

When you pray...
Sermon 170 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 5, 2023
Matthew 6:7-21

Today's reading includes one of the most well-known, most memorized, and most quoted pieces of scripture there is. I believe it is always a good thing when we memorize the words of scripture, maybe it's that Bible Drill training coming through... but sometimes when we do that the words become so ingrained in us that they cease to have any meaning at all. They roll off our tongues without any thought or consideration of what we are actually saying. In a way, they sort of become dead to us, rendering no power at all in our lives, not because we want it to be so, but rather because it has just happened over time.

So today as we explore the words of the Lord's prayer together, maybe our prayer could be for God to resurrect Jesus' prayer in a way that draws us more deeply into God's Kingdom.

How do we pray? (That's the implied question that drives today's reading) How do we pray? Quietly? Individually? Boldly or timidly? Publicly or privately? Do we close our eyes and bow our heads? Do we awaken early in the day to listen for God or to write our prayers in a journal, almost like a letter to God? Do we utter the names of those on our prayer list to God whenever they cross our minds? Do we join a zoom call early on Wednesday morning? Or do we get on our knees beside the bed at night, just before falling asleep?

How do we pray? Much has been written about prayer...

St. Paul says we are to pray continuously in his letter to the Thessalonians.

In her book, *Help. Thanks. Wow.*, Anne Lamott observes that most of the prayers she sees, hears, or speaks can be defined by three essential categories. All of them, no matter the time or circumstance, are variations on the themes: help, thanks, and wow. Sometimes it's a friend praying, "Help me afford a new Mercedes-Benz;" and other times it's, "Help heal my friend Martin from his cancer." Sometimes it's "Thank you for getting me out of that mess I created for myself." Other times it's "Wow! Look at the way the buds burst forth from that branch. It looked so dead just a week ago." Or "Wow, who knew something so good could come from a situation that seemed so bad?"¹

The most simple definition of prayer is that it is our line of communication with God. Prayer is the means by which we talk to God *and* it is also one of the means by which God speaks to us. Sometimes our prayers are reactive like asking for help in the midst of trouble. And sometimes our prayers are proactive, more like eating our vegetables to make sure we keep our bodies healthy, proactive prayer; being in communication with God can keep us spiritually healthy before the trouble arrives. Prayer can be "motion and stillness

¹ Anne Lamott. *Help. Thanks. Wow: Three Essential Prayers*, p. 1-7.

and energy all at the same time,"² prayer can be words and silence, prayer can be hopeful and optimistic even if we are feeling bitter and broken. Prayer is an opening opportunity for us to be with God and to be *real* with God.

Jesus' instructions on prayer lead us in the same direction, toward authenticity. Before offering us his sample prayer, he tells us not to be showy or fake when we go to God in prayer. Not to climb up onto our soap boxes or turn up the volume on our microphones so that everyone can hear our beautiful words. No, Jesus tells us to be honest, raw, and real with God because, after all, God knows our needs before we ever name them.

Nothing could make this clearer than the opening of the Jesus' prayer itself, "Our Father."

For some this opening is problematic because the language and image of father is wrought with trauma and pain. Parental relationships can be so loaded can't they? For some who struggle with fertility or child loss, for others who have endured abuse, and still for others who never knew a father at all; just saying the word is a painful endeavor. For those who cannot find God in the image or language of Father, please hear this: the gender of God is not the point. Whether you know God as mother, father, mentor, friend, or Love with a capital L, the point of Jesus' address is the intimate relationship. When Jesus says *Abba*, Jesus is calling upon the God who knows him better than he knows himself. The God who loves him more fully than any human being could ever love. Jesus prays to a relational God, God who knows the number of hairs on our heads, knows the intricate lines on our faces, who knows the longings of our hearts, and who wants nothing but the best for our lives. Through this prayer, Jesus shows us, in a radical way, that our God is a relational God whose motivation is always Love.

Not only is Jesus praying to our relational God but he also teaches us a very relational prayer. Different from the prayer asking God to help me afford the Mercedes-Benz, Jesus' prayer is not self-centered, self-serving, or even self-preserving. Notice there are no "I's" or "Me's" or "My's" in his words, only "ours" and "us-es" reminding us that our relational God calls us to be in the right relationship with our neighbors. In fact, with the very first word Jesus reminds us that the God to whom we pray is not only our individual *Abba*, but is the Loving parent of us *all*. Notice he says, "Our God, who is in heaven." Not, "My God who is in heaven." This very intentional opening phrase sets the tone for everything that follows.

When we pray to the One who loves us all our petitions cannot be so self-focused. How can we ask for our own nourishment while staring at the faces of our sisters and brothers who are hungry? How can we ask to be forgiven when we hold onto grudges with, and prejudices toward those whom God has called our siblings? How can we ask to be saved from struggle, when so often our own protection comes at the expense of someone a few steps removed?

² *Ibid.* p.4.

When we pray the Lord's prayer we tune our hearts to the bigger picture - because that is exactly how Jesus wanted us to pray, to think, to live... Not for ourselves and our own individual desires, but for the welfare of the world that God so deeply loves.

One scholar writes that "the practice of prayer can be the deepest de-centering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling... that burning preoccupation with myself."

It is hard to imagine a more beautiful prayer to aid us in that critical spiritual work of de-centering ourselves...

I wonder if Jesus knew that we would memorize and repeat this prayer as our most traditional piece of liturgy?

Of all the sayings, all the teachings, all the pieces of wisdom recorded in the Gospels, I wonder if Jesus knew that *this* one, more than any other, would shape the Christian spiritual life for thousands of years?

And did Jesus somehow already know what modern education theory teaches us: that when we repeat something over and over again "it allows a conscious skill to transfer into [our] subconscious, freeing up working memory and allowing for"³ deeper growth and learning? Did Jesus know that if we really did pray like this, repeating his words, that they would - over time - seep into our subconscious, and begin to transform us from the inside out? Did Jesus know that in our remembering and reciting of *his* prayer, we might actually become a small part of the Kingdom even as we prayed for it to come?

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.

Can't you just see how transformative that would be - if Christians everywhere paid attention to the words as they flowed from our lips - if we could embody the promise even as we asked for God to make it our reality - a true expression and experience of heaven on earth. Can't you see it now?

A world abundant with food enough for all, not so much that it could stay in the pantry until it spoiled but enough to fill the bellies of all of God's children near and far, the whole world wide. A world so generous that no loans needed to be made, no promissory notes signed, no collection agencies ringing the phones of the poor, because all of us had learned that there is enough to share and give generously.

Oooh, now it's starting to sound like Jubilee! But can't you see it?

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...

³ [https://icandreamcenter.com/can-you-repeat-that-how-repetition-enhances-learning-outcomes/#:~:text=The%20importance%20of%20repetition%20cannot,of%20Repetition%E2%80%9D%2C%202016\).](https://icandreamcenter.com/can-you-repeat-that-how-repetition-enhances-learning-outcomes/#:~:text=The%20importance%20of%20repetition%20cannot,of%20Repetition%E2%80%9D%2C%202016).)

A world where all are saved from the trials of isolation, desperation, and marginalization.

A world where boundaries are made not with walls and greedy ambitions but with healthy intentions - those which foster good relationships allowing for intimacy, respect, and vulnerability.

Can't you see it now? A world where mercy and justice and forgiveness flow down like a mighty stream eager to sweep us all up in its joyful tide. Can't you see it now? Isn't it beautiful to behold? What if we could build it together... starting now? Starting here?

Friends here's the thing, I think we can. Because we believe in the power of prayer, not to necessarily to change God, but to allow God to change us.

So how then will we pray? As individuals with our own wants and needs that we parade before God? Or as a family of faith, united in our resolve to bring God's Kingdom near - here and now - *on earth as it is in heaven*.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear now our prayer and make it so:

Pray with me:

Our Father, who art in Heaven.

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.