

**PRAYER: WE SPEAK**

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

I hope you know the God of that song. The faithful One. The One upon whom you can depend, no matter what. The Solid Rock. The Anchor in a storm. I wonder if the words of that song resonate with you.

*I call out to You again and again.*

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Did you notice in this song that all the words are about God's character and the way God is in relationship with the singer?

*You are my Rock of peace.*

*You are my Rock in times of trouble;*

*You lift me up when I fall down.<sup>i</sup>*

There's an assumption in the song, that when the singer calls out to God, God shows up – God answers – God provides what's needed. Again and again. It seems to me that the person who wrote this song didn't just know *about* God; he *knows* God.

Last week I told you that we're going to be talking about and invited to practice a bunch of different Spiritual Disciplines over the coming weeks. Don't let the term *Spiritual Disciplines* intimidate you. They're just tried-and-true tools that help put us in a position to meet God – to know God. They aren't things we're meant to master; they're things we're meant to practice. Some of them will be familiar and some won't. Some you'll recognize, and have lots of experience practicing, others will feel brand new.

Over the next 4 or 5 weeks, we'll be talking about prayer. It's probably the most familiar of all the Spiritual Disciplines. Probably all of us have prayed in some way before. Maybe just by saying grace before a meal, or uttering a quick "God help me" when something feels too big or too much. We always spend time in our worship services praying for the various needs of people connected to our congregation. You might love this part of our worship service, or you might find it tedious. But it's prayer. And you know it's prayer.

There are a lot of definitions of prayer out there. Some of them are super intimidating. Take this one, from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian mystic named Theophan the Recluse. He said, "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you." That's quite the description. Let me read it again. "To pray is to descend with the mind

into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.”<sup>ii</sup>

Richard Foster wrote that prayer “catapults us onto the frontier of the spiritual life... It ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father.”<sup>iii</sup> That’s beautiful, don’t you think? “Perpetual communion with the Father.” Who wouldn’t want that? Who wouldn’t want communion with God? Dare I say, Friendship with God?

Corrie ten Boom, famous 20<sup>th</sup> century author and speaker who was part of the Dutch resistance during the Nazi occupation in WWII, wrote this: “The wonderful thing about praying is that you leave a world of not being able to do something, and enter God's realm where everything is possible. He specializes in the impossible. Nothing is too great for His almighty power, nothing is too small for His love.”<sup>iv</sup>

Again: Who wouldn’t want that? If that’s really what prayer is – entering God’s realm where everything is possible – which of us wouldn’t want to pray?

But let’s be honest. If it was just about *wanting* to pray, I’m sure most of us would be praying all the time, or at least with regularity. After all, I don’t think anyone would argue that prayer isn’t part of being a Christian. But if we’re honest, many of us, even though we want to pray, don’t.

Before I speak to this whole *wanting to pray apparently isn’t enough to make us actually spend time praying*, thing, I’d like to take a look at two really short comments about Jesus.

The first is in Luke 5. Jesus has just healed a man’s leprosy. Even though he told the man not to tell people what had happened, word got out. In verses 15 and 16 we read this: Now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

It seems a weird choice, doesn’t it? People are coming to Jesus from everywhere. He’s healing people left, right, and centre. This is the point, isn’t it? Isn’t this why Jesus came? What better manifestation of God’s kingdom than the sick being made well? But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Right when everything was going great, when people were coming to Jesus in droves, he would withdraw and pray. Why? It doesn’t seem like the best move, logistically. Except Jesus knew that it was only out of a place of communion with

the Father that he could do anything. And he knew that such communion was to be found in prayer.

I wonder how many of us would even think to withdraw and pray, right in the middle of everything going great? Let's be honest, aren't we more likely to pray when things are falling apart? when no one's coming? when nothing's working? If everyone's coming, what sense does it make to leave them to go pray?

If *Jesus* needed to withdraw and pray, doesn't it stand to reason that so do we? Doesn't it stand to reason that especially when things are going great, we may need the grounding that comes with stepping aside to pray for a bit?

One of the things prayer does, is remind us who God is and who we are. If ever we need to be reminded of this, surely it's exactly when things are going great. Surely it's exactly when things are going great that we're most in danger of thinking it's about us or it's because of us? Maybe that we don't really need God? What better time to withdraw and pray and be reminded who God is and who we are.

In Luke 6:12 – 13, we read that Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.

Jesus had all sorts of followers. Lots of people had decided to be Jesus' disciples. They wanted to learn from him. They wanted to live like he lived. But the day came when Jesus needed to choose 12 men who would become the apostles – those who would travel the world telling the stories of Jesus, sharing his teachings, encouraging people to believe and recognize Jesus as their risen Saviour and Lord. These twelve would be the birth of the Church. But before Jesus chose the twelve, he spent the night in prayer. Jesus needed to spend time in intentional communion with God in order to discern God's will regarding the identity of the twelve men who would be his closest friends and disciples.

How many times are we faced with decisions, and we don't even think to consult God on it? How often do we maybe ask God for direction, but then fail to sit still and listen and wait for God's response? If Jesus needed to spend an entire night in prayer before choosing the twelve, surely we, too, need to spend time in prayer before making whatever big decisions are in front of us?

I'm pretty sure all (or at least most) of us know we should pray. We perhaps even want to pray. We want to pray like Jesus prayed. So why don't we?

I think there are a few things that stand in our way.

I think sometimes we have this idea that we have to have everything just right in order to pray. Maybe we think we need to know more about *how* to pray. Or we think our lives need to be a bit better – *we* need to be a bit better – before we pray. Maybe we're concerned our motives aren't pure, or our faith is insufficient, or we don't really know what to pray. Maybe we hear stories of people who pray for hours, and we know we can't possibly pay attention that long – we're intimidated – so we don't even bother trying.

But here's the thing: as with all Spiritual Disciplines, it's not about us doing something perfectly, or even well. It's not about us mastering a skill. At no point, ever, does God demand perfection or the right words or anything else. All that's required is that we come to him, with whatever is going on, whatever is on our mind or in our heart. We come simply as children before a loving Father. And not only that, but again as with all Spiritual Disciplines, it's not just on us. Prayer is never a one-sided effort. God's holy Spirit lives in us, gives us words and speaks for us when there are no words.

Have you ever seen Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam"? It's a pretty famous painting. At the bottom left is Adam, with his arm stretched out toward the God figure in the upper right side of the painting. God's arm is also stretched out toward Adam. Their fingers touch in the middle. When you look closely at the painting, you can't help but contrast Adam's super relaxed pose with God's strained reaching. To my eyes, the angels that surround God seem almost to be holding onto him, as though if they were to let go, God might fall right out of heaven, he's straining so hard toward Adam.

I love this painting as an image of prayer. We reach out toward God, with whatever we have. We may not have much; that's o.k. Because God is also reaching toward us. And he has everything. Even if all we have to offer is 1% of the effort, God can easily supply the other 99%.

As Richard Foster reminds us, "God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it."<sup>v</sup>

So, o.k. We agree. We should pray. We agree. We don't need to be perfect or skillful or anything. We just have to do it. But how? How do we pray?

You know, that's exactly what the disciples asked Jesus. They'd witnessed him going off by himself for hours on end to pray. And they wanted to learn how to

pray like that. What I love is that Jesus didn't minimize their struggle. He didn't just say to them, "Come on, just do it. Just talk." or "Just listen." Instead, Jesus heard them. He heard the genuineness of their request. And this is how he answered (according to Luke's gospel): "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." (Luke 11:2 – 4)

I think sometimes we forget that prayer is something we learn. It's not something we just do; we learn to pray. So let's learn together how to pray.

The simplest way to think about prayer is just talking to God. Share your hopes and dreams, your sorrows, your joy. Talk about the things that scare you or that make you laugh. Just talk about whatever's going on – whatever's on your mind. For some of us, it's really easy to just talk. Maybe it's easier if you talk out loud. You're probably less likely to get distracted or side-tracked if you're talking out loud instead of just quietly in your head. Maybe it's easier if you write out whatever you have to say. Maybe use a journal, or type into your computer, or write on whatever scraps of paper are lying around.

While we can (and should) pray anywhere and everywhere all through the day, if we're going to practice prayer as a Spiritual Discipline – something we do intentionally and consistently – then it's often helpful to have a bit of structure in place.

It can be really helpful to find a place that's quiet and free from interruption and designate that your prayer spot. Maybe it's just a corner. Maybe it's in a closet. It doesn't have to be any bigger than you can sit in comfortably. It may be helpful to light a candle as you begin, to give you a visual reminder of God's presence with you. Don't plan to spend hours in that spot as you're beginning this practice of prayer. Just go there for 3 minutes a day. Find a position that's comfortable. Maybe sit with your palms open and up as a physical expression of your receptiveness to God. Maybe it's helpful to close your eyes. Or maybe there's a picture or something else that can focus your attention. Set an alarm for however long you plan to spend in prayer so you won't be distracted by the time.

You know how we've started doing the palms down, palms up thing at the beginning of our worship services? Maybe just do that. Palms down – tell God the things you need to release. Palms up – tell God the things you need from him.

If you're looking for more structure, maybe try the ACTS outline. A is for Adoration. Spend a bit of time simply speaking words of Adoration to God. Tell him how great he is. C is for Confession. Having identified how great God is, we become aware of all the ways we aren't great. Name whatever comes to mind and give it to God. T is for Thanksgiving. What are you thankful for? Tell God. And S is for Supplication. This just means asking. What do you want from God. Tell him. Don't worry about whether or not it's appropriate or right or worth God's time. As C.S. Lewis apparently said, "Lay before him what is in you, not what you think ought to be in you."<sup>vi</sup>

This week, I'd love for all of us to commit to spending some amount of time every day practicing prayer. Pick whatever time of day works best for you. It's probably most helpful to choose the same time each day, but if that doesn't work, don't stress about it. Just pick a time every day that works. Then decide how long you're going to do it. If you've never done anything like this before, maybe just do 3-5 minutes every day. Maybe you can manage 10. But don't think about how much you think you *should* do. That's not what this is about. This is about practicing something and hopefully practicing it consistently and intentionally enough that it becomes a habit. But for that to work, we need to be gradual. Start small. It'll grow. But start small.

Once you've picked your time of day and the amount of time you're going to try (don't forget to set an alarm so you're not distracted by wondering how much longer), decide what you'll do with your time. Maybe you'll talk out loud to God. Maybe you'll write to him. Maybe use palms down, palms up to guide your prayer time. Maybe use the ACTS acronym. Or maybe just talk – lay before God whatever happens to be on your mind. There are no rules about what must be included or what's acceptable. Just talk. Complain, celebrate, yell, whisper.. whatever is on your mind: tell God about it.

Right now, I'd like to walk us through a guided time of prayer. Maybe you'll find it helpful as you consider what it means to pray.

To start, be still. Breathe in. Breathe out. As you breathe in, imagine the Spirit of God filling your body. As you breathe out, imagine all your worries, leaving your body.

As you breathe in, think about the fact that God is with you. As you breathe out, remember that you are with God.

Now I'm going to invite you to repeat after me, one line at a time.



Lord, surround me with your Spirit. (pause)

Remove from my mind all distractions, inattention, coldness; (pause)

Open my eyes to see you and my ears to hear you (pause)

Help me be still in your presence. (pause)

Hear my prayer (pause)

Now, if you are conscious of some particular faults, remember that God is ready to forgive you. I will again pray one line at a time, and invite you to repeat after me, or add to the sentence, whatever you need to do. My words are just meant to help guide us.

Humbly and sorrowfully I long for your forgiveness. (pause)

For every weakening thought to which my mind has wandered (pause)

For every thoughtless word spoken (pause)

For every failure of self-control (pause)

For these things I just cannot forget (pause)

Lord, help me to know your forgiveness and acceptance. (pause)

Help me to let go of the past. (pause)

Help me to live from now on for all that is good and right. (pause)

Now, if there is something you want to thank God for, repeat after me if you'd like:

From the depths of my heart I give you my thanks

For all your goodness and kindness to me,

Especially for.... (pause)

May I praise you, not only with my words, but in my life.

Now, if you are troubled or worried about anything, remember the promise of Jesus, that he is "with you always" and repeat after me, filling in the blanks as we go:

I am distressed, Lord, because of...

When I cannot see the way to go, help me to trust in you. (pause)

When I cannot understand, help me to go on believing. (pause)

When all seems dark, let the light of faith shine in my heart. (pause)

Now, if you know someone else who needs your prayers...

To your loving care, Father, I bring....

And finally, if you'd like, repeat the words of this prayer after me:

Lord let me walk with you and know your peace (pause)

May my life speak of you, (pause)

And my whole being wait on you, (pause)

To hear your word and do your will, (pause)

My Lord and My God. (pause)

Amen. (pause)

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<sup>i</sup> This song is *Faithful One*. It's by Brian Doerksen. © 1989 Mercy/Vineyard Publishing | Vineyard Songs Canada.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard J. Foster. *Celebration of Discipline*. Revised ed. (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1988), 19.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>iv</sup> Corrie Ten Boom, *I Stand at the Door and Knock: Meditations by the Author of The Hiding Place*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), 63

<sup>v</sup> Richard J. Foster. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 13.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, 21.