

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012, dedicated to Carol Ann Spencer, O.P, Pat Gibboney, Amanda Cushing, the board of directors and the spiritual directors of the Spirituality Network of Central Ohio, and always to the glory of God!

**“Great Prayers
Shape our Faith”
Joel 2: 1-2; Matthew 6:1-18**

**(Part I of VIII in the Sermon Series
“Great Prayers of the Bible”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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It is early morning in Jerusalem. I have been up before dawn on this steamy August Monday. As the sun is rising I make my way to the Old City. Through the Jaffe Gate, into the Christian section, winding through the still sleeping marketplace on cobblestone streets, past sleeping dogs and the skinny, wild cats of Jerusalem stalking and sniffing in search of leftovers, I make my way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - the 4th century church built on the site where it is believed Jesus Christ was crucified, laid on a stone for burial preparation, buried and rose on Easter.

“Good morning,” the Muslim doorkeeper says to a small crowd of 150 people in Arabic and English, as he turns the key and opens the 1,700-year-old door. His family, **the Nusaybahs**, has been keepers of the keys to this church since

the Kurdish General Saladin reclaimed Jerusalem from the Crusaders. For 820 continuous years, 299,300 plus days, this Sunni Muslim family has opened and closed the church for pilgrims of Christian faith, seekers, tourists and the curious ones of other faiths.

This entire day is spent in prayer in the chapels, chambers, tombs, sanctuaries and rotundas of Holy Sepulcher. When not praying, I am inevitably drawn to watch the people who come to pray. They are the universal church of Jesus Christ - coming from every tradition and corner of the globe. They come to honor, glorify, adore our Savior and observe one another doing the same. They are people of prayer.

There is a sacred stillness and low-key buzz throughout the day broken only when tour groups unprepared for the sacred stillness of this holy site enter in. They bring sound and excited movement through the doors - but are soon stilled by the Armenian Orthodox priest who puts his finger to his lips in the international sign of silence. Prayer is truly the unifying peace of Christ that passes understanding in the holy and sacred place.

Our outstretched hands and spirits reaching for the divine connect us to early human cave dwellers. So writes Princeton Professor J. Wentzel van Huyssteen in *Alone in the World: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, the Gifford Lectures from 2004. He points to the Upper Paleolithic cave drawings in Southern Europe as some of the earliest depictions of human beings reaching beyond the earth to the heavens above. They evoke images of the human imagination stretching out beyond the given. These early symbol makers are showing us all tens of thousands of years later that there is only a "thin membrane or veil between people and the spirit world."

Van Huysststeen writes, "We are wired in our brains" to reach out to God (Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the*

Old Testament, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2008, p. xi-xii).

What a simple and beautiful thought. We are wired in our brains to reach out to God. We are in search of the eternal. We are creatures who need a power beyond ourselves to find meaning, purpose and bliss in life. But somewhere between the innate wiring and the science of our brain mapping in the quest for God and the reality of our daily lives, the GPS system has lost track of intelligent design.

I believe our intimate connection to the eternal will always be found in prayer. We should begin each day and end each day in prayer. Somewhere in the middle of each day, we should be still and seek a power beyond ourselves, a power beyond the star-studded universe surrounding us in which we can be still and know the presence of God.

Today is a cleansing day. It is a day to reset our spiritual systems and begin again. When I turn off my GPS system, the last thing I see on the little screen is a suitcase. It is as though the GPS system is telling me to pack and prepare for the next journey to God knows where.

The temptation we have is to separate our ministry and our work and our lives from our prayer and spirituality. Our demons say, *“We are too busy to pray; we have too many needs to attend to, too many people to respond to, too many wounds to heal. Prayer is a luxury, something to do during a free hour, a day away from work or family, or saved for a retreat . . . somewhere down the road. Prayer is for the Trappist monks, the Buddhist monks, the Poor Clares, the isolated hermits. God has set them free for prayer - let them be our conscience and carry the church and her prayers.”*

But nothing could be further from the truth! Our demons must be silenced by the heart of prayer which calls to us as we call to God. It is harmful to think that others should pray while we carry on the work of the church and the world.

Service and prayer; work and prayer; family and prayer - can never be separated. Like the Yin and Yang of the Japanese Circle, our lives must be always intertwined with prayer.

In his book, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, which we will study during Lent and from which I will preach on the prayers of Nehemiah, Abraham, Moses, Hannah and Jeremiah, Walter Brueggemann writes that the primitive prayers of the people of Israel cried out from the depths of the soul. In their earliest prayers, one found in Psalm 82 and echoed in Exodus 2:24-25, the Hebrew Slaves in Egypt cried out - with no particular focus to a God whom they did not name. It is in the crying out, that God's attention was grabbed. We read that God heard their prayers and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *"God looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them."*

Our God, the God of Jesus Christ, notices us. Especially when our sighs are too deep for words, when our prayers are simply cries for help, "O Jesus, help me." "O God, help me." God hears us in our desperation.

Lindsey Crittenden in her book *A Skeptic Learns to Pray*, writes about crying out to God. Once she learns that simply admitting she felt awful was the first step into prayer, she began crying out all the time. She writes, *"I cried out 'Help' in the car and underwater in the swimming pool, where no one could hear me. Desperation that blatant and raw felt embarrassing but oddly liberating and justified, too."*

When you feel lousy, run down, run over, and forgotten, like the slaves of Egypt, cry out. It is prayer. When you feel awful and helpless, cry out, it is prayer.

Helmut Thielicke writes, "The challenge of our time in offering hope and healing to others, the seat of our disease is not found in the branches of our nerves at all, but rather in our roots which are stunted and starved. To work without praying and without listening, means only to grow and to

spread oneself upward without striking roots and without an equivalent in the earth.”

Let our roots in prayer be planted. Let us be still and acknowledge that we are a people embraced by a savior who was all about prayer and whose roots were deeply planted in the soil of God’s soul.

Over the next seven weeks we will dig deep into the great prayers of the church. But God knows that the greatest prayer you can offer is within you. It is waiting to find a seed of stillness. It is waiting to grow into a great prayer - from a heart that is given to God.

Soon we will gather at the cross. May we use these 40 days to come closer and to arrive in prayer. Amen.

* Based in part on Walter Brueggemann’s book *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*.