

## Prayer-Cise Part I– September 2010

Jesus' calling of Matthew is a stop action moment; everything in his life had been headed in one direction, and then in a life-changing instant, it takes on a whole new direction. That's what the word conversion means, a change in direction, a turnaround. Notice that it isn't like hitting the rewind button, and just reversing everything, the way we would like to do when we realize we made a mistake way back when and would like to have the chance to do it all over again. Even with conversions there is no going back, the direction is forward. Only it's a new way forward. One that didn't seem to really exist before.

What makes the difference is having a guide, a companion who knows where life is meant to be headed. Jesus is that guide, Jesus is our companion on the way. That's why his invitation is "follow me accompany me, let us walk together, your way will become my way and my way will become yours."

Matthew's journey begins with a pretty dramatic break, like that flight attendant who quit right in the middle of his job, flipped open the emergency exit and slid down the chute. In an instant Matthew - the despised tax collector - said "I'm out of here!" But Matthew didn't just quit, he left work because he was called, he was invited.

Every one of us is called. It may not be as dramatic as with Matthew or with Paul, but Jesus comes to accompany each one of us. And not just those of us here in church, his invitation is extended to every single human being that ever was or ever will be. As Paul writes Timothy "God our Saviour, ... desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" So we are not alone in our journey towards truth. What counts is that we continue, that we carry on, that we keep moving, even if that feels sometimes like we have to start all over again. Its strenuous, its demanding, but so is everything that is truly worth while, and worthy of our best efforts.

So how do we keep on keeping on? By praying. That's the most practical, the most effective and most important thing we can do as disciples. Abraham prayed, Moses prayed, Jesus prayed, Paul prayed, and so he passes along to Timothy the secret of the journey, the key to the kingdom. A contemporary version of our passage reads like this: "The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know." (The Message)

Paul mentions different **kinds** of prayer, intercession, which is asking on behalf of others, supplication, bringing our needs and life situations before God, and the basic giving of thanks, practicing the attitude of gratitude. A little later on Paul says to Timothy, "since prayer is at the bottom of God's desire that all be saved through the self offering of Jesus, "what I mostly want is for everyone to pray – not shaking angry fists at enemies but raising holy hands to God." Here Paul is speaking about the **way** we pray, our inner attitude, yes, but also the outward gesture that goes with our prayer, the way the inside connects with the outside. And that is what I'd like us to focus on now, and to practice.

So this is going to be a pray-er-cise session. Here's what Paul tells Timothy, exercise daily in God, no spiritual flabbiness please. Workouts in the gyms are useful but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both for today and forever. ( 1 Tim. 4. 8) Now I want to repeat we're not going to be worrying right now about the kind of praying we're doing. We're zeroing in on our prayer muscles, shaping up the spirit together with our bodies. So our focus will be on our prayer posture, our prayer preparedness. you could call it pre-prayer, a kind of warm up stretch session getting ourselves into that zone, or space where we can be

in communion with God, where we can be truly centred and present to God, instead of scattered and distracted. And if you find any of these exercises are working for you, then practice them at home, as well as here.

We're going to start with something that's already happening, something life giving, something that mostly take for granted: our breathing. So I'd like you to sit up straight or straighter, maybe moving forward to the edge of the pew, move your shoulders back and relax your arms by your side, ...close your eyes, and start to take longer slower breaths, ... just become aware of that fundamental movement of breathing in... and then out, ...just focusing on that movement of receiving and giving back, the gift of life, of being, letting our minds grow quieter, listening to the breath, the spirit. Now we let our breathing help to empty us of fear, anger, sadness, and fill us with peace, God's peace, peace passing understanding, peace beyond our reach, peace that God gives, the peace that is Jesus. Breathing together, let us breathe in and out... in ... and breathe out fear, breathe in peace, breathe out anger, breathe in peace, breathe out sadness, breathe in peace.

OK you can open your eyes, and breath normally. I hope that exercise helped you realize the importance of posture, how we hold ourselves, our bearing, is really an expression of our attentiveness, our paying attention. We should know that there are several postures of prayer in Christian tradition, I think the one we are accustomed to is kneeling. It just so happens that the word in Hebrew for kneeling is barak, (sound familiar?) it is related to the word for knees. The Hebrews regarded the knees as the symbol of strength, so to bend the knee is to bend our strength before the living God acknowledging him as the source of our power, our abilities, our freedom to move and to act. When we kneel we lower ourselves but at the same time we look upwards, beyond ourselves to the Lord who beholds us and draws near.

I wonder if we are also aware that another ancient posture of prayer is standing. Standing was the classic posture of prayer in the Old Testament, it is the other side of the reverence to God expressed in kneeling. We kneel in quietness and rest, we stand in alertness and vigilance, ready for action. When the Good News of the Gospel is proclaimed, we stand, when the peace is exchanged we stand, when we wish to be ready available to God we stand.

So let's do it, please stand,...and give yourself a bit more room on either side, because were going to use our arms. Standing upright, we seek to align ourselves we God, we alone of God's creatures stand upright, bearing God's image we are a link between heaven and earth: feet planted firmly on the ground, our heads aloft, our arms relaxed at our sides, palms open, facing outward, available, ready to be used, waiting for God's call.

We remember the importance of our hands, how they can carry our souls, express our spirits, and so we lift them up raising them above our shoulders, again hands open, receiving blessing and giving praise. As you are able continue to hold your arms aloft. Here we are lifting holy hands to God rather than shaking clenched fists in hatred. We cannot do both. Slowly and gently let's bring our arms back down to our sides again and relax. I think we'll end our workout here. There are additional movements linked with the Lord's Prayer that we'll explore more prayer-cise. All you have to say is "follow me."