

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



September 2013

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, On my tenth birthday my parents presented me with a gift of ten new, crisp one dollar bills. In 1955 that was a king's ransom! It may even have been the ten dollars with which I opened my first bank account at the Bound Brook Trust Company - long ago swallowed up and (after decades of mergers) folded into the Wells Fargo Bank. Ten dollars! I could hardly wait to turn 11! The next year, however, things were different. We had moved into the new house which my parents had built themselves. Much of the interior work was not yet complete. When my birthday rolled around, my parents just forgot. Now I'm not going to tell you one of those sad "greatest-disappointment-of-my-life" tales. My parents worked hard. They couldn't be expected to be on top of everything. Even as a child I knew full well that they may have forgotten a birthday, but they hadn't forgot me. Some things just aren't as important as other things. The experience taught me not to get so wound up in small details as to lose sight of the big picture.

In a way, from an early age my understanding of prayer was tinged with realism. Certainly Jesus said, "**Ask, and it will be given to you...**" (**Matthew 7:7**) Somehow it does not seem sensible to expect that every little request will be granted just as I wish it. Too many people pray for this or that special favor or thing only to be disappointed. Even as a child, something always suggested to me that God had more to do than worry about my personal wish of the moment. More troubling than whether I get some thing - some bauble, some favor - is the fact that prayers for other people and for more serious things like justice and peace often appear not to be answered. People's loved ones get sick. They die. Families have internal and external troubles. The faithful focus their attention upon world hot spots. Prayers go up, but sometimes things just keep going wrong. Of course, there are the usual answers and explanations. "It wasn't meant to be." or "God has something better in mind." But, quite frankly, on the surface it still looks as if Jesus is not making good on his promise.

After he cured a demon possessed boy that the disciples could not, they "came to Jesus privately and said, '**Why could we not cast it out?**' He said to them, '**Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.**'" (**Matthew 17:19,20**) It's not much comfort to think that our lack of faith is the reason prayer seems to go unanswered. In frustration, we wonder what we can do about it. How can we conjure up faith? A desperate father brought his son to Jesus for healing. The disciples had tried, but they could not prevail against the demon-illness that convulsed him. When brought into

Jesus' presence the demon violently convulsed the boy again. ***"Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, with tears, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"*** (Mark 9:21-24) It's difficult not to empathize with that father. What more can we do? How can one force belief? Is it even possible to just conjure up faith?

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Assurance! Conviction! This classic definition of faith points in the direction of something beyond ourselves. Sure, we've all known people full of assurances and convictions which are foolish or even downright evil. We've also seen those things come back to bite them. The assurance and conviction of which the Bible speaks is a quiet confidence in God. When God spoke from the burning bush and Moses asked his Name, ***"God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.'"*** (Exodus 3:14) The answer - though seemingly straightforward - is shrouded in mystery. God is Being itself. He is the Life-giver. He speaks and things are created. He breathes and life awakes. Before anything was, is, or will be, there is God. He can not be understood or grasped fully by any human thought. Yet we speak of him in human terms. Let's face it. It's all we've got! And that seems to be alright, because the Word of God itself became flesh and dwelt among us. In Jesus "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ..." (Ephesians 1:19) And Jesus had a thing or two to say about prayer. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: ***Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."*** (Matthew 6:7-13)

Christian prayer is first of all an entering into the presence of God. It is to open our hearts to his heart, to open our minds to his mind. It is to submit ourselves to his will. When we intercede, it is to lift up our concerns and place them in his arms. Our assurance and our conviction are actually gifts given to us rather than attitudes we are required to conjure up. When we have prayed in this way we need to trust that it will all work out and then act accordingly. No true prayer allows us to sit back, fold our arms, and say, "OK God, now get on with it." If we have prayed in faith with assurance and conviction, we know that God is going to do something. We step out in faith.

This spring it looked as if we would be missing a considerable amount of money which we needed to run Camp Faith 2013. It was a worry. We offered it up in prayer, and then went on to lay plans for the running of the camp. Of course, in the usual human way we had plans A, B, and C! But one way or another, we were going to have a summer program for children. We hired and trained staff. We booked the usual trips out. The children and young people were expecting it. There was a general conviction that it was good and God-driven. And there was an assurance that it was all in God's hand. One way or another, Camp Faith was going to happen! And it did! Gifts and donations began to pour in from all sides. By mid July when we were half way through the five weeks of camp, we knew that there was enough to do the job well. We even added a third trip to Neshaminy Pool, which we had held back on for caution's sake. Of course we are aware that it was through the concern and generosity of a lot of good people that this turn of fortune came about. So how else does God work?

Prayer and action! It is two sides of the same coin. When we enter into a prayer relationship with God through Jesus our Lord, we put our hearts and minds with his. Hands and feet - and mouth - soon follow. I love the story of the woman whose heart went out to a group of suffering children in some distant part of the world. She prayed God would do something for them. Soon the revelation dawned that he would - he would send her to work among them! What we know of God through Jesus is that he is full of compassion and mercy, and that he cares for the orphan and the widow. When we speak and act for the seemingly unlovable or the poor and the defenseless, we have the conviction that we are standing in the right place - the place where God is. Standing there, we have the assurance that our hope in God is to be trusted.

Be careful what you pray for. Prayer sometimes has another unforeseen result. My prayer for St Paul's 33 years ago was that we could raise a congregation which looked like the city of Camden - you know, black and white and so on! About 12 years later, frustrated that all that we did depended mostly upon teenaged amateurs, I quietly grumbled to God. Then I stumbled upon the statistic that half the population of Camden was under 21! I got what I prayed for - only not the way I thought it would be.

“When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:15-17) Prayer is the means by which we enter God's presence. It is his gift to us. ***“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Romans 8:31, 32)*** Conviction! Assurance! God will answer our prayer - his way! ***“ For I am convinced that [nothing] ... in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38, 39)*** The power and the goal of all prayer!

Father Martin +

Website: www.stpaulscamdennj.org

Email: revmartin@stpaulscamdennj.org