

SLIDE 1. Series: The Sacred Mystery of Prayer

Teaching: *Pray as You Can*

Sunday September 10, 2023

I was sitting at a dinner table last week – head down.

It was not the start of the meal. It was well after it.

We were not praying. We were “chatting” – which was much more of a monologue than it was a dialogue.

I love my dad. And sometimes he gets stuck in his thoughts – and sometimes those thoughts are hard to hear when he expresses them – as they were that night.

So, I had my head down. Silent.

As if I was absolutely enthralled with my placemat.

I was praying – even if *we* weren’t praying.

I was praying...

“Lord, I don’t know what to do here. I feel anxious and defensive. I have tried to listen well, and I have tried to help my dad see things from a different perspective, but it doesn’t seem to be working. It doesn’t seem helpful.”

“I can feel my temperature rising.”

“I’ve said what I can. I don’t know what to do next?”

“Help me!”

I seemed to hear Jesus answer...

“Stay with me for a while. Just me. Let my Spirit in you calm you down. Let my Spirit in you lead you to self-control. Let my Spirit in you give you time to think about what you will say and do next.”

“Pause. Deep breath. Now, change the playing field. Ask if you can take his dishes. Be of service. Stay within earshot. Clear the table. Load the dishwasher.”

“Ask him – in the end – how you could be of help to him in those kinds of conversations.”

“And then - stay with him. Be present to him. Doing so will remind him that tough conversations don’t have to signal the end of relationship – that getting through them and staying with him is the measure of the relationship.”

“And – make him laugh. Reset each other physiologically!”

SLIDE 2. Prayer – speaking to and listening to God – is a *sacred mystery*.

Sacred because of who we are talking to.

Mystery because of how it works.

As Tyler Staton says – in his wonderful book on prayer called – “Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools” – prayer is a mystery for saints, (spiritual) sleepwalkers, and skeptics alike. We wonder...

Is prayer necessary? If God is all-powerful – then doesn't he accomplish what he wants when he wants how he wants? Why do we need to ask him anything if he is going to do what he's going to do?

What's actually happening when I pray? Are there things that happen because I pray? Are there things that don't happen because I didn't pray? In other words – what effect does my praying or not have on whatever happens?

Do my prayers ever change God's mind?

Do they change me?

Do my prayers matter? Do they matter to God? Do they matter in real life?

Why does God sometimes seem to answer some prayers only after I pray them for a very long time?

Why doesn't God answer my prayers for family and friends to come to Jesus to be saved, made whole, and live with purpose? Surely, he wants that even more than I do! Surely, he wants to answer that prayer! So, why hasn't it happened?

And yet – saints are encouraged to pray...

SLIDE 3. Jesus said: *I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours* (Mk. 11:24).

SLIDE 4. James, the brother of Jesus, said: *Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working* (Jas. 5:16).

SLIDE 5. King David said: *Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!* (Ps. 4:1).

SLIDE 6. Peter said: *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil* (1 Pt. 3:12).

SLIDE 7. Paul said: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (Phil. 4:6).

Or in shorthand: Don't worry about anything. Instead, pray about everything!

Q. So, why *don't* we pray?

And let's assume that the devil is behind any of these reasons!

1. When we wonder if prayer is necessary or effective or if God is even listening (which saints and sleepwalkers and skeptics do) – we tend to not pray.

2. We don't understand how it works. No one has shown us how to pray. No one has taught us how to speak and listen to God. So, we don't pray.

3. We get distracted. We get busy – with work and worrying and web scrolling. Crowding out time to talk and listen to God.

4. We rely on our own strength. We depend on ourselves. We have what we need so we go about our days like we don't need God. So, we don't pray.

5. We don't want to look naïve in a secular world.

To quote Tyler again: "To pray is to risk being naïve, to risk believing, to risk playing the fool. To pray is to get our hopes up. And we've learned to avoid that (because we live in an era of cynicism over belief). So we avoid prayer" (p. 14).

Do any of these reasons - not to pray - resonate with you? They do me.

So, let's remind ourselves of some reasons why we *do* pray?

SLIDE 9. 1. Because Jesus prayed.

Jesus prayed and fasted for 40 days and nights to prepare Himself for the temptation of the devil in the Judean wilderness (Mt. 4; Mark 1: Lk. 4). This more than likely contributed to his victory over Satan.

Jesus prayed the night before choosing his 12 closest disciples (Lk. 6:12). He turned to God for wisdom and insight before making a big decision.

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He pled with the Father to spare him of the suffering and separation of the cross. He prayed when he was in great need.

Jesus prayed repeatedly on the cross. He cried out in his suffering. He prayed for those who were hurting him. And finally, he prayed a prayer of surrender of himself into the Father's hands.

As Christians – we are defined by the work and the way of Jesus Christ.

For some – it is enough to say, "If it was the habit of Jesus – I'll make it mine."

How do you prepare yourself against temptation? What do you do when you have a big decision to make? Who do you turn to when you are in great need? What do you do when you're in tremendous pain?

Jesus prayed.

2. Because conversation is critical for relationships.

I can't imagine not talking to or listening to my wife, Jackie. We share our highs and lows. We bounce ideas off one another. We pray for each other. We cheer each other on. We challenge and encourage one another. We have disagreements. We exchange apologies and forgiveness. We make each other laugh.

Healthy relationships require communication.

Our relationship with God is no different.

The disciples saw how close Jesus was to God-the-Father. They longed for that intimacy. So, they asked him, "Teach us to pray!"

3. Because we feel overwhelmed sometimes. We have been groomed by a post-Enlightenment story of deconstruction that doesn't trust God or people. So, we tend towards self-sufficiency. The problem with that is this: we can't do everything on our own.

As a result - we can feel overwhelmed! And so I prayed, "Lord, I don't know what to do. Help me!" I escaped feeling overwhelmed through prayer.

4. Because our complaints are welcome.

As Tyler rightly observes, "God is not nearly as worried about our mixed motives as we are" (p. 19). The proof of this, of course, is the Book of Psalms – filled with prayers of anger and complaint and depression and lament.

Tyler goes on to say, "God is looking for relationship, not well-prepared speeches spoken from perfect motives. God listened to overreacting rage, dramatic despair, and guileless joy, and he called David a man after his own heart. When it comes to prayer, God isn't grading essays; he's talking to children. So if God can delight in prayers as dysfunctional as the ones we find wedged into the middle of the Bible, he can handle yours too without you cleaning them up first."

[As C.S. Lewis said, "We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."](#)

5. Because praying is how we learn to pray.

The father of modern spiritual discipline, Richard Foster, says, "By praying we learn to pray."

The contemplative Thomas Merton wrote, "If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying."

And spiritual heavyweight, Mother Teresa taught, "If we really mean to pray and want to pray, we must be ready to do it now."

As we noted earlier – the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.
And how did he do that?!
By praying!

I love how Tyler put it in “Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools,” – “Prayer is more practice than theory.”

“Pray as you can,” he quotes Dom John Chapman.

Pray running errands or exercising or walking in a forest.

Journal prayers with paper and pen or (as I do) with keyboard and screen.

“If you can’t pray with hope and faith, God isn’t bothered. He wants you to tell him about your doubt and disappointment.”

Because conversation is critical for relationships.

“Pray as you can,” says Tyler again, “and along the way, you will make the most important discovery of your life – the love the Father has for you. That discovery is God’s end of the deal. Your part is just to show up honestly. Show up and keep showing up.”

“If you’ve never uttered a word of prayer, you should know that one humble request was enough for a career thief crucified next to Jesus to discover the Father’s love.”

“If prayer is the source of a deep wound or disappointment for you, remember that when trust is broken in a relationship, it doesn’t get healed by silence and distance; healing requires the courage of re-engaging. I won’t pretend that’s easy. But it is the place of healing” (p. 26).

If you’re years into an active life of mature prayer and beginning to wonder what’s left to discover... keep going.

Couples and partner and best friends who have known each other for years often say the same thing about each other, “I am still getting to know them.”

How much more is there to know about God – who was and is and always will be?!

May we never lose a sense of wonder about Him – his creativity, his grace, his love, his discipline, his kindness, his wisdom, his correction, even – his timing – among so many other things.

“Pray as you can.”

Still yourself. Be quiet. Know God.

You can do this anywhere, anytime. Just show up honestly.

Here's an example of an honest, just showing-up prayer by the poet Ted Loder.

Sit back and listen...

Holy One,

there is something I wanted to tell you, but there have been errands to run,
bills to pay,
arrangements to make,
meetings to attend, friends to entertain,
washing to do...

and I forget what it is I wanted to say to you,
and mostly I forget what I'm about or why.

O God,
don't forget me, please,
for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Eternal One,

there is something I wanted to tell you,
but my mind races with worrying and watching,
with weighing and planning,
with rutted slights and pothole grievances,
with leaky dreams and leaky plumbing
and leaky relationships I keep trying to plug up;
and my attention is preoccupied
with loneliness,
with doubt,
and with things I covet;
and I forget what it is I want to say to you,
and how to say it honestly
or how to do much of anything.

O God,
don't forget me, please,
for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Almighty One,

there is something I wanted to ask you,
but I stumble along the edge of a nameless rage,
haunted by a hundred floating fears
of terrorists of all kinds,
of losing my job,
of failing,

of getting sick and old,
having loved ones die,
of dying...

I forget what the real question is that I wanted to ask,
and I forget to listen anyway
because you seem unreal and far away,
and I forget what it is I have forgotten.

O God,
don't forget me, please,
for the sake of Jesus Christ...

O Father... in Heaven,
perhaps you've already heard what I wanted to tell you.
What I wanted to ask is
forgive me,
heal me,
increase my courage, please.

Renew in me a little of love and faith,
and a sense of confidence,
and a vision of what it might mean
to live as though you are real,
and I mattered,
and everyone was sister and brother.

What I wanted to ask in my blundering way is
don't give up on me,
don't become too sad about me,
but laugh with me,
and try again with me,
and I will with you, too.

What I wanted to ask is
for peace enough to want and work for more,
for joy enough to share,
and for awareness that is keen enough
to sense your presence
here, now, there, then,
always.

"Pray as you can."

Now.

In a moment – we will close our service in a time of prayer. But before we do – let me remind you of the ways you can ask for prayer...

1. You can drop by the church or call us or email us – and Pastor Bryan or I would be happy to pray with you.
2. You can join a LIFE GROUP – where members regularly pray for each other.
3. You can go online – to our website. Just click on PRAYER – right in the middle of our home page. You can choose the level of confidentiality: pastoral staff only, the Prayer Team, or churchwide – through our newsletter.

Here are some things we can pray about this morning...

- a. Karina's brother – falsely accused overseas – protection, justice, salvation.
- b. Families and firefighters in Kelowna and other parts of our country, our world.
- c. A local mom struggling with alcoholism.
- d. Perry and Julia Springman's adult nephew, Michael – broken neck in biking accident.
- e. Trisha's dad – fell out of bed – broken femur, cut eyebrow.
- f. A friend of the church – her girlfriend's son died by suicide.
- g. Worldwide Suicide Prevention Day – today!
- h. Truth and Reconciliation – month – day on Sep. 30.