

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday May 13, 2018 Easter 7B  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Text: Psalm 1  
Title: Like trees planted by streams of water

Human beings are by definition, *homo faber*: tool-making creatures. It is a classic definition of who we are, not animals living by instinct and closely in touch with our environment, nor heavenly beings who live by pure intelligence and unfettered access to God. We are creatures heavily involved with and indebted to tools. We use tools everyday to eat: knife and fork and spoon; to travel: car or bus or bike; and to communicate: email, cell phone, pen and paper. We are at home with tools and unlike the angels, we use tools to hear what God is saying and the sacraments to receive the presence of life of God into our midst and into our bodies.

But there are other definitions of humans as well, for we are also creatures that pray: *homo prelator*. Eugene Peterson, a pastor and theologian, reminds us that these two definitions are related. Prayer is technology. Prayers are tools for communicating with God.

Now don't get me wrong here. In our incredibly technological world we are often enamored of our tools. But tools are not the most important things about us; God is the most important. God is our ultimate concern, the source of life, the energy of the universe: creating, redeeming, wooing and blessing all that exists. God creates the universe. God smuggles himself into our world, incarnate in the person of Christ. The scriptures tell us that God fills all in all; he pours out his Spirit on creatures and creation.

And while we love our tools - ipads and smart phones, SUVs and racing bikes - tools are not the most important thing about us; we are. We are interesting in all of our flesh and striving, in our love-making, our thinking and expression, our making a living, our making of messes, our physical feats, our goodness and our fallenness, our believing and our questioning of our beginnings and our purpose.

As human beings we are not only tool-making creatures, we are tool-using creatures. In human life tools are required equipment for almost everything we do: tractors for farming, knives for cutting, pots for cooking, prayers for believing. All of life requires tools. And while it may seem strange to say it this way, prayer is a tool. It is a tool made mostly of words and silence, but a tool nonetheless.

In our faith life, in the church, in our striving to know God, we use prayer. Prayer is an interesting tool because it is not designed for doing anything or getting anything really; it is a tool for being and becoming. We're familiar with tools that help us to do things, (a chainsaw to cut off a limb) or tools to get things (an internet connection to get information). But we are not so comfortable with tools that are for being and

becoming, they are not offered to us as often. We all live in a world that sings the praises of technology while we all live in no small fear of its deterministic power over us. We are at times overwhelmed by technology. We live surrounded by it on every side, but the technology for becoming human is too often missing. Could it be that there is a deprivation of technology in our very midst? Is our culture so fixated on doing and getting that vast areas of the interior life of human beings are ill-equipped for the journey into becoming alive to God?

At the center of the whole enterprise of being human, prayers are the primary technology. Prayers are tools that God uses to work his will in our bodies and souls. Prayers are tools that we use to collaborate in his work with us. (Eugene Peterson).

For centuries, Jews and Christians have looked to the Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, the tool-box for being and becoming, in their efforts to become human beings relating to God. The Psalms were Jesus' prayer book, his tools for shaping a deep life of becoming God's person in the world, and so they are also the toolbox for us. All 150 of these Hebrew prayers are transplanted from the Bible into our Book of Common Prayer for devotional practice. The Psalms are carefully crafted poetry that deal with the great diversity of activity that God desires to accomplish within us. The Psalms are expert at addressing the totality of human existence, from sheer joy to devastating loss, to confident trust and paranoid doubt, to woundedness and wholeness. People of faith have turned to the Psalms to learn how to pray with the simple faith of anyone picking up a tool, like the gardener with shovel and hoe or the carpenter with hammer and level. The Psalms are quite simply the right tools for the job of learning to pray, of working the angles of being and becoming, of being shaped into a covenant person related to the living God.

How do we learn how to use the Psalms, these ancient tools for prayer? Interestingly the Psalms themselves begin with primer on prayer. Psalm 1, a kind of orientation psalm, gets us ready to pray.

The first word of the first psalm is *blessed*. It sets the tone for learning to pray: happy, fortunate, full of holy luck. That is the first word of the Psalms. This powerful and attractive word *blessed* sets our direction, orients us to the life of prayer. As we get ready to pray, Psalm 1 reminds us of the proper posture or attitude before God. If we are fearful or apprehensive as we enter prayer it will cripple us from taking risks or simply being open. If we are dutiful and serious we may miss the playfulness of God. But *blessed* is a different posture; it sets a tone of expectation, of discovering more that is also good. We are not sure what we will find in prayer, but *blessed* helps to pique our interest. To pray is to be fortunate, to open oneself up to a God who can work changes in us, and this anticipation prepares us to be blessed. So often we get what we expect, and to expect to be blessed makes us capable of being blessed, of finding our joy in God.

If you look closely at Psalm 1 on page 585 in the Book of Common Prayer, I want to draw your attention to two things; an action and an image. The action or practice is meditation on the *torah* and the image is that of a tree planted near a stream.

Torah (law) is God's words or ways that are aimed at the human predicament. "The noun *torah* comes from the verb, *yarah*, that means to throw something, a javelin, say, so that it hits its mark. The word that hits its mark is *torah*. In our own speech words are like javelins that go out of one mind and into another. ... But God's word has this aimed, intentional, personal nature. When we are spoken to this way, piercingly and penetratingly, we are not the same. These words get inside of us and work their meaning in us." (Peterson).

What all of this torah talk tells us is that as we prepare to pray, we learn that God's words are *torah* and that we are the intended target. The psalmist tells us that the words of God, *torah*, are a gift to those who want to pray. The psalms help us internalize the saving story of scripture, to delight in its ways, to take it into our bodies. God's words are powerful words intended to shape us. God's words are words that can save and heal and make new. God's words hit us where we live and strike us with energy to transform. The words of God are words intended to shape new life within us, to feed us deeply in a world that settles for fast food, to enliven our taste and zest for life, to make us aware of the movement of God in the world. To delight in these words, this *torah*, is to find oneself settling into meditation. To meditate is to turn things over in a patient and expectant way. It is a physical activity, like chewing slowly, savoring and taking pleasure in making the sounds of the words and getting the feel of them in your body, allowing them to sink into your person.

Second, a vision of a tree provides the important image for describing the life of prayer. It is a picture of a tree planted near a source of water, like a huge cottonwood established alongside the acequias. We get ourselves ready to pray by looking at a tree and endeavoring to see ourselves in it. It is a curious thing that the Psalms begin to teach us to pray by telling us to go and sit down in front of a tree planted by an irrigation canal and to look at it long and hard and thoughtfully. Prayer it seems begins with the ordinary geography of our lives. It begins not with the invisible but with the visible. Prayer begins in the senses, in the body, in our own backyard, in what is growing right in front of us.

This is strange. We thought prayer would be all about great ideas or exotic abstractions, but it turns out that prayer begins with the ordinary in our very midst. Is it possible that fine thoughts are the enemy of prayer? True prayer begins in the everyday, in the contemplation of a tree growing near your home, in the moment your enemy mounts another attack, in the curious eyes of a child wanting to talk, in the quietness of your home early in the morning.

The Psalmist says that prayer begins with two things: First attentiveness to God: blessed, happy are you when you begin to allow the *torah* of God, the javelins of God,

to pull you out of the noisy distracting world of arrogance and violence and acquisition and accomplishment. And second, the image of a thriving tree near the source of water and nourishment tells us to put our roots down deep in the soil of the everyday, for that is where prayer begins; that is the raw material for cultivating a relationship with God. Don't look too hard for the right place to pray or the perfect conditions; just find a place and sit down and look at what is in front of you and allow God to begin to speak into the place of your heart. Prayer begins not with what we don't see but rather with what is right in front of us. That is the wisdom of the Psalmist this day. Prayer is possible not because we desire it or work at it, but rather because God desires us and has already addressed us in his *torah*, the stories of God's steadfast love for a people. Prayer is possible not because we have fantastic thoughts or ideas but because we are ordinary people who have bodies and experiences that can all be shaped into the material of prayer.

The psalms are the ancient school of prayer, and they are no less strange and awkward than they have been for centuries. In their odd ways and strange rhythms, they manage to pull us into a life of prayer that teaches us something singular, that life is really about knowing God. As one theologian put it: "The psalmists are not interested in human potential; they are passionate about God – the obedience-shaping, will-transforming, sin-revoking, praise-releasing God (Peterson)."

So this day as we encounter the first psalm of this collection of tools for prayer, let us slowly read the first three verses together, not rushing or thinking too hard, but allowing the words to sink into our hearts and lives, listening to the sound of them in our neighbors' vocalizations, being quiet enough to tune our words alongside theirs and attentive enough to hear the voice of God speaking to us in these ancient Hebrew prayers that are meant to draw us into life-giving relationship with God, that we too might become like trees planted by streams of water. (BCP. p. 585 )

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, \*  
nor lingered in the way of sinners,  
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2

Their delight is in the law of the LORD, \*  
and they meditate on his law day and night.

3

They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; \*  
everything they do shall prosper.

*I wish to acknowledge my deep indebtedness for this sermon to Eugene Peterson for his writing on the Psalms in his excellent book Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer. The introduction is based on his introduction to the Psalms, and I have drawn heavily upon his commentary on Psalm 1 in shaping this sermon.*