

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz

“Enough”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 4, 2021

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

I Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Thessalonians 5:16-20

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets.

Matthew 6:9

‘Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

My formal training in prayer did not happen as I thought it would. I was expecting that it would occur somewhere in the midst of the three years of intense theological education known as seminary. But I was wrong. Instead, my formal training in prayer took place much, much earlier in my life, in Mrs. Sutton's third grade Sunday school class, to be precise, when my classmates and I, at Mrs. Sutton's direction, spent several Sundays of class time memorizing the Lord's Prayer. When we thought we had the words of Jesus prayer memorized, we told Mrs. Sutton, who then individually took us over to a table in the corner of the room and invited us to recite the prayer to her. Upon successfully demonstrating our mastery of the prayer, we were rewarded with a quarter.

Now, this was in the day when a quarter could get you five full-sized candy bars or five packs of baseball cards with a stick of bubble gum in each pack. And because candy bars and baseball cards were pretty much the center of my universe at that moment in time, Mrs. Sutton's vast economic reward for memorizing a short, simple prayer, well, it gave me the idea that there might be other prayers in the Bible and that memorizing them could be lucrative. When I raised this possibility with Mrs. Sutton, she smiled and directed me to the Book of Psalms and said she'd be ready whenever I had one memorized. After a few minutes of flipping through the many, many, many psalms, I quickly concluded that memorizing biblical prayers would not provide the solid financial foundation I had envisioned. And so, my formal training in prayer came to a swift conclusion.

In the weeks following Easter, my sermons focused on understanding Jesus Sermon on the Mount, which is found in chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' mountaintop message is a concise guide for how his disciples, how we can practice faithfulness. And in the season of Easter resurrection, when the glow of God's love for us is most intense, paying attention to our faithfulness as disciples paid attention to how we might be as faithful as we possibly could, that just made sense to me. And so that was the focus of the sermons in that time. The only section of the Sermon on the Mount that we did not explore in any detail was Jesus' teaching on prayer found in Matthew 6:9-15. And so this month, again, with the help of New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, we're going to explore the familiar words and phrases of Jesus and instruction on prayer, which is known to us as the Lord's Prayer, because this prayer is nearly always part of the worship liturgy and so is something many of us know by heart and therefore is always mumbled by us as we rush through it. We may not understand as much of the content and meaning of this prayer as we think we do. And so, over the next few Sundays, I hope we can grow our formal understanding of prayer a bit by focusing on what Jesus wants us to pray about and how he suggest we should pray for those things. Now Jesus lays the foundation for teaching us about prayer by first describing three boundaries

for our practice of faithfulness. In the opening verses of Chapter 6, Jesus reminds us that the focus of prayer is always God. It is not on us. It is not on the church. It is not on the musician. Sorry, Bilstein. It is not even on the pastor, especially not the pastor. Second, Jesus also reminds us, strongly emphasizes, that our personal prayer should not be for public display. He suggests that we should always try to speak to God in private when we pray. Now here we say private prayer can and does and should take place here amid public worship. But Jesus cautions us against any approach to prayer that draws attention to us.

And so here in this place, as we pray privately, we need to do just that, pray privately. Third, Jesus urges us not to use a lot of words when we pray. His exact caution is don't keep up empty praises because God is already aware of what is in our hearts. With these faithful cautions firmly in mind, Jesus invites us - the first words that we read in Matthew's gospel - to pray this way. Now, I believe it is crucial for us at this juncture in our education on prayer to see that Jesus invitation is about so much more than are using his exact words in the exact way that they tumble out of his mouth in whatever version of scripture, whatever translation we are reading from. Jesus tells us as his disciples that one of the most important aspects of our discipleship is our need, our need for regular and ongoing conversation with God, and that we must pay attention to the state of our hearts and the state of our mind as we enter into conversation with God. Prayer is not about getting God's attention, says Jesus, for we already have God's attention. Prayer is about our continued and continuing response to God's deep and abiding love for us. New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine says that there are five purposes behind the prayer which Jesus teaches us. I believe our attention to these purposes makes this very familiar prayer come alive to us in profound and hopefully new and faith-changing ways. For Jesus, the first purpose of prayer is that it allows us to honestly express to God our feelings of worry and anger and thanksgiving and celebration. The words and images that Jesus teaches us for prayer here in Matthew, as well as those words and images that are found in the prayers that occur in other parts of scripture, like the Book of Psalms, all these words and images can help us understand that we can pray in ways, that we can pray with words, that we can pray with images that we have not thought about before, that we don't have to be limited to just those words that sound godly and holy. God is interested in our complete being, who we are in totality, and we need to pray in that way.

The second purpose of prayer is that of communication. We all know that the more we talk to a friend or to a child or to a parent or to a spouse, even the more we talk to an enemy, but the more we communicate with someone, the better we understand them, the better we know them, and hopefully the better, in turn, they know us. Prayer is about our improving our relationship with God through more and better communication. In our other brief scripture lessons from Deuteronomy and First Thessalonians, we are reminded that prayer should be as constant and as routine in our lives as brushing our teeth and as going to about the various parts of our day and that everything that we do, everything we do without exception, is a new opportunity for us to communicate with God, for us to be with God in prayer.

The third purpose of prayer is for us to better connect ourselves to one another in community. By our reciting the Lord's Prayer nearly every Sabbath in worship, we bind ourselves to one another. We bind ourselves through the common language we use in talking about God. We bind ourselves through a shared understanding of who God is. We bind ourselves to one another through a common understanding of our relationship with God. And as we repeat this prayer, we in turn connect ourselves with the generations of the faithful who have come before us and the generations of the faithful who will follow after us. We do not, we never have, and we never will pray alone. The connection to one another and the connection to the generations of Jesus' disciples is an important aspect of prayer.

The fourth purpose of our praying this communal prayer is the reminder it provides us that we are not all in the same place. Saying these words remind us that some of us need support and some of us need challenge of a particular aspect of the prayer on a particular day. By our all praying this prayer together, we support those in their particular need on that particular day, just as they do the same thing for us in our time of need in our particular day. The sharing of mutual support within the body of the church is a gift of prayer that is deep and abiding, that is life changing.

The fifth and final purpose of prayer that Levine outlines for us is that it is helpful to us in matters of discernment. As we try to figure out what we need to do in the face of all the temptations and all the challenges that we face each and every day, prayer helps us to think about and remember what God wants, what God expects from us. And prayer helps us to understand and articulate at the same time what we want and what we need from God.

Now, building upon these five purposes, the faith practice of prayer helps us as disciples connect with our God in life-changing and community-changing ways. When Jesus taught the first disciples this simple prayer, he was teaching disciples of all times, disciples like us, that the relationship we are invited to have, we are always invited to have with God, is rich and loving, is forever complex and not simplistic at all, is to be embraced and never to be feared. Jesus knew that our faithfulness is completely dependent upon our ability to be in communication with God each and every day. And in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gave us the perfect tool, the perfect spiritual tool, to talk with God as easily and as fully as we communicate with one another.

For our spiritual homework this week, I'd like us to spend some time in the days ahead assessing the state of our communication with God. How are we doing? Are we engaging God as a conversation partner? Are we doing most of the talking and very little of the listening? Are we just kind of listening without having much to say in return to God? In the days ahead, I invite us each to consider afresh how we are going to communicate with God in ways that will change our lives, in ways that will change the life of this community. Conversation this important, conversation this vital, can't be left to chance alone. It must be intentional, and we must be intentional as we come to this communication. What if we start with committing ourselves to be in conversation with God at a specific time each day in the week ahead, maybe at bedtime, like when we were little and parents were helping us through our daily prayers, or maybe in the morning when we're getting ready for the day or maybe when we're on a walk or a run or a bike ride or every time we see a child at play or every time we hear an ambulance rushing someone to a hospital. What works for you? Think about that and then use that time each day to communicate with God.

My friends, there are opportunities for prayer, opportunities to be in conversation with our God everywhere we turn. And so let us practice using these opportunities to talk with God like we never have before. And then next week, when we all come again for notes at 9:00, we'll have that great half-hour or so between when the music stops and before worship starts. And we can use that time to share with each other what our intentional embrace of prayer is teaching us and where we think God is leading us individually and maybe even where we think God is leading us as a community. Let us pray, my friends. Let us pray intentionally and joyfully. Let us pray with God, our creator, God, our friend, God, who wants to be in communication with us. Amen.