Prayer: An Invitation from God

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That was an incredibly moving introduction. Thank you so very much. It is moving because you each have touched me in so many different ways.

Monthly I get a visit whether I want it or not. Most often it is exactly the wrong time of the day, the week, the season, and in waltzes in, I don't know, a half a dozen very demure, kind, gracious women and once a year a handful of wonderfully robust and strong men. Every time I see them on the calendar, I say, “Oh, not today.” It is not because I do not like you. It is because I am not always ready for you. You bring so much with you when you come in the room.

I think I am on to you now. Remember when I said quiet, demure, shy, reticent? You ain't that at all.

I will tell you, every time you leave I am touched whether you know what you said or did or not, whether you are aware of what other situation is brewing in my life at that moment, there has not been a time that when you have left the room that I have not felt that God sent you directly to me for that moment in that day.

That is a true gift. It has reminded me time and again, whatever is going on in my world, in our world, God has got this, and God has got me and you.

It is truly a distinct privilege to serve as the Chaplain of the House. The major part of that privilege is not just your visits, but it is the opportunity to open every legislative day in prayer. You may not know this, but since 1789, both the House and the Senate every legislative day is opened in prayer.

As you think back on those 237 years, what has happened and where our country has been and the crises and the chaos it has faced, the challenges and the overwhelming elements that are in our country, the way evil works in our world, the way hope overcomes it every legislative day, captures that in its prayer. That is so profound to me. And to be given that privilege overwhelms me time and again.

So, I appreciate the prayers that you offer for me as I prepare each day. I will tell you each day I pray the prayer is based in Scripture. That has been a discipline for me. I have prayed all my life. Especially as a Chaplain, I am called on frequently to pray for a number of different events.

I will tell you one short sea story. In the evenings at sea, on ships that have Chaplains just before taps, five minutes before taps, you will hear over the broad announcement, the public announcement speaker saying, “Tattoo, tattoo. Stand by for the evening prayer.” And there is a prayer offered by the Chaplain on the ship.

The ship is darkened. There are no lights above the water line, but there on the bridge of the ship stands a Chaplain with a small microphone who prays. That has also been my privilege to cover our men and women in uniform, where they have gone, and to cover them with prayer and the Grace and the strength of God.

You know the power of prayer. I feel like, you know, speaking to the choir, you know, that wonderful phrase I am talking about prayer to people who are prayer warriors with a capital P and W. You are very strong in your prayers. You are very open and generous with your prayers. You are vocal with your prayers and even more vocal than I ever knew. I will tell you, my little watch tells me when the room gets too loud. It is just flaring up warnings all morning.

Prayer, An Invitation from God

I would like you to look at a different side of prayer this morning. We often think that prayer comes from us, that it is generated from our souls, from our hearts, from our experiences, our desires, our needs, our frustrations, our praise. We think that prayer comes from us. Friends, prayer is an invitation from God.

God allows us to come into His Presence. There was a wonderful phrase and one refrain in one of the songs that 'God is sweeping into the room'. God invites us to gather. God invites us to be in His Presence, and God invites us to be with Him.

In Exodus 3, you remember the verse probably pretty well, where God calls to Moses. Now to set the scene, the bush is already burning. An angel has already appeared. There is a whole bunch of stuff going on on the scene already, and within that drama, God speaks from inside the bush and says, "Moses, Moses."

The Holy One, in all the Glory of Heaven speaks to one man and says only his name and by so doing, God invites Moses into a relationship. God establishes the conversation. God has the first word, and any speech that Moses would give would come from that invitation from God that would allow Moses to offer what, a word? A sigh?

The impulse to pray is God's gift to us. But who are we to receive such an invitation? Think about old Moses. Not the best example of righteous living up to this point. Murder is on his sheet and a few other things. And yet, from that burning bush which could have devoured not only that shrubbery, but could have devoured, scorched the earth around it, from that comes an invitation.

Who are we in the midst of everything that is burning around us, that threatens to scorch our very lives, that will decimate anything we hope for - that we value? Who are we to hear in all of that, God, speaks your name?

We are just ordinary people going about our ordinary days. For better or worse, we are followers of Jesus. We have a few things on our rap sheet as well, but we do the best we can to live day by day. And as Ephesians says to us, God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, before that bush was even made or thought of, God chose us and allows us to be invited into His Presence, blameless before Him because of His love for us.

In Romans five, God demonstrates His own love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, God spoke to us through Christ's death for us. Friends, we are invited to pray. We do not start the conversation. But prayer requires us - not just offers us, not just an invitation - but requires preparation.

In the next verse in Exodus 3:5, God tells Moses, “Do not come any closer. Take off your shoes. This is Holy ground.” To receive such an invitation is something we cannot take lightly. For the Creator of the universe has allowed us to come into His Presence, but do not get too close, because we are not ready for that yet. We could be scorched.

We offer reverence and respect. We are humble before the Lord. May I tell you, watching you as you sing is quite a moving experience. I see the joy. I see the exuberance. I feel the spirit coming from you. But many of you take a posture of humility, of quiet, of reception.

Prayer is Preparation

Prayer is preparation to be in the Presence of God; therefore, we have to let go and leave behind the residue of the outside world before we can approach God. The shoes we wear are the troubles we bear. The shoes we wear have dust on them that others have put on us having drug us through the mud, or through the challenges, or the bad words they say, or the reputation they choose to give us. We have to let go of all of that. Take off those shoes that represent the outside world before we can approach God. Because if we do not, that will get in the way.

We need to prepare ourselves, our whole selves, to shed everything that wishes to hold us back, to leave that behind, so that as we prepare ourselves to come into God's Presence, we will be able to receive the invitation to be in relation with God.

There was a simple laborer named Jimmy. Each day when returning home from work, Jimmy would stop by his neighborhood church and sit quietly in the back for several minutes. The pastor noticed Jimmy's regular visits and wondered what he was doing during there. So, one day the pastor asked, and Jimmy replied, “Not much, pastor. I just say, ‘Jesus, it is Jimmy.’ And He says, ‘Jimmy, it is Jesus’, and we are happy spending time together.”

Prayer is Relational

Now that is a relationship. Prayer is relation. We enter into a relationship where we can speak whatever truth is in us. I do not need to tell you what that is, but perhaps I will name a few. Pain and grief. Fear and disappointment. Yearning and desire. Questions and doubt. Hope and faith. Failure and weakness. Praise and thanks. Despair and sorrow. Anger and even hatred.

To enter into a relationship where we can say, “Hi, Jesus, it is Margaret.” All of Margaret. All of who you are. Everything that makes up your lives. Everything that invades your soul. Everything that seeks to overwhelm you. Everything you are joyful for. The things that you are grateful for. That is when Jesus says, “Hey, Margaret, it is Jesus. Margaret, I receive you with all that you are and are overwhelmed with.” That is relation. There is no one like Jesus with whom we can have that kind of open, fully exposed, vulnerable moment. Prayer is relation.

Relationship brings Surrender

With relation comes capitulation to surrender to what God wants to do or is doing in us. We pray, “Thy will be done.” When we pray that we are surrendering our will. We are surrendering everything that we want to happen. Even if it is good, even if it seems to be the best thing that could happen for ourselves, for our family, for our country, for our communities, for our world. We surrender all of that. It is capitulation to be totally aligned to God's will.

Jeremiah offered that wonderful image. You are like the clay in the potter's hands, and I am the potter. Do you think that clay could say, “No, wait, I am not into that vase thing. Make me a coffee cup. You know, people like coffee better than flowers.” The clay does not say that. The clay yields itself. Sometimes it yields itself so much that on the wheel it collapses and it gives up any sense of its former shape.

You are the clay. Jesus is the Potter. Are we allowing ourselves on this wheel of life to collapse into His hands, to surrender all of who we are so that He would shape us into not what we want to be - although I like coffee, but what God wants us to be?

God will answer us. God will give Himself to us for His purpose only as we give ourselves to God. God does not ask for a death of self. We are still Jimmy. We are still Margaret. We are still Karen. We will still be who we are. We do not die because God created us uniquely and specially to be who we are. We do not die to self, but we die to self-centeredness.

What is in it for me? How does this make me look good? What will people think of me? We die to self-centeredness. God asks for self-surrender and its offering so that we could be used in His service.

Prayer is Communication

Prayer is also communication. We are good at that. I am on to you. You are really good about communicating to God. I have heard different shapes and sounds of it already. You are really good, but okay, time out. There are two sides to communication. There is the transmitter and there is the receiver.

Sometimes God is the transmitter and we need to receive to listen to what God is saying, to listen for where God is leading us. And oh, by the way, that is not easy sometimes. We do get the occasional divine nudge. Thank God for that. Love the God winks.

That is one of the reasons I love your visits so much because God speaks through you to me. You can say nothing. I do not mind if you come in and say nothing because God is using you somehow, someway, in a way I need to hear. And it happens every time you show up. I guarantee it happens in every conversation you have with people, as long as you are the clay and God is the Potter - we passed that already.

But what about how we listen for God's voice when there are not obvious prayer warriors around you? When there are not obvious believers to buck you up and to encourage you and console you? Where do you hear God's voice in recent incidents?

- Where is God when the car accident happens?

- Where is God when the diagnosis is given?
- Where is God when the rug is pulled out from under you?
- Where is God in the unexpected phone call? A nice phone call that came out of the blue. Did not God offer that phone call to you? There are no coincidences.
- Where is God In the traffic delay? Dang it! You all have been in DC long enough that you know what we suffer on a daily basis. But where is God then? We may never know.

Just this morning I drove away from home. Happy and excited to come and got about, I don't know, a quarter of a mile from the house and thought, oh, left my speech at home. And I had to make the U-turn. And of course, in my mind I go, okay, what was that about? What did I just miss?

Prayer Requires Listening

Listen first. When God approached Moses in that burning bush, Moses did not say, “Woah, Yahweh, You are here!” I cannot imagine what Moses was feeling like. I honestly would be completely speechless. And frankly, that is the way we should be. Every time we walk into the Presence of God, we should be completely speechless.

Let God speak our name. Let God set the table for His Holy ground that we would be able to be present with Him. Let God establish the relationship. Let God allow us to surrender into His loving hands that He might shape us as a potter does to clay. Let God communicate what God needs to communicate, so that our prayer can then be a dedication to all that God wishes to offer us.

You dedicate yourselves daily to prayer.

Yeah, that is just so wonderful to look at you here in this place, to hear you sing, to watch you show your joy. But it is also so wonderfully comforting when you enter into my world. I am clear on your dedication. It is written all over you. Thank you for dedicating your lives, for dedicating your time, for dedicating your vulnerability to enter into some spaces that some would never dare to darken and speak a word that enables other people to receive an invitation from God. That other people would want to find preparation, to be in God's Presence. That other people would want to be in relation with God. That other people would learn what it means to have to capitulate to God. That others would be able to communicate with God. Thank you for your dedication because it just keeps on giving.

The bush is already burning. The world is already on fire. There is so much going on and angels are all around us trying to warn us, guide us, direct us. But in all of that, God speaks your name. May God bless you as you enter into prayer with Him.