

Be.Church.Now: Be.Prayerful.Now
September 13, 2020
Luke 11:1-13

Lord, teach us to pray. Although the prayers of their Jewish faith are embedded in the hearts of the disciples, they recognize that their relationship with Jesus offers an opportunity to grow deeper in their prayer life. They ask, "Lord, teach us to pray."

COVID-19 has upended our world in ways we've not experienced before. Even routine activities such as grocery shopping have been transformed. The church has had to adapt many of our ministries. What does it mean for us to be church during COVID-19? How can we be church now, when we can't access our buildings for in-person worship, when we can't gather in-person with more than 10 people? For the next several weeks, along with other United Methodist Churches in the Sonoma County circuit, we are going to consider how we can be church now through the activities of prayer, presence, witness, gifts, and service. These correlate with the Core Values of this congregation as discerned by the congregation earlier this year.

Today we consider Prayer. First UMC values *Prayer as essential to our worship experience. Our private prayers connect us to God and our shared prayers connect us to one another.* The Lord's Prayer is an anchor and a solid model for our prayer life, in addition to many other ways to pray.

Jesus' parable of the shameless neighbor encourages us to be intentional and persistent in presenting our need to God. He goes on to instill confidence that God will respond when we ask, seek, and knock. God is reliable and God is good, desiring that which is life-giving for God's children. This is not a guarantee, however, that we will receive whatever we request. When we align ourselves with the will of God and the way of Christ, we will discover God's response.

Perhaps even more important than a specific answer is the relationship with God that develops in prayer. God is not a vending machine that simply dispenses what we request. God is a Divine Being who created us for relationship. As we cultivate a relationship of prayer, God listens as we speak, we listen for God's response, and we enjoy one another's company as we do a dear friend. Prayer is a matter of being with God.

Just as we have discovered that there are different learning styles that work best for people, so also there are a variety of prayer forms. If your prayer life feels stagnant, you might experiment with a different style to enliven your relationship with God. Using a fresh translation of the Lord's Prayer, as I will today, can deepen our understanding.

I asked Paula to share examples of the way she prays in color. This is an active, meditative, playful prayer practice. Although Paula is an artist, we need not be a skillful artist in order to pray in color. It might resonate with visual or kinesthetic learners or in those times when you are word-weary and don't know what to say. Here is a prayer for Paula's family. As she wrote their names, and as color danced around each of them, she was praying, connecting with her family members and connecting them to God's love for them and God's desire for their lives. Here is a prayer for our country and world. While noting several challenges facing our nation and global community, there is a meditative sense of inviting God's presence into these difficult circumstances, asking, seeking, knocking, desiring God to respond and lead us

through to love and light. Praying in color is a way of spending intimate time with God, relaying our petitions, trusting in God's response, and listening for God's call upon us. In these days when we are easily distracted and find it difficult to concentrate, this tangible means of prayer may keep us focused.

I have been praying the news. It is easy to become discouraged or frustrated when we hear or read what is happening in the world. Prayer is far superior to worry. Worry makes us feel helpless; interceding for others is an action we can take. As I hear or read of situations of concern, I pray for those involved. This past week I've prayed for the family, students, and colleagues of the professor in Argentina who died of COVID-19 while teaching an online history class. This situation prompted me to pray for Latin American countries, economically and politically stressed, as well as hard hit by the coronavirus. I imagined the grief for now nearly 900,000 around the world who have died and sought holy comfort for their distress. I envisioned God weeping with those who mourn and lamenting the diminished health of millions around the world, for God is the God of life, and this turmoil is heart breaking for God. I empathized with teachers who are laboring to teach their classes, coach their children, care for their families, and struggling to find any kind of balance. I prayed for moments of peace to be woven through their days, for restful nights, and for routines that provide order.

In praying this way, I find that prayer changes me. Prayer connects me to people I know and to many I do not even know, but with whom I share the human experience. Karl Barth said, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." Picture the energies of prayer penetrating the forces of evil that seek to harm life. Using various styles of prayers can keep our prayer life vibrant and fresh, connecting us to God and connecting God to others.

Jesus encourages us to be persistent in prayer. The uncertainties with which we live, the layers of loss and trouble threaten to stall our prayer life, even our faith in God. But Jesus urges us to persevere in asking, seeking, and knocking, for we will receive, find, and the door will be opened. God will respond with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus doesn't promise that our specific requests will be granted. The Creator God whose will is for the health, well-being, and peace of God's creation will respond with the Holy Spirit, a presence of strength, encouragement, guidance, and goodness.

A few years ago a group called American Atheists put up a billboard outside the Super Bowl, which said, "A 'Hail Mary' only works in football." The group issued a press release that said, "It's time to stop believing that prayer works."

The atheists had a point. Fans should not pray for their team to win. Players should not ask God to help them catch a pass or get the ball into the end zone. Prayer does not change the outcome of football games.

But the American Atheists were wrong to say that prayer does not work. Prayer changes the people who pray, making them more peaceful, accepting, and connected to God. Prayer doesn't change the path of hurricanes or the outcome of sporting events, but it does draw us into deeper relationship with the God who saves us and equips us to endure the challenges of life. Prayer unites us with the Holy Spirit.

The world needs the church to be prayerful now, to pray without ceasing, for the need for God's saving grace and power is great. God's will is always for the goodness of God's beloved creation. God yearns for relationship with humans, just as we have a God-shaped hole

that longs to be filled by the spirit of God. May we persevere in prayer, trusting that we and our world will be met by the goodness of God through the Holy Spirit.

Loving God, your steadfast presence with us throughout day & night is a source of comfort & inspiration. You know that in these days your creation both grieves & rejoices. Our hearts take courage from your holy word which tells us that you hear our prayers and that we are never separated from your love.

We offer for your transforming power & blessing all those who suffer for the sake of justice, all those who freely share the burdens of others, all those who speak out on behalf of others. May your love sustain all who do your will on earth, and show us the nature of your reign.

We pray for children, senior citizens, prisoners, those without jobs or homes, victims of crime, and people who have every kind of illness. We pray for people named in our hearts....for recovery & wholeness, for protection & encouragement, for comfort & strength. We remember families in crisis, marriages in trouble, children in need, relationships in limbo.

We pray for strength for those living in the pathway of fire, fearful of impending danger. Renew the energy of firefighters working endlessly to extinguish the blaze. Comfort those traumatized by fires of the past.

We pray for your church and its leaders. May your holy will be known and embraced in our congregational life, that our witness to your reign will shine like the sun, that your will may be done here on earth.

Eternal Spirit

Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all.

Loving God, in whom is heaven.

The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen.

(From the *New Zealand Book of Common Prayer*)

