

“Prayer; Learning how to talk to God for Others” 1 John 5:14-15, 1 Tim 2:1-2, James 5:13-16
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Rev. Jamie White

Friends, we’ve been talking about prayer this month, digging into this divine conversation. The last two weeks we’ve focused on ourselves; how we come to God in prayer, trying to be as genuine as we can as we bring our true selves to the Lord. We talked about how easy it can be for us to turn prayer into this thing we have to master. We feel pressure to be eloquent or use precise language... but in striving for perfection, we lose sight of what prayer really is. Theologian Robert Farr Capon writes, that when we do this, **we are like ill-taught piano students: we play our songs, but we never really hear them because our main concern is not to make music but to avoid some flub that will get us in trouble.” –Robert Capon**

But prayer is not about playing the scales perfectly friends, but about allowing our relationship with God to inspire us to make music. Last week, Pastor Joe gave us a handful of helpful practices to move us away from perfecting our scales, by encouraging us to begin on the path of least resistance, to start with a prayer practice that feels more like music to us, and to try to redefine what “success” might look like. All very helpful and I hope you felt freed up to pray in new ways.

This morning I want to talk about praying for others; often we call this intercession or intercessory prayer. But don’t be intimidated by that word. Intercession just means **“the action of intervening on behalf of another.”** When we pray for others, we are simply intervening on their behalf. We are taking our energy and time, our faith, our empathy and compassion, and we are praying that God would act on another’s behalf.

I know many folks post on social media when something goes wrong in their life; maybe a family member is diagnosed with cancer, a friend is in a car accident... and they’ll say something like “please send us your prayers or all your good vibes” or “I really need your thoughts and prayers right now.” Now I know asking for good vibes is really about trying to include folks outside our faith tradition, people who might not be comfortable with the language of prayer. There’s nothing wrong with that.

However, prayer is about a lot more than good vibes or optimistic thinking. When I pray for others, that is itself an act of faith. It’s my way of acknowledging that I need God to show up for this person or circumstance in ways I never can. When we pray for others, we are not just sending good vibes... we are asking God to act. We are interceding on their behalf. Richard Foster says, **“If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others.”** Praying for each other matters and sometimes, it might be the only thing or the very best thing we can do to help.

There's a parable about a traveler and his companion, who prepared to set out on a long journey. In preparation, the traveler packed a second coat. His companion asked, "Why are you bringing a second coat?" The traveler responded, "I will need it."

The traveler then packed a second pair of shoes. His companion asked, "Why are you bringing a second pair of shoes?" The traveler responded, "I will need them."

The traveler then packed extra food into his bag; two of every kind of food he would bring. His companion asked, "Why are you bringing two of every kind of food?" The traveler responded, "I will need it."

The traveler's companion finally set his small bag down and said, "Look how heavy your load is. Mine is light. I have but one coat, one pair of shoes, and just enough food for the days we will be walking. Why do you need so much?"

The traveler said, "Because your coat is old and thin, and your shoes are old and worn. Having walked with you before, I also know you often grow hungry."

Confounded, the companion said, "But when I asked you about these things, you told me that you would need them, not that I would need them."

"You are my companion," said the traveler. "So long as we walk together, there is no difference between your needs and mine." (-Justin McRoberts and Scott Erickson; "Prayer")

When we pray for others, we are loving them as our companions on the journey. We are helping to carry their load, or as Galatians 6 puts it; we are bearing their burdens. It is an act of love.

And we do this following in the example of Christ, who scripture tells us is right now, seated at the right hand of God, interceding for each and every one of us (Rom 8:34, Hebrews 7:25). We can pray with confidence, for as Hebrews 4:15-16 declares: "We don't serve a God who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way... so, **Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**"

You know there is this fascinating encounter that happens in Exodus 17. The Israelites have been attacked by the Amalekites, a large foreign army. Moses tells Joshua to lead the small Israelite army into battle to defend themselves, but promises to go up on the mountain to pray during the fight, holding up the staff that God had given him as a sign of God's presence and protection. Moses takes a couple lieutenants up on the mountain with him to pray; Aaron and Hur. Well, while Joshua is down in the valley fighting, Moses is praying. But Moses begins to get tired.

And then he realizes that every time he lowers his staff and begins to slow his prayers in weariness, the Israelite troops begin to falter. Yet, when he raises his staff and prayers to the Lord,

they find success. Soon Aaron and Hur, realize they can help with this and then spend the rest of the battle holding up Moses' arms and supporting him as he prays. **(SHOW IMAGE)** Joshua and Israelites win the battle that day... but they did not do it alone. People praying made the difference. People supporting the weary in prayer made the difference. What a powerful image that is for us as we hold one another in prayer.

I remind you of this story because praying for one another has a cost, just like loving one another has a cost. It requires you engage your curiosity and compassion, to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to feel what it is that they need. It requires time and energy to pray. It might make you tired or it might keep you up at night. You might need the support of others to be able to continue to pray. But friends, praying for one another, it matters. Even more, it is the call for Christ followers all throughout scripture. Let's look a few of these:

In James 5:13-15, we're told: **"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven."**

From Paul in Phil 4:6-7 **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

1 Tim 2:1-2 **"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—including political leaders and those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness."**

Colossians 1:9 **"We have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives."**

1 John 5:14 **"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."**

Matthew 5:44, **"Jesus told them, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."**

Friends, I could go on and on (I mean, even more than I already just did). We are to pray for one another. And that prayer covers anything and everything. Sickness. Grief. Anxiety. Joys. Your boss. Leaders. Celebrations. School. The church. Our families. Our friends. And even our enemies. God is interested in it all. So where do we start? N.T. Wright once said, **"Most people pray at least sometimes. At its lowest prayer is shouting into a void on the off chance that someone out there is listening. At its highest prayer merges into love as the presence of God becomes so real that we**

pass beyond words into a sense of God's reality, generosity, delight, and grace. For most Christians most of the time, it takes place somewhere in between these two extremes. To be frank, for many people it is not a mystery but a puzzle... they know they ought to do it but not quite sure how." -NT Wright.

Let's talk about how this morning. (One slide that has: **Pray God's Word. Use the Resources. Develop a rhythm. Pray now. If you need prayer, ask.**)

1. Pray God's Word. Not sure where to start... use your bibles. Ephesians is full of prayers!
 - a. Eph 1:16-18 "I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you wisdom to see clearly and really understand who Christ is and all that he has done for you. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can see something of the future he has called you to share." I'd take that prayer any day... that my heart would be filled with light, that I would be able to see clearly."
 - b. Eph 3:15-19 "I pray that out of God's glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." What a great prayer... that we would be able to grasp God's love.
2. Use the resources out there.
 - a. Pray with the saints (My favorite or Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton).
 - b. Google it! You can find anything online. How to pray for your children. 5 ways to pray for your partner. How to pray for your workplace. 5 things to pray for our church. How to pray for the prodigals in your life.
 - c. Read books about how to pray. A resources list is in your bulletin!
3. Develop a rhythm of regularity that works for you. Sometimes having a place (fav chair in the house), going on a walk, using a journal, listening to an app, praying while driving. Put an alarm on your phone. Prayer lists (use a photo album). Prayer beads. Find what works for you and use it. Side note, what worked in one season might not work in another.
4. Pray now. Offer to pray on the spot for someone or to offer a blessing. Ask; people rarely say no. In fact, praying for people is often the most loving things you can do. "I bless you in the name of the God who created you, the Son who redeemed you, and the Spirit who sustains you."
 - a. If it makes sense, tell someone you're praying for them. Send your prayer in a text. Ask for an update.
5. If you need prayer, ask for it. Prayer cards, email the office, tell your friends. If you're having surgery, I'm happy to come anoint you with oil and pray for you before your procedure. Let us pray while you face whatever battle surrounds you.

There's about a million different ways to pray. Use what works. Engage in the divine conversation. Make prayer a priority in your life.

Here's how we're going to end this morning. We're going to pray for one another. We're just going to sit quietly and allow the Spirit to bring to our minds who it is we should be praying for. If you need ideas, your bulletin is full of them. As a person comes to your mind, simply say their name in the quiet of your hearts and then one or two words that you feel drawn to pray over them. Maybe the Lord will keep one person before you the whole time, that's okay. Pray over them. Imagine yourself holding up their weary arms. Just talk to God on their behalf.

Maybe you'll notice that God leads you to think and pray for a number of people. As they enter your awareness, pray for them. If you don't know what they need, that is okay. God knows and Christ himself is interceding on their behalf even now. Just hold them before the Lord. After a few minutes, we will pray the Lord's prayer together. (Our Father...)