**Living Church: Prayer**

**Philippians 4:4-9**

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“Now, I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Does that sound familiar? How about this one? “God is great; God is good, Let us thank him for our food. Amen.” Did you have a prayer that you always said at bedtime or for grace when you were growing up? Do you still remember it? Or was there one that you taught your own children?

Our earliest lessons in how to pray often come from our parents. We learn them by rote – enjoying the comfort of their familiarity, the rhyming and the rhythm, the simple connection to family that they bring. The problem is that as we grow older, those prayers don’t always feel adequate anymore. As we move from child to youth to adulthood, we become more and more aware of how complicated the world the can be. We begin to ask questions and have doubts about God. And, of course, many of us begin to feel inadequate, thinking “I don’t know how to talk to God! I don’t know how to pray!”

By the time we get to be teenagers or young adults, many of us feel like prayer is a mystery - we’re not sure we can pray or if we even believe in prayer. Yet, like many things, the real problem is that we over think it and, in doing so, we lose one of the greatest gifts God gives to us – the opportunity to be in relationship with our own creator, the God who loves us beyond what we can even imagine.

This is the fourth in a series of sermons I’ve been calling *Living Church*. The idea is that in this case, the word “living” is both an adjective and a verb. We, those who seek to be like Jesus, are the living church – the church alive and making a difference in the world. And, our call, our task as Jesus-followers, is to live out in our daily lives what God created the church to be. When we live church, we show the secular world that our faith offers an alternative to the hate and anger and posturing happening all around us. And so, our series has looked at different ways in which we “live church” through our presence, our gifts, our service, our prayers, and our witness. This week we land on prayer.

I suppose that if we want to understand what prayer is, beyond the simple verses we learned as children, we can start with its roots. The English word *prayer* is defined as “petition” or “request”. The Latin word, *precari*, means “to beg”. The Hebrew word, *palal*, means “to meditate” while a similar Hebrew word, *tsela,* means “to bow down”. Finally, the New Testament Greek word means “to wish” or “to vow”.

No wonder prayer can feel a little intimidating. In our tradition, it has so many layers of meaning! Petition, request, beg, meditate, bow down, wish, vow. But, again, I think that just makes it too complicated. What if we simply say prayer is how we communicate and commune with God? God seeks to be in relationship with each of us and, like any other relationship, a marriage or a friendship, the health of the relationship depends on good communication and on spending time together.

But, how? How do we communicate with something so much bigger than ourselves, someone we cannot see? Like all good communication, I think prayer begins with listening. We can’t communicate with God if we don’t slow down and pay attention to what God is saying. When we stop to listen, God speaks to us in all sorts of ways - through scripture and the beauty of Creation or in gentle words spoken by a friend or family member. We may come to recognize God’s voice in a set of circumstances, a situation in which we learn a deeper understanding of who God is and how God is working in our lives. We may experience God’s voice through journaling or intuition or a profound sense of conviction or a sudden sense of how things are meant to be.

All of these are ways that God nudges, touches, speaks to us, but we can only hear if we are open to God’s voice within us. As Marjorie Thompson puts it in her wonderful book, “Soul Feast”, “Our real task in prayer is to attune ourselves to the conversation already going on deep in our hearts.” God is already speaking. We are listening when we cut through all the internal noise – the worries and to do lists and self-doubts and criticisms – and find the voice deep within us that we trust is good, we trust is just, we trust is honest and real.

Of course, communicating through prayer isn’t only about listening. It is also about speaking. Here again, many of us have a lot of limiting ideas about what we can and should say to God. We feel like our prayers should always be eloquent and beautiful and selfless. Of course, we thank God for all the gifts God has given us and lift up the people and situations we know of that need God’s help. And all of those things are true and important. God seeks our gratitude and hears our concerns for the sick and the grieving and the broken.

Yet, like in any other relationship, our relationship with God is more likely to grow deeper when we don’t stop there. When we not only take our concerns for the world to God, but all our own junk, too. As many of you know, one of my favorite authors is Anne Lamott and perhaps my favorite of her books is the one on prayer entitled “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers”. In talking about prayer, Lamott says, “My belief is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said. If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real-really real.”

God isn’t looking for us to come to God in prayer with only part of who we are – but, rather, with all of whom we are. Our joys and our worries. Our strengths and even our faults. Because it is our faults – our pride, our insecurity, our selfishness, our fear, our hate – these are the things that keep us from doing God’s good work in the world. God can’t heal and transform us until we acknowledge our own need for transformation. To again quote from Anne Lamott, “If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God for the first time today, it would help to begin by admitting the three most terrible truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little.”

This leads me to one other facet to prayer that we should not overlook. While much of prayer is communicating with God, prayer is also the opportunity to commune with God. To simply be in God’s presence – not for the sake of saying anything or even, necessarily, to listen, but simply to be. To soak in the tremendous love and goodness that is God, allow it to wash over us or well up from deep inside us, and to rest there. It sounds so easy but can be so hard - because to commune with God means to let go, quiet our minds, and simply be. Anthony Bloom, the late Russian orthodox bishop, tells the story of an 18th century priest who saw an old peasant sitting for hours and hours in the chapel and finally asked what he was doing there. The old man said, “I look at God. God looks at me. And we are happy.”

To pray is to bring to God our worries, our joys, our intercessions for others, and above all, our true selves, and allow God to take them so that we do not have to carry them alone. Amanda Williams is a member of our congregation, a new mom, and a woman hard at work on her faith journey. I’ve asked Amanda to share a little bit about our own experience of prayer.

Thank you Pastor Nancy for the opportunity to speak about prayer with all of you today.

I have prayed for as long as I remember. And for all long as I can remember I have felt inadequate on “how” I pray. I mean…how should one pray?

Growing up I sat next to my devout Methodist grandmother in church who carried her prayer list in her hand bag. Every Sunday she had her list out with the names of people and places she would pray over that week. And so she prayed. I believe she lived Ephesians 6:18 ~ “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always see on praying for all the Lord’s people.” ~ And she lived her life out dedicated to the care of her family and her community. And it wasn’t complicated for her. And she was steadfast.

So often I thought about prayer as a kid…wondering how to do it? 1st Thessalonians 5:17 states “pray continually” and Colossians 4:2 says “devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” So I thought “I got this”…pray every day and be watchful and thankful.

So for years, over a decade I prayed continually and I believe…thankfully. But I will admit that I didn’t understand the “watchful” piece of it all. And I felt good about praying. I felt like I could hear God leading me. I believe God lead me to Michigan from Iowa and here I met my husband and together we have escaped on many adventures…ultimately the greatest one this year with Adeline’s birth.

Romans 12:2 says “do not conform to the pattern of the world, but ***be transformed by the renewing of your mind***. THEN you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is…”

And then I realized there was so so so much more missing in my prayers. I needed to be more watchful - more mindful. And less about just the discipline of praying but praying with the intentionality I believe my grandmother did. And so I put together list of who I wanted to pray for and what I thought I should pray about. And so I started praying for my husband every night. For him personally and for the Lord to give us both confirmation on our paths forward so then WE could be more certain together. And I pray over Adeline’s crib at night for her to feel our love, for her health and happiness BUT most of all for her to grow into a child of God filled with the reassurance of Faith. And the ability to lift up her pains, fears and joys to God in her own prayers someday. And I pray for so many other people and things.

And through this transformation I can slowly feel my stubborn mind becoming ***slightly*** more quiet and my own heart softening to the change our sweet Lord has no doubt been trying to *set me free* from for many years. And as I await more guidance…for more transformation in my own self…for constant forgiveness for all the ways I do wrong every single day…I pray continually and watchfully and with a new level of gratitude.

Psalm 145:18 ~ The LORD is Near to all who call in Him…to all who call on Him in Truth…and that is where I am now…pushing myself to be constantly…transparently thankful and honest…in the hopes that He may open my heart to all the amazing things he has planned for this life.

Thank you, Amanda. Friends, living church, living our faith in a broken and messy world, is not easy. The world pulls us in many different directions, frightens us, and angers us. Yet, God has given us the gift of prayer that we might hand over all of that angst, give to God our authentic selves, and find rest and renewal in the abundance of God’s love. Prayer doesn’t have to be complicated. Our prayers can be as simple as those we learned as children. What God asks, though, is that our prayers are real, that we bring our whole selves to God. When we do, God transforms and heals us. And when we step back into all the chaos of the world around us, we are refreshed, strong and filled with hope as we seek to be a living example of the kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.