

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 24, 2016
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 11:1-13

Teach Us to Pray

It must be the wisdom of the lectionary to lead us to contemplate **prayer** in the middle of July. Left to our own devices, we might be swayed to consider the wonders of outdoor recreation, the majesty of the mountains, or why does time go by so quickly in the summer in Montana. And this year, the timing couldn't be more perfect. We are bombarded with news of the presidential campaign, and horrific stories of violence and senseless loss of life. But today, smack dab in between political party conventions, we find ourselves being refocused on prayer, that avenue of connection with God which we need more than ever.

Consider this morning's worship an opportunity to turn away from the noise, the celebrations, the contention, the hyperbole, the craziness, and the media frenzy of political conventions, and to turn toward communion with God. Consider this turning not an escape, but a resetting of our perspective. Maybe Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view from prison in Berlin in the 1940s can help us here. He wrote, "God is beyond in the midst of life," (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, 1972, p. 282) In prayer, we seek the beyond, in the midst of life. Today, in the middle of convention season, we seek God.

I am reminded of hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray's lyrics,

"Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:
Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see
all the things that really matter, be at peace, and simply be."

(1992, Hope Publishing Co., in *Sing the Faith* #2128)

Prayer is the quiet center, the way we as people of faith breathe. It's no accident that the words respiration, inspire, and spirit have the same root. For just as air is needed for our bodies to breathe and thereby live, prayer is needed for our souls to take in God's Spirit and be spiritually alive. When we are submerged beneath the world's chaos and noise, we are in danger of drowning for lack of air. Prayer is coming to the surface to fill ourselves with God.

The truth is, nearly all of us feel inadequate in our prayer lives. I'm not regular enough, I'm not disciplined enough, I can't keep my focus, my mind drifts, I don't know what to pray about, I have too much to pray about, my prayers are too self-centered, I don't have the right words, I doubt that God is listening, God never seems to answer my prayers, and for heaven's sake, don't ask me to pray out loud in front of other people, because they'll find out I'm a fraud! Maybe you thought you were the only one with these fears and self-doubts, but let me assure you, the vast majority of people feel some if not all these feelings. So it's not hard to understand the disciples' request: "Lord, teach us to pray."

And Jesus obliges, with a few short phrases. You probably recognized them as a skeleton of what we commonly refer to as the Lord's Prayer. The longer version is found in Matthew's gospel. This is the bare bones version, not because Luke devalues the importance of prayer, but maybe because he takes seriously Jesus' advice on prayer, found elsewhere in the gospels. One writer boils it down to three points, two of which are found in Matthew's gospel only, and the third echoed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (Ronald Goetz, "Jesus' Prayer," in *the Living Pulpit*, July-Sept 1993, p. 44)

- 1) Keep it secret. (Mt. 6:5-6) Jesus tells people not to make a show of their prayers. Certainly other biblical witnesses give wonderful examples of corporate prayers, prayers said in public on behalf of the gathered people. But Jesus exposes the show-off prayer for what it is. A public display of piety intended to puff up the person praying. Avoid that, says Jesus.
- 2) Keep it simple. (Mt 6:7-8) Fancy words, long elaborate phrases, eloquent poetry—none of these impress God. The simplicity of Jesus' prayer as given to us by Luke exemplifies this. Keep it simple and straightforward.
- 3) Keep it up. (Mt 7:7-11, Mk 11:23-24, Lk 11:5-13) Our scripture this morning drives this message home. Are you feeling like a beginner at prayer? Just keep it up. Are you feeling inadequate in prayer? Nonetheless, keep it up. Are you feeling discouraged in prayer? Still, keep it up.

Keep on praying, no matter what. For God is good, and God is listening, and God always, always, always is committed to the best for us, to the fulfillment of all we really need, to our healing and wholeness and unity with God.

It might have been technique for which the disciples were asking, the “how to” of prayer. But Jesus' response was more along the lines of, “Just do it. And don't give up doing it.”

To illustrate the importance of persistence, Jesus told a story with the highly valued customs of hospitality at its core. When guests show up at the door in Middle Eastern cultures to this day, announced or not, they are welcomed inside. The best food and drink are provided, along with shelter and a place to sleep. In a desert culture, the hospitality of strangers and friends alike can be a matter of life and death. So if a guest comes to your house, and you don't have enough food on hand, certainly your neighbor will help out so that you will not be shamed as a host. Jesus makes the details of the story as extreme as possible, what we might call a worst case scenario. The guest shows up in the middle of the night. But even though it is the middle of the night, even though your neighbor is cranky and stingy, he will eventually share bread. Don't give up, keep knocking at the door and reminding your cranky neighbor to do his neighborly duty. Don't give up, keep knocking at God's door and reminding God to fulfill his Godly duty. Don't give up, for God is God, and it is God's nature to provide for those in need.

Similarly, Jesus compares our prayers to the pleas of a child to a parent. If a child asks for a fish, do you give him a snake? If a child asks for an egg, do you give her a scorpion? These are worst case scenarios—there may possibly be an evil parent who would do such a thing, but God is the opposite of that evil parent. God gives us what is good, and what we really need. So ask, seek, knock, don't give up the practice of prayer.

Keep practicing. Prayer is the way we open the airwaves between ourselves and God, between our world and God's world. There is no petition too small or unworthy with which we might begin. But it's true that as we mature, so do our prayers. We begin with begging God for a better house, a bigger salary, a more prestigious job. We may or may not gain these desires. But if we are persistent in prayer we learn that material rewards are immaterial to God. Maturity in our relationship with God looks more like gratitude for what we do have than greediness for more. Persistence in prayer opens our hearts to understand that God's care for us probably looks very different than what we expected. Thus our prayers are answered, often because we become satisfied with what we have.

In the same way, we should never give up prayer for others. Cure my friend of cancer, restore her marriage, end his addiction, heal this child. I am grateful that our church's prayer chains keep us

praying day after day for needs of which we are aware. We should never give up. Sometimes the answers to our prayers come quickly; sometimes they are exactly what we hoped for. But more often we do not anticipate the outcome as we put things into God's hands. We pray for a cure, yet the person suffers and dies. We pray for restored relationships, yet the estrangement lasts. We pray for peace, and another war erupts.

And yet. The dying person is reconciled, through suffering, to God, and thereby healed of bitterness. The angry person receives mercy, and becomes more forgiving. The world moves slowly and painfully but inexorably towards the rule of justice and peace, and we who are praying come to know ourselves as partners with God in bringing more peace to more places. Prayer is working, not in the ways we imagined, but according to God's will and goodness. Prayer changes things—if not the things we were hoping for, prayer changes the ones who pray. Keep it up. If we desire to be part of the movement of God's Kingdom coming into the world, keep praying. If we want to be closer to God even as we live our lives in this world, don't give up on prayer. As we grow in prayer, we become less focused on God's goodies and more aware of God's goodness. May it be so.

For the gift we receive as we persist in prayer is one more surprise, a twist at the end of Jesus' teaching that sounds puzzling at first. The answer to our prayers, the result of all our searching, the presence opening the door when we knock persistently, is the Holy Spirit, God with us, us with God. It is in John's gospel that Jesus explains the coming of the Spirit, when he says, "I will not leave you orphaned." (Jn 14:18) The Spirit is the advocate, the helper, the friend. The Spirit is the way God is with us and within us and at work in the world. The Holy Spirit is the true answer to all our prayers, the complete and perfect answer to every and all prayer, for in the Spirit, we are one with God.

Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to live as prayer-filled people, people who are tuned to your frequency, trained to your teaching, entrusted with your desires for the world. Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to live as Spirit-filled people, people who resonate with your truth and goodness, who say "not my will, but thine be done," and really mean it. Lord, teach us to pray, so that we might be carriers of your peace, confident in your presence, committed to your mission in the world. Lord, teach us to pray, for ourselves and for others, and for the healing of creation. Through Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.