

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Discipleship Series
Luke 11:1-4

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Before I read this morning's scripture, I want to say a few words about the context in which I am preaching this morning. Nearly two years ago the session of our church decided that as a congregation we needed to think and pray together about our future. Our building renovation was complete, so we needed to look to the next chapter of our mission. So a process called our "Journey of Renewal" began, and 2008 was devoted to that process—listening, discerning, talking, praying, and finally, formulating some recommendations. We adopted four themes to describe our purpose—Learning love, Sharing faith, Serving people, Celebrating God. We have some new goals we are working on as a session. And out of this process, it has become more clear that what we need to focus on as a congregation is our **discipleship**, our personal relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, which is foundational to our relationship to one another in Christian **community**, which then leads us outwards in our Christian **mission**. Over the next three months, this is what you will hear in our preaching and worship services—discipleship, community, mission.

Today begins our emphasis on discipleship, and today I am starting at the beginning, the foundation of that personal relationship, which is **PRAYER**.

(READ LUKE 11:1-4)

David H.C. Read, who was one of the great preachers of the second half of the 20th century, once commented that "prayer" was probably the favorite topic for most congregations—and the least favorite for most preachers. I don't know about the congregations part, but I know why I am intimidated by prayer as a topic for preaching. It's because, after all these years, I still feel like a beginner. It's because I am sure that there are people in this congregation, sitting in these pews, who are more knowledgeable, more advanced, more devoted, more prayerful than I am. It's because despite all the books of prayers on my shelf and the books about prayer, and despite all the public praying I've done in 21 years of ordained ministry, I know there's so much more I could learn about prayer. I still feel like a beginner.

So I find some comfort in the request of the disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray." What? These companions of Jesus, these faithful Jews who were born into and steeped in a culture full of prayer, they don't know how to pray? Their lives weren't as crazy-busy as ours, as distracted, and their world wasn't as rushed or noisy, crowding out prayer time. They prayed at morning and evening prayers, they prayed after eating, at Sabbath services in the home and synagogue, and at the great festivals. There is much evidence of this, for hundreds of early Jewish prayers have survived the millennia. The psalms as a book of prayers and songs took their final form sometime around that first century of the Christian era, and there is no richer written source for the range of human relationship to God than the psalms. And Jesus' disciples had left behind their livelihoods, their daily routines, to devote their days and weeks and months—years, even—to walk with this spiritual master. Why would they need lessons on prayer!

But they asked. They had seen Jesus praying, often. In quiet places, at turning points, at table. Prayer was essential in Jesus' life, and they were curious. What did he know about prayer that they didn't?

I think they felt like beginners. And Jesus took them seriously, and taught them a prayer which they took to heart and shared with others and which has been said by centuries of Christian disciples ever since.

Father,
 Reveal who you are.
 Set the world right.
 Keep us alive with three square meals.
 Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
 Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

(The Message, NavPress: Colorado Springs, 2002, p. 1879)

Hold on. Those aren't the familiar words, are they? No, they are Eugene Peterson's translation from the original language. He made this translation to bridge the gap between the ancient world and today's world, and I wonder if we've heard the older translation too often to teach us anything new. But newness is what what the disciples were asking for—not what they'd heard and said forever and ever, amen, but a prayer which would startle them and capture their imagination and communicate with God freshly and openly and honestly. The prayer of our Lord was probably just as fresh and refreshing and honest to God. "Lord, teach us to pray," was a prayer answered with a prayer. When you pray, lay it out before God, shows Jesus. Don't try to sound professional or eloquent. As Nike says, Just Do It.

That's our first lesson on prayer. Just do it. Don't be afraid or intimidated. You may always feel like a beginner, but humility is a good posture for prayer. I was comforted to read in my research this week that St. Dimitry of Rostov says that we are all beginners at prayer, no matter how advanced. (quoted by Thomas Hopko, "Understanding Prayer," *The Living Pulpit* vol 2 no. 3, p. 18) I have no idea who St. Dimitry of Rostov is, but I'll take it! Just do it, no matter how amateur it feels.

The second lesson on prayer is about what prayer is and is NOT. It's not magic. Let's be clear—prayer does not manipulate divine power to make the world what we want it to be. You've probably heard "prayer changes things," and the comeback to that, "most of all, it changes the one who prays." But prayer is also not a means of self-improvement. Every month I receive in the mail a magazine which is, start-to-finish, aimed at helping women improve their lives. There are always articles on weight loss and exercise, diet and health. (The ads are usually for processed food and the recipes for yummy desserts, but never mind the contradictions!) There are articles on family finance, parenting, housekeeping, organization, beauty and style. There is something in this magazine to help every woman with whatever inadequacies she may feel. Self-improvement is a powerful drive in our culture. And often we hear prayer offered as a means of self-improvement. Think about it—haven't you heard that some form of prayer (which you're not currently doing) will make you more "fulfilled, . . . psychically stable, integrated, peaceful, healthy, happy, satisfied, or positive?" These may be by-products of prayer, but these are not the

goal of prayer. Prayer is not a means of self-improvement. (David H.C. Read, reviewing Douglas John Hall's *When You Pray*, in *The Living Pulpit*, vol 2 no. 3, p.35)

Instead, I think prayer is better thought of as

- “conscious contact with God,” (Fred R. Anderson, “Does Prayer Work?” *The Living Pulpit* vol 2 no. 3, pp. 24-25),
- a “living encounter with a living God,” (Kenneth Leech, 1980, *True Prayer*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, p. 8),
- the means by which our relationship with the One who made us, who redeems us, who sustains us is deepened.

Prayer is relationship. In prayer we grow in knowledge and intimacy with God, we begin to recognize God in the world around us and in us, we learn to trust and honor and love God.

“Holy is your name, O God,” --the words begin to express the awe and wonder which deepens in us the more we know God.

“Your kingdom come” –the phrase captures our longing for God’s power and justice to be here and now with us.

And the three petitions for food, and forgiveness, and protection-- speak aloud the needs of our bodies and souls, the strains of life in the world, the weakness of being human and the mightiness of being God.

Prayer is communion with God. It is tuning our lives to God’s perfect pitch, tuning our hearts to sing God’s praise, tuning our desires to God’s desires for our lives, tuning our actions to God’s will—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

So prayer is not about manipulating God or improving ourselves. It is about deepening our relationship of love and honor and trust in God.

Which leads to the third lesson about prayer. Do it daily. From the rising of the sun until its setting, and then some. Romans 12:12 tells us to “persevere in prayer,” and 1 Thess 5:17 says “pray without ceasing.” How are we to do that? Is it possible to grow so much in prayer that God becomes as near to us as our breath, as real to us as the air we breathe, in and out, 24 hours a day, whether we are awake or asleep, 7 days a week, at work , at play, at rest? Is that humanly attainable? Could we be so whole and holy?

In this noisy, crazy, hectic world, it’s very easy to let God be crowded out of our lives. It’s very easy to wait until the house is burning or the Titanic is sinking before we call on God for help. But that’s not the way we want to live, is it? So we need some disciplines to train our bodies to pause and re-establish that conscious connection with God. We need reminders to invite God back into our lives, deeper into the world, closer to our awareness. This is where the little green dots come in. What I invite you to do is to take your green dots and stick them places where you will see them and be reminded to pray, and thus grow in your relationship. Maybe you need one in your bedroom, so that when you see it first thing in the morning, you will pause to thank God for the blessings of the new day, and ask for help with the challenges in that day. Maybe you would rather put it on the bathroom mirror, so that when you look at yourself you see that God is with you,

that God is in you, that God is for you saying “go, go, go you can do it.” Maybe you will want to put it in the center of your table, or on the refrigerator, to increase your gratitude for that daily bread the prayer asks for. Or how about on your computer keyboard or monitor, so that as you send and receive email you also practice the discipline of sending and receiving messages from God. Make God part of your social network. You could put your green dot on your rear view mirror in your car, and every time you see it you could pray for that guy who just cut you off in traffic, or ask forgiveness for your own aggressiveness behind that wheel. If you are a student, you could put it in the corner of your desk, or on your notebook—anywhere that will make you notice it and remember to pray, to invite God into your life, to re-establish that conscious connection with God. I think you probably get the idea by now—if we all have 3 dots reminding us to pray, then we will each be cultivating our communion with God. And all together, we will be that much closer to fulfilling the call to “pray without ceasing.”

These could have been red dots, to remind you to stop what you’re doing to pray. Or they could be yellow, to remind you to slow down and be more cautious, and talk to God before you rush ahead into the intersection. But they are green dots, because green is a sign of growth. To pray daily is a mark of a disciple. It is a foundational practice, because it is in prayer that our relationship to God through Christ can begin, and grow, and mature. Just do it, begin at the beginning. Deepen your relationship through prayer. And do it every day.

There is so much more to say about prayer, so much more we could learn together. This is a start. When we commit to daily prayer, we commit to learning love and celebrating God. And knowing Jesus, I have a strong suspicion that sharing faith and serving people won’t be far behind.

note: Green dots are available in the church office for those who would like them.