

"Prayer; Learning how to talk to God for Ourselves"
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Pastor Joe Bagdanov

Friends of Christ,

We are in the middle of a series on prayer. If you missed last week's sermon, Jamie laid out the groundwork for the life of prayer or as she called it, the divine conversation. Jamie framed prayer as simply getting into a space where you can speak to God and God can speak back to you. She said that she fears we have overcomplicated prayer in the church and that many may feel intimidated to speak to God because they don't feel holy enough or articulate enough. In this vein, she quoted Richard Foster's insight that in prayer, "you do not pray what OUGHT to be in you. You pray what's REALLY in you."

This is the starting point. Prayer does not need to be hours long and spoken in poetic prose for God to hear you or for you to have a "successful" prayer time. A couple weeks ago I had a big meeting that would decide the course of this next year for me, and right before the meeting I just stopped and said, "God, I am really anxious right now. Please be with me." That is a genuine and useful prayer. Or you can imagine being around a table of people that you love, the food is delicious the conversation is vibrant, what if you stopped and just prayed "God this feels like what heaven might be like, thank you." Genuine prayer does not need to be complicated or long.

So if last week was all about establishing the groundwork for prayer, really introducing you to the divine conversation. Then this week is putting tools in your toolbox for diving into that conversation. It is critical to say though, these tools are not rules. These are not fences to force you down one particular path. They are merely sign posts pointing you in a possible direction. Choose whichever feels most alive to you.

But I will say one quick caution. Do not be turned away because something feels a little weird. There is this wonderful story about a rabbi who is asked why the Bible asks the Jewish people to do so many "peculiar" things. The rabbi considers for a minute and then he asks, "why would I follow a God who asked me to do precisely what I was already going to do." The truth is some of the things that are the most beneficial for our lives feel very foreign to us. But, if you allow for prayer to be a little weird sometimes I think you will be surprised and delighted.

So with that said, I want to give you three pathmarkers this morning for prayer.

The first is a simple form of contemplative prayer called breath prayer. At its simplest, it is choosing a simple collection of words or even a single word and combining it with your breathing. You can choose whatever you would like, "Holy Spirit be with me" "Jesus, be my friend." "grace" "Abba" "love" "Peace" but there is one that has been practiced for nearly 2,000 years called the Jesus Prayer.

Breathe in: *Jesus Christ, Son of God*
Breathe out: *Have mercy on me*

This is a very old prayer. It is taken from a couple places in the new testament. However, the monks of the early church, just a couple hundred years after Jesus began praying this prayer along with paying attention to their breathing. So if you are interested in being more contemplative or trying a form of meditation, this is a lovely and time-tested practice. Sit in a comfortable and upright position, close your eyes and focus on your breath while saying these words. An added level to the practice is thinking about the fact that you are breathing in Jesus, and breathing out in relief that Jesus is in fact merciful to you.

Contemplative prayer invites us to stillness and it invites us to search within ourselves for God. This may at first seem foreign or even non-Christian to us. Isn't this a terrible form of narcissism? Isn't Christianity about seeking God? Not about naval gazing? Yes, but the radical claim of Christianity is that God is not indeed far from any of us, but is alive and active within us.

Think of the Scriptures,
"be still and know that I am God" Psalm 47:10

**"By waiting and by calm you will be saved,
In quiet and in trust your strength lies" Isaiah 30:15**

"²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.' Luke 17:20-21

²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being" Acts 17:27-28

"you were within me, but I was outside of myself." Augustine

The contemplative tradition is in recognition that the God who made us and gave us the Image of God, is found not in grand adventures and gestures, but in becoming still and silent. We often seek for God's voice, the contemplatives are telling us that God is always speaking, but we are too loud to hear.

A second type of prayer that I want to invite you into is what might be called, "imaginative contemplation" In this type of contemplation or meditation, we imagine a scene taking place and we put ourselves into it. This can be done a couple different ways. The first is to take a Biblical story, say the parable of the good Samaritan and you read through the story (or perhaps listen to it) and then close your eyes and imagine you are one of the characters in the story. The man who was robbed, one of the passersby, or the Samaritan. Read through or listen through several times changing characters. Reflect on how you would feel in the story. The horror you would feel being passed by as the person who was robbed, the shameful aversion of the eyes of the people who walk by the man, the immense gratitude once the Samaritan reaches out in

compassion. The purpose of this type of practice is to move scripture from a place that simply reaches our heads, and instead can take root in our hearts and imagination. Knowing things about God and knowing God are two separate things.

The last suggestion I have for you this morning is to take a walk. I think a lot of us get caught up on the old image of “hands clasped, heads bowed.” Maybe we associate prayer with being on your knees next to your bed or something. I find these forms of prayer to be difficult and sometimes especially in our homes or places of work there are so many distractions. Going for a walk can put us in a different headspace and we don’t have to be self-conscious about a lull in the conversation. When sitting in a chair or especially if you are kneeling, if you don’t know what to say next you will probably move on very quickly. But if you are walking you have less of a reason to move on so quickly.

My suggestion would be this, especially if you feel like you are still a beginner in prayer. Download an app like Pray as you Go. Every single morning these charming Jesuits from the UK put out a 15 minute guided prayer. It includes lovely music, guided scripture readings, and questions for reflection. Go on a walk, put on pray as you go, but then after it ends keep walking for a bit and use the momentum you created by listening to the podcast to direct you in prayer for a little longer. Maybe you follow one of the rabbit trails from the devotional or maybe now that you are in the headspace of prayer you just allow yourself to tell God what’s on your mind, or pray for your neighborhood.

I want to close this morning with two encouragements when beginning to pray

1. Start with the path of least resistance, this will then build your prayer muscles and you can tackle harder and harder things
2. Don’t measure your success according to a school grade, but more like baseball. In school, anything less than 70% is a failure, and you are only *really* successful if you get above a 90%. But this is a dreadful standard for prayer. Instead, in Baseball the very best players are successful 30% of the time. This is a far more manageable expectation.