

A Life of Prayer  
Beginning the Conversation  
Romans 8:26-27

During the month of July we will be talking about prayer. We will be talking about a very specific form of prayer—conversational prayer. This is prayer in which we talk with God, rather than talking to God.

As Methodists, a key ingredient of salvation is to grow in our fellowship with God. Last week I talked about the importance of sinking our roots deep in the love of God. Life is good when we experience the joy of loving and being loved. Our goal as Christians is to grow until we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and we love our neighbors as ourselves. Abundant and eternal life is the life of love. Our capacity for love is increased when we are loved. We love because we are loved.

We experience God's love in many ways. God's love is not just a matter of words. God's love is manifested in very concrete ways. The very air we breathe is a gift of God's love and can be a constant reminder of God's love. God's love for us was shown most powerfully and dramatically in Christ's death on the cross. There is no price that God will not pay to give us the opportunity to bloom and be filled with the joy of the goodness of life.

But, although love cannot just be a matter of words, words are important in expressing love. There is a man who had a good father. His father had worked hard to provide for his family. Any time any of his children needed help or support, their father was there. However, this man's father kept his emotions to himself. He didn't express affection for his children. He never told his children that he loved them. The man said that although he respected his father, he always felt like there was a barrier that stood between them. It wasn't until he became a father that he understood the depth of love a man can have for his children. He knew that his father must love him and his brothers and sisters as much as he loved his children. One day he had an opportunity to be alone with his father. After they chit-chatted a bit, he said, "Dad, I just want you to know how much I appreciate what a good father you have been to us. I love you, Dad." The man said that his father looked dumbstruck. He could see that his father was struggling to control his emotions. Finally, he said, "Son, I've always loved you and your brothers and sisters. I've wanted to tell you. But I guess I thought a man didn't say those kind of things. But you are as much of a man as I've ever known. If you can say it, so can I. I love you, Son." The man said the barrier that had stood between them melted away that day, and they grew closer than he thought it was possible for him to get with his father.

Words matter.

We know that God loves us. We see the evidence of God's love every day. But we also need to hear God tell us that God loves us.

That's why we need to talk with God, not just to God. That's why we need conversational prayer.

How do we enter into a conversation with God?

When I was young, I thought of God as being far away, sitting on a throne in heaven. I wanted very much to know God, but all my efforts felt like trying to touch the moon by climbing up a step ladder. It seemed impossible, because it was.

What I didn't know was that we are already in fellowship with God. All of us are. God is with us, living in the deepest recesses of our hearts as the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit that was moving me to seek God by creating a hunger for God within me.

Every human being is in fellowship with God. Some know it and some don't. We don't have to start the conversation with God. God has already started it. What we need is the ability to hear what God is saying to us. We need to become of the presence of the Spirit within us, and we need to grow in that awareness throughout our lives.

There are barriers to our awareness of God's presence in our lives. The main one is that we don't think we want to hear what God is saying to us. We think that God will say something like this, "I'm disappointed with you. You are more concerned with enjoying life than you are living a holy and righteous life. It's time for you to stop all the nonsense and live a serious and sacrificial life."

That is not what God says to us. God is saying to us, "I love you. You are my joy and my delight. You are the apple of my eye. I want you to be filled with the joy of the goodness of life. I can show you the way. Trust me. Follow me. Let me lead you into abundant and eternal life."

We remove the barrier to fellowship with God when we can honestly and sincerely pray, "Lord, I do trust you. I am willing to follow where you lead me, because I believe you do love me and want to lead me into a joy-filled, abundant life. Speak, Lord. I am listening."

Then wait. At the time and in the way that God chooses, God will communicate with you.

I use the word "communicate," because God does converse with each of us in the way that is most effective for each of us. You may hear the still, small voice of God. Or you may feel God's presence and leading. Maybe God will communicate with you in pictures, or impressions. Or perhaps each of these at different times. And maybe other ways.

However God chooses to converse with you, God is always gracious and loving. It is not a frightening experience. It's like pouring water on dry, parched land. For some, it comes as a great flood. For others it comes like a gentle rain. Everyone's experience is different. But, for everyone, it is good.

And then the conversation begins.

Our prayer life is greatly enhanced by conversational prayer. Without conversational prayer, our prayers are often formal recitations. It's hard to really talk to someone who isn't listening. Early in my ministry I had a radio program, a five-minute devotional once a week. It was bad. I had no training in radio. I would go in and try to talk to that microphone. I would stutter and stumble. I felt like I was talking to myself. After a few weeks the station manager called me in. He said, "Wesley, what you need to realize is that there are hundreds of people listening to you. You need to imagine that they are right there in front of you, and talk to those people." It worked. I was able to convince myself that there really were people listening to me when I talked to them. But it was never as natural or as easy as talking to someone who was responding to what I was saying.

When we enter into a conversational prayer, we can talk to God directly. We can talk with God honestly. We can tell God what we are truly thinking and feeling. Oftentimes we won't even know what we are thinking and feeling until we begin telling God.

And then we can listen, as God responds to us, helping us to think more clearly, to be more truthful with ourselves, transforming negative and destructive thoughts as we see the world and ourselves the way God sees us.

The Modern Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit is God with us, for guidance, for comfort and for strength. That and much more is what we receive from God, when we spend time in conversational prayer with God. When God speaks to us, we are comforted, strengthened and given guidance.

But most of all we are reminded of God's love for us. Most of what God says to us is simply to remind us of God's love for us, because we become loving by dwelling in God's love. In the last chapter of the Book of Revelation, the last chapter of the Bible, we are shown our final destiny. The New Jerusalem, our final home is being described. We are told that the throne of God and Christ will be in the New Jerusalem. There will be a river of life flowing from the throne. And there will be the tree of life planted beside this river. It will produce fruit which will feed the nations and leaves which will bring healing to the nations. Now, we know what the river of life flowing from the throne is. It is the Holy Spirit. But what is the tree of life? I would like to suggest to you that we are the tree of life, those who are rooted in the love of God and drink deeply of the Spirit of God. We produce the fruits of the Spirit, which give life to those around us. And our love can bring healing to them.

During these next few weeks, I'm hoping that those of you who have not yet entered into a conversation with God will ask God for that fellowship. I'm hoping that those who you who have been in conversation with God will understand it more fully and will spend more time in conversation with God.

Conversational prayer is a powerful means of dwelling in the love of God.

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