, you haven’t dragged the old day along behind you. The hope, the belief, is that a new day is upon you now.”³

You may be wondering what this has to do with piety or prayer. Just this. Anne was miserable when she lived in fear of what the weather would do to her frizzy hair. She was consumed with how she looked and what people would think of her. She wanted to be in control and couldn’t. And it took baptism to teach her that not being in control is okay. Newness in life comes not because we’re in control but because we give ourselves up to live in God. And that’s what piety is as well. Our religious duty isn’t for the sake of others, though it can certainly bless others. Much less is our piety to be seen by others. It isn’t even primarily for ourselves. Piety centers us in the source of life — God. That’s what prayer is all about too. Prayer is conversing with the Source of life. That’s why we are to be good and that’s why we are to pray.

Conclusion

As we center our lives in God through piety and prayer, we begin to receive Jesus’ promise. The promise is that God happily responds to those who center their devotion and prayer in God. In Jesus’ positive examples of piety he talks about reward three times. “...

³ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts On Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999) 229-232.

and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (6.4, 6.6, 6.18). We’re not told what the reward is but we can guess from what we read elsewhere in Matthew that the reward is the joy of the presence of God.⁴ For what higher good can we hope than to live in the presence of God and let the presence of God live in us?

I said at the beginning that piety is how we live in order to pray. So real piety means cleaning out the clutter that keeps our lives from being centered in God. We moved from Marlborough to Westford a couple of weeks ago in order to be closer to Merrie’s new job in Chelmsford. Of course, we moved here a year ago. And a year before that we sold our home and moved into an apartment while I was seeking a new call. When you move that much in such a short time your muscles become painfully aware how much clutter we have in our homes and lives.

I’ve come to believe the much of the clutter in my basement and closets and garage is really the residue of over-consuming ways. Increasingly for me it is a toxic residue, a clutter that comes from consuming but ends up consuming me. So every move, including this one, means that more stuff has to go — to charity, to the dump, to somewhere. And the physical clutter is but the visible side of emotional, spiritual, and social clutter that also has to go. For all the clutter distracts from God being the simple, singular center of our hearts.

Dear friends, piety done only on to God and prayer help clean out the clutter and bring us to the center. There God will meet us and reward us. That’s what I want to happen over these next nine weeks.

⁴ See Matthew 25.21, 23. Brueggemann, 190.