

Living Prayer
Week 1 *Pray without Ceasing*
2-25-2018 Pastor Roger Barkley
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According to the Gallop Poll, more Americans will pray this week than will exercise, yet most of them feel unsatisfied with their prayers.

Even among people who pray every day, many feel that prayer is an obligation or burden, rather than an inspiration.

I know from our conversations that a lot of you feel that you are not as good at praying as you'd like.

As a matter of fact, we are doing this series because it was specifically requested by folks in our congregation.

Maybe you don't know what to say, or you don't hear God speak to you, or you just feel awkward when you pray.

Or, maybe you have mixed feelings about if prayer even matters; maybe it is just a burst of words into a cold and empty cosmos.

I'll be frank: I sometimes feel those things, too, but we're in good company.

Here's what the guy who wrote half of the New Testament had to say about his prayer life:

Romans 8:26b *We do not know what prayer to offer or how to offer it as we should*

...

Did you catch that?

The Apostle Paul didn't always know how to pray.

Of course, Paul couldn't turn to Google for help, but this week I Googled "how to pray" and I got 104-million suggestions.

But wait! There's more, because Amazon lists over 200,000 books on prayer.

That means a lot of people are looking for help with their prayers, so, there's no shame for feeling that we aren't the pray-ers we'd like to be.

When Jesus began his ministry, he gathered twelve men who followed him for three years.

They had a front row seat to witness his miracles, they heard him deliver the best sermons in all of history, they saw him heal every kind of disease ... they even were there when he raised Lazarus from the dead.

But nowhere in scripture do we find them asking, "Lord, teach us to prepare a three-point sermon", or "Lord, teach us to do a breath-taking miracle".

Here's what they did ask:

Luke 11:1. One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Why?

Because they realized that the source behind all his great works was his prayer life – his connection with God the Father.

Jesus prayed constantly, talking to God in the morning, the afternoon and evening.

He prayed in front of crowds and when in private.

And so, they didn't ask how to preach or how to do miracles.

Instead, they asked how to pray.

We are wired for prayer – it is in our DNA.

There're many different styles of prayer because from the beginning of time people have prayed.

They may not all be praying to the same god, or for the same things, or with the same language, but everybody prays.

Even when I was an atheist, which I was for the first half of my life, when things got desperate enough, I caught myself praying.

At the time, I dismissed it as nonsense, but deep inside I sensed that there is something eternal beyond me to which I am somehow connected.

Even what we might call the most “un-spiritual” book of the Bible talks about that.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 God has set eternity in the human heart.

Just as there is an eternity to come after our few decades on this planet – there also is eternity of depth in the present moment, more than the routines, tedium, worries – even the good times – of life.

We are spiritual beings having a human experience, and so we never feel whole or at peace until we align our body, mind and soul with that eternity, the Divine.

And, we are wired for prayer because God made us for relationship.

If you don't get anything else out of today's message, get that, because that insight frees you from all sorts of “shoulds” about prayer.

God longs for a relationship with us.

If you're a parent, you know that you want your children to talk with you.

My son Ian is nearly 48-years-old and I still am happy when he calls me.

I remember when he was a baby, so curious with the world around him.

My wife and I could hardly wait to hear what was going on in his little head, what he was thinking, what he might have to say about his world.

And you know what his first communications were?

“Round and round.”

Cement mixers.

He was fascinated by how the tanks on cement mixers go around as the truck drives down the road, and so I used to drive him over to an area where there was a lot of construction taking place, and then drive along beside a cement mixer so he could point at it and say, “Round and round”.

I was delighted that we could then share those experiences, because they were important to him.

Sometimes people wonder what they should talk to God about.

They maybe assume it is weighty matters, prayers for world peace, or an end to homelessness.

Those are important, but throughout the Bible we encounter a God who is personal and intimate.

So, God wants to hear what’s going on in your life.

God, your heavenly Parent, longs to hear from you, and so God wired a desire for prayer into His design of you.

Isaiah 30:18 *The Lord waits for you to come to him so he can show you His love and compassion.*

Think of how you get together with your friends.

You might meet at Starbucks for serious one-on-one conversations.

You might do activities together – running, or tennis or game night.

There are all sorts of ways to connect with your friends depending on your personalities and the circumstances of your lives at the moment ... but the important thing is that you make quality time to be together.

Ultimately, prayer is that simple ... God wants to hear from you and He wants to communicate with you.

Part of people’s problem with prayer is that they make it too weighty and complicated.

By the way, God isn't impressed with Middle Ages English: *O, great Potentate, I humbleth myself before Thee and beseech that Thou anointeth this hour of Thy servant.*

Nor does God think you're hip because you use modern Christianese, you know: *Jesus, my heavenly buddy, we just come before You because You are like our Lord and we just seek your guidance here.*

And God isn't awed by elaborate rituals.

Prayer is a relationship, not a ritual.

Prayer is a conversation not a ceremony.

This is what God says about the ritual sacrifices of the time:

Hosea 6:6 I don't want your sacrifices – I want your love! I don't want your offerings, I want you to know me!

In other words, your just going through the motions means nothing to me or to you.

We may need some of those things, if we do them with our hearts, to orient our minds and spirits toward God.

Now, any of those things will become stumbling blocks if we use them to show off what a “prayer warrior” we are, or to shine the spotlight on ourselves.

If anyone comes to you and says, “Joan, that was such a beautiful prayer”, then watch out.

Prayers are addressed to God, not to an audience.

Some may be beautiful, but that is never the goal.

That can easily lead to pride and hypocrisy, which was Jesus' main criticism of the Pharisees of his time.

Matthew 6:5 And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

Motivation is what matters.

You see, styles of language, prescribed prayers, and rituals are valuable when we use them to get ourselves in the right frame of mind to be receptive to God.

My first church experiences were in the Church of Religious Science, (a cousin of Christian Science), where after three years of study and practice in prayer I became a licensed Practitioner.

Religious Science Practitioners are known for their healing prayers, which I have personally witnessed.

Through classes and much practice, I learned a five-step prayer that wasn't so much a formula as it was a series of steps to get ourselves oriented toward God, because from that place of communion with Spirit prayers are powerful.

After all, I can't draw near to God if I'm in the wrong state of mind; that would be like a deaf person going to a concert.

So, prayer language, prescribed steps and rituals are aids to prayer *if* they attune us to God.

James 4:8 *Come near to God and he will come near to you.*

Remember that for God to come near to me doesn't mean that God is going to give me everything I want.

God is not a cosmic vending machine ... insert prayer, receive your goodie.

For one thing, vending machines will give you junk.

Put in a buck and the vending machine will give you junk food that can mess-up your health; God won't do that.

Nor is prayer like a magic wand.

I think that is why some of us think we aren't good at praying – we've got this wrong idea that prayer should be like a powerful incantation that will make all our dreams come true and all our problems disappear.

Maybe we pray for a new job or something and it doesn't suddenly appear, so we conclude that we're not a good pray-er.

Save that magic wand, "hocus pocus" stuff for the Cinderella or Aladdin movies.

Here's your trivia fact of the day.

The words "hocus pocus" are actually a perversion of Latin in the old Catholic mass.

The priest would hold up the bread and say, "Hoc est corpus meum" – which in English means, "This is the body of Christ".

In the Catholic tradition, with those words the bread literally becomes the flesh of Christ – that's called transubstantiation.

So, some guy decided the magic was in the words and thought a version of them – "hocus pocus" – would make other things mysteriously change from one thing to another.

And, then, some of us think we are bad at prayer because we don't hear God speak to us in words.

Some people do.

I've been married to two women who pray and then hear God say things to them in real words.

And I've learned to trust those words ... they clearly are from God and give them dependable clarity and guidance way beyond what they had on our own.

But for most of us, God's communication is subtler, but none less real – but we have to be awake to get it.

When I go hiking, I am amazed by the number of people who are wearing ear buds.

In some cases, I can hear them coming from some distance away.

If you're out in nature with hip hop pounding in your ears, are you going to "hear" what nature is saying to you?

Are you going to be aware of the dozens of bird species, the subtle changes in plant life, which flowers the bees are drawn to?

Of course not ... and you'll also be oblivious to the dangers, like the warning sound of a rattlesnake.

So, if you are distracted by the distraction of the world, are you going to be attuned with the spiritual world in which you live move and have your being?

Of course not ... but then you'll get frustrated with God because life isn't working out like you think it should.

Prayer – drawing close to God – requires shutting down life's distractions, at least for a little while so we can sense what God may be saying to us.

Now understand, God always answers prayer in one of four ways.

Sometimes with a "yes"; sometimes with a "no"; sometimes with a "not yet" ... and sometimes with a "you've got to be kidding me".

1 John 5:14-15 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

Key words in this verse are "according to His will".

God is not going to deliver on your prayers if they contradict His will.

When I first considered going into ministry I thought I was good to go.

For one thing, I had done a lot of public speaking – first during the civil rights movement, then later as a sales trainer.

So, I thought I could give a dynamite sermon – that was what I assumed was all that was necessary to be a good minister.

So, I prayed and told God to give me this opportunity, and thank God that He said, “no”.

He said “no” to some ministry things I wanted to jump right into.

At first, I was discouraged, thinking God wasn’t answering my prayer.

Only later did I understand that God was taking my prayer more seriously than I was myself, that what seemed like a “no” actually was a “not yet”.

Instead, he put me into a local school of ministry, then He led me to a traditional seminary, then He led me to a couple of challenging internships, then He let me embarrass myself with a sermon belly flop.

Well, ok, with several belly flops.

So, He answered my prayer, just not how I’d originally wanted.

Instead, God took my prayer seriously and used about five years to prepare me for a promise beyond my wildest dreams.

How much better it is if we can just stay in touch with God so we aren’t discouraged when things don’t immediately go our way, or just think of pray as a last resort.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 *Pray without ceasing.*

I have to confess that for years that verse made me feel burdened.

I guess that in the back of my mind I took that to mean that I should isolate in a dreary monk’s cell, or that I should go through my day praying the Rosary.

But actually, this gets back to what we were talking about a minute ago.

God wants to hear from us – what’s going on, what we are thinking about, what we are concerned about.

So, think of praying without ceasing as just maintaining an ongoing conversation with God.

“Good morning, God. Thank you for bringing me this day.”

“God, I’m really concerned about this meeting I heading into. What will these management changes mean to me?”

“God, thank you for this meal. I got it: this is a gift. Thank you.”

“God, I’m really upset with you.”

Walk around with God and you’ll get familiar with His ways.

Prayer is not a last resort.

Sometimes you hear people say, “We’ve exhausted all our options. I guess all we can do is pray.”

No.

It’s just the opposite.

Pray without ceasing so you become familiar with God, so that you are led by God, so that you learn how to depend on God.

The closer you are to God, the less stressed and the more blessed your life will become.