

## **“Just Pray It!”**

August 28, 2016

*Starting Over, Digging Deeper series*

I was with some colleagues at a restaurant, and as we were getting ready to say a blessing over our meal that our server had just brought to us, one of the people at our table asked our server how we could pray for him. My guess is that this doesn't happen too often. Our server was surprised - even taken aback - and didn't know how to respond. He was like some of the folks in the video who weren't sure how to respond. So, we just told him we'd pray that he'd have a good day, and he seemed relieved.

Then we had a conversation about some of those holy moments when we've been able to pray for others - sometimes these powerful times when God showed up and the Holy Spirit brought peace, comfort, and encouragement. Now I'm not the first person to jump at the chance to ask strangers about how I can pray for them, and sometimes I wish I was more open about offering prayer - not because I'm great at praying, but because it's a vital part of my relationship with God. Every time I pray for someone or with someone, God reminds me of how vital it is that I talk to God - not just on behalf of others, but even for myself.

I'm always interested in how people respond when asked about prayer. In a 2014 Pew Research survey, 55% of Americans say they pray every day, 21% say they pray weekly or monthly, and 23% say they seldom or never pray. Among those who claim no religious affiliation, 20% say they pray daily.

Even more interesting to me was that 45% of Americans saying they rely a lot on prayer and personal religious reflection when making major life decisions. But here's the kicker: 63% of Christians in the U.S. say praying regularly is an essential part of their Christian identity. Just 63%!

Now agreeing on a definition for prayer may be tough. I used to say that prayer is talking to God, and it is. But I've expanded my definition - prayer is having a conversation with God - both talking and listening. It seems to me more than 63% of us who follow Jesus should think that prayer is essential to living a life of faith.

I have questions for God. I can relate to the people in the video when they're asked, *“If you could tell God anything and you knew he was listening, what would you say?”* I can relate to some of the responses: *Hurry up and get this over with!...I'm right, aren't I?...Why am I here?...I don't know...no idea...Bring some peace, stop the violence...Why?* You and I have been there - maybe you're there today! I appreciate the honesty and rawness of the responses.

And yet we struggle to speak honestly. Sometimes we think that we have to pray a certain way and say a certain thing - that there's a "right" way to do this praying thing in order for God to hear us. But I love the words we sang "prayer is the soul's sincere desire uttered or unexpressed..." Prayer is really about what we need to say to God - and how we need to listen to God. Someone said, "The refreshing and liberating fact is that God is not much concerned with how you pray; he's more interested in what you pray about and what your attitude is while you pray." That's what Jesus tells us.

God desires that we *feel free to talk to God* - whatever the situation or struggle - and that God desires that we *talk freely* - with all of the raw honesty and emotion that we feel. And if Jesus' lesson on prayer is any indication, then Jesus assumes that those who follow him have a prayer life. He's clear on what not to do - how not to pray. Prayer isn't grand-standing or looking good or showing off your deep faith to the world, but a response to God's work in our lives.

Prayer is about nurturing a relationship with God who created us, loves us, knows us, and wants us to know our Creator God more intimately. Conversation and connection are vital when we care about a relationship. We know that's true for human relationships. When we fall away from regular contact, we feel it. Staying connected is important.

The purpose of prayer isn't for us to ask for what we want, but to recognize what we need. One of the best reminders that I offer myself and all of us is "God is not a vending machine." Praying offers us perspective and grounds us in our relationship with God. God loves to hear us, and God loves to talk back, but maybe that's the harder part.

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."

I've had a lot of conversations about the merger of two congregations in the past few months, and I've been able to lift up the power of prayer in the process. From the beginning, prayer was the foundation of our work. Our commitment to gather for prayer, to pray for ourselves and others, and to be honest in prayer is a miracle by which God has worked. I know the merger itself is official, but I know we're not done yet. Prayer continues to be a vital aspect to God's work in bringing us together.

The power of prayer is that we grow closer to God and to each other. That's what I hear when I really look at the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer doesn't get old - but it can be too familiar. I think Jesus' purpose in offering this model prayer is to

remind us that when we pray, we're praying to God and building that relationship with God, and we're also building a relationship with each other. What's the first word?

## **OUR**

Right away, Jesus puts us in a community when we pray. We are God's beloved children - that's where we start. And we focus on God first - God's holiness, God's kingdom, and God's will - not our own. Then we move into how God calls us to live our faith and help to build God's Kingdom, to rely on God for our needs – not our wants, to be forgiven and forgive others, to be real about the temptations we face and our need for God's help. And we end with praise to God.

I appreciate the questions that Dr. Phil Maynard offers for each part of the Lord's Prayer.

*Our Father who art in heaven...*

How do I sense the loving presence of God in my life today?

*Hallowed by your name...*

How can I lift up God's name in my life?

*Your kingdom come...*

Where in my life is there a need for God's reign?

*Your will be done...*

What guidance am I seeking from God?

*On earth as it is in heaven...*

Where is the gap between heaven and earth that needs to be filled by God's presence?

*Give us today our daily bread...*

What needs do I have that only God can provide?

*And forgive us our trespasses...*

What do I need to confess to God so that I can be forgiven?

*As we forgive those who trespass against us...*

Whom do I need to forgive?

*And lead us not into temptation...*

What temptations am I facing today?

*But deliver us from evil...*

Where do I need God's protection?

*For yours in the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...*

What do I praise God for today?

Prayer is an act of worship that helps us to be more honest and more authentic with God and with ourselves. When we pray, it is an act of dependence on God. It is an act of faith. And it brings great joy as we grow and invites us to be more disciplined.

As I talked to someone this week who was uncertain about his faith, he spoke truth about prayer. Even with his questions about God and faith, he said, "I didn't get a "return to sender" when I prayed." I love that! It was an example of God's grace for me.

If you struggle to pray, would it help you to pray with others? I invite you to join us on Sundays before worship or this Wednesday at our prayer group. Can you carve out even up to 5 minutes in a day to talk to God and to listen to God? Do you need to find a space where you can focus?

Perhaps a list of prayer needs would help you or choosing a psalm to read and pray, or finding prayers that are written. Let me know if I can help. And don't think that you have to be anyone else when you pray - be who you are - not who you think you should be.

And listen to God. Celebrate answers to prayers. Keep a journal of how pray is changing you. And don't be afraid to express yourself when you struggle with prayer - with answers that are different than you hoped.

What is one way that you'll pray differently this week? Maybe you won't go out to lunch and ask your server how you can pray for them, or maybe you will.

But maybe your witness will be how you approach prayer differently - not trying to use the "right" words, but simply talking to God and seeking to listen - even if you're unsure if God hears. Maybe you'll write your prayers or tell someone you love that you're praying for them.

Just pray - just do it - and see what God does!

Thanks be to God! Amen.