

“How-to’s of Covenant Life: Prayers – Talk to God”

September 7, 2014

Fall series

Earlier this summer, I was flipping through channels, and I heard this quote: “Prayer and duct tape can fix anything.” Does you want to guess where I heard it? *** It was an preview for a show called “Party Down South” on CMT - Country Music Television. I had to stop and write it down. I was both shocked and slightly comforted by what I heard.

Researchers say that there is written evidence of people praying as early as 5,000 years ago. On a reality TV show, someone was talking about prayer. Someone was talking about how prayer made a difference. I’m not sure that prayer fixes anything, but it can change our perspective. Prayer can and does change us.

Today we begin a series on our covenant life. We’ll focus on the five parts of membership vows that we make when we join the church: prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. I know that not everyone has chosen to take membership vows. I get it, and that’s OK. It’s a very personal decision. And yet the five pieces are helpful as we come back together, as we start a new program year, as we seek to be the Body of Christ in the world.

When I think about my life and faith, prayer is an area where I’m always seeking to go deeper and grow stronger. Prayer is foundational to living out our faith. It’s one way we witness to God. It’s vital as we seek to love God and love each other. Prayer is not about getting what we want; it’s about our intense desire for God's presence, God's power and God's peace. My sense is that most folks are open to prayer even if they don’t claim faith for themselves or if they’re unsure about what they believe. Our prayers matter. Our sincerity in praying for others makes a difference. Prayer is a gift of God. It’s a way that we seek God. It’s a gift that we offer one another, and yet sometimes we find ourselves talking to God like we

heard this morning - coming to God with self-centered and self-absorbed prayers asking God to change others instead of us.

A 17th century rabbi explained (prayer) this way: If you watch a man out on a boat grab a rope and pull his boat to shore you might think, if you were confused about weight and motion, that he was really pulling the shore to his boat. People have much the same confusion about spiritual weight and motion: In prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God.

The Bible doesn't offer many specific rules on how to pray, and Christian traditions give their own distinctions. We read people's prayers, but prayer itself is actually rarely addressed. Perhaps that's because it's a given. God created us in God's image. God created us for a relationship with God, so it seems natural that talking to God would go along nicely, right? Relationships depend on communication - talking and listening. When Ivan and I started dating, we sat and talked a lot. That's how we got to know each other. That's how we began to understand each other. That's how we grew in love together. And it's still true! Without communication, relationships do not work. No joy. No interaction. No challenge. No comfort.

Jesus speaks about prayer. He is preaching to a large group of people. He's challenged them with words about being blessed and about how to be salt and light. He's gone over the commandments – instructions for being righteous before God. He has given some hard rules for loving our enemies.

Now there's a change in his tone. He's been talking about being righteous before God in how we behave toward one another – it's important to let others see your good works, he says, so that they might praise God, too. But wait, he says, make sure you're not doing this stuff so that you'll get praise from others. It's what God sees that matters.

David Buttrick says, "Often people think prayer is something we do to which God responds. But in the Bible, prayer does not begin with us; rather

prayer is a response to God's grace. So first, prayer is for God and God alone. We might pray to make ourselves feel better, and prayer can do just that, but Jesus says that prayer is worship directed to God. Prayer nurtures our relationship with God. Don't call attention to it – just do it, and check your motives! Go away from public view if it will help you to be more authentic and honest.

In Jesus' time, faithful Jews had specific times for prayer during the day: morning, mid-afternoon, and evening. It was normal for them to stand in the synagogue and even to pray aloud. However, Pharisees were known for their public showing of piety rather than their wisdom about God. Jesus' concern here is focus – that we should pray to God – not to an audience. Prayer begins with God and is for God alone.

Second, Jesus warns against using too many words. Maybe it sounds strange, but apparently some folks thought that prayer meant more the longer it was! This is where we sometimes get stuck. There's no right formula to use. There are no right words to make prayer more effective, but there is prayer language – words that speak of our faith and our need for God, words that remind us of our dependence on God. We can't manipulate God in prayer. God is not a vending machine. Prayer is an expression of trust in God who knows our deepest need. When we pray, we place our trust in God.

It's been said that Elvis Presley would pray before each performance. He would find a quiet spot offstage, think about his performance, and offer this simple prayer: "Send me some light – I need it." What powerful words to express his trust in God and his dependence on God!

John Wesley, the leader of the Methodist movement said, "think not the fruit of your prayers depends on the length of them." He also says to guard against insincerity: Beware not to speak what thou dost not mean. Prayer is the lifting up of the heart to God: All words of prayer, without this, are mere hypocrisy. Whenever therefore thou attemptest to pray, see that it be thy one design to commune with God, to lift up thy heart to him, to

pour out thy soul before him...” Our prayer doesn’t have to be long to be real.

So, prayer is for God alone, and the words we use should express our faith. Third, prayer expresses what we believe about God – not just in those emergency moments when we’re moved to pray, but as a way to honor and praise God constantly and consistently. Jesus gives us what we know call The Lord’s Prayer, which is an expression of our belief in God. But Jesus is also encouraging us to see prayer as a witness to who believe God is. Prayer is communication with God that gives witness that I understand God’s presence with me and that I live in community with others.

Jesus assumes that his followers pray. It’s not a sign of weakness, but a sign of our humanity and our connection to God our Creator. We don’t have to impress God. We can’t impress God. But what’s interesting is that Jesus uses the word “whenever” when he talks about prayer, “Whenever you do these things” – not “if ever.” His expectation is that those who follow him will take these prayer seriously as a part of a living and active faith.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we usually think about our relationship with God. But this prayer is offered to a group of people. One person says that it’s really a community empowerment prayer that’s about being in relationship with God and each other. Jesus teaches us to honor God (11:2b), yearn for God's reign (11:2c), rely on God's daily providence (11:3), seek God's forgiveness (11:4a), forgive others (11:4b), trust God's protection (11:4c). This is about our covenant life - how we live together with God, how we pray and seek God’s will, and how we’re transformed through prayer.

Prayer does not necessarily happen only when my head is bowed and my hands are folded and still, but prayer happens whenever and wherever I communicate with God. Marjorie Thompson says, “we need to speak whatever the truth is: pain and grief, fear and disappointment, yearning

and desire, questions and doubt, hope and faith, failure and weakness, praise and thanks, despair and sorrow, anger and, yes, even hatred.” “Since the God we know in scripture is personal, we are free to speak with God heart to heart as we might with a dear friend.” When is the last time you and I prayed to God like a dear friend?

Ultimately, prayer strengthens our relationship with God and others. John Wesley says, “the end of your praying is not to inform God, as though he knew not your wants already; but rather to inform yourselves; to fix the sense of those wants more deeply in your hearts, and the sense of your continual dependence on Him who only is able to supply all your wants. It is not so much to move God, who is always more ready to give than you to ask, as to move yourselves, that you may be willing and ready to receive the good things he has prepared for you.” Prayer gets us more in line with God – not so that we ask and get what we want, but so we ultimately open ourselves to God’s future for us.

Henri Nouwen says, “When we are connected with God and God alone then we discover that the God of our prayer is the God of our neighbor. Therefore: The closer we come to God, the closer we come to each other.”

Friends, may it be so for us - to love God and love our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen!