

New Life In Christ Fellowship of Prayer
Col 4:2-7, Luke 18:1-8

Good morning! What a week we have had! I hope that you are safe and getting all the debris cleared out of your life. Alice and I just FINALLY got our power back yesterday at 5:30 pm. That is 5 and half days of no electricity! I was not expecting that. The good news is our freezer is really clean! It is amazing how much we rely on electricity isn't it? One of you was mentioning to me that being without power for a few days made you realize what a luxury having electricity is. Isn't that the truth? So many things in our house are just useless without power! We are very grateful for the things that worked without electricity —like our gas stove and water heater! And for batteries! It is really good to be back connected to power!

Today we reach the end of our walk through the letter to the Colossians—this discussion of the new life in Christ. Last week we saw that life sketched out, and what a wonderful picture Paul describes. Being clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, patience—bearing with each other, having the strength to forgive, covering everything in love. And finally, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and His Word live in us as we give thanks to God for everything. Wow! That life *sounds* nice, but can we actually do it?

Yes! The good news today is that we can live that kind of transformed life, constantly being shaped more and more like Jesus. So how can we do it? That is what Paul teaches us in this week's reading. He tells us about the power source which enables that new life. Without being plugged into that power source nothing really changes. We have to be connected to the power source to live this new life.

So what supplies the power for our New Life in Christ? It is prayer. Prayer. Paul says *devote* yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Devote yourselves to prayer. Paul describes an ongoing, long lasting *commitment* to prayer. Not just crying for help when you're desperate (although God loves to hear from us anytime) but cultivating a life of being aware that we are ALWAYS in God's presence.

We are made to live in community with God—to be in an ongoing, give and take relationship with Him—and prayer is the lifeblood of that relationship.

Our short reading today gives us three key points about prayer, the power source for our new life with Jesus. First—we must persevere in prayer, second—we should partner in prayer, and finally we have a great purpose in our prayers. Persevere, partner and purpose in prayer.

First is persevere. Stick to it. Don't lose hope and give up. Prayer is a conversation, not a request to a genie. A no or a not now answer may shape us better than getting what we think we want. All this week I've been obsessively checking the Rocky Mountain Power outage map. Over and over. Yep, still no progress in our neighborhood! I persevered in checking, but it really didn't make any difference. Prayer is NOT like that-- Prayer changes things. Our two-way conversation with God can actually change things, in us and in the world!

Our gospel reading is a parable Jesus told about this same topic. It is a story about an unjust judge and a persistent widow. Even though the judge didn't care about anyone but himself, he finally gave the widow justice because she kept pestering him. The judge is a bad person, but Jesus' point is that if even an evil person will eventually respond to persistent requests, *how much more* will our loving, perfect Father in heaven respond to our requests? Just to make sure we don't miss the point, Luke spells it out for us in the first verse. He says "Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Always pray and don't give up! Never stop—never disconnect yourself from the power source!

This is not about going through the motions or mindless ritual. No, it's about living a life aware of God's nearness. Most of us need to set up some habits of prayer to help create that on-going awareness. That is why I've been encouraging you to check out resources that help you come to God each day in prayer. You can find them on our "Connect with God" page on our website. This week I heard two of my favorite leaders in ministry talking. One of them, Mark Labberton, who was the pastor of First Pres Berkeley for many years and is now the president of Fuller Seminary, was asked about his spiritual practices. He said he found himself praying the Jesus Prayer—this is the ancient prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." Labberton said he probably prayed that prayer hundreds of times a DAY! The other

leader, Anglican Bishop Todd Hunter, interjected that he did too! Labberton said this wasn't something he imposed on his day, it just happened naturally. Each time he prays it, it is a statement of fact---he is seeking mercy and expressing his need for Jesus and dependence on Jesus, over and over. It is so easy for us to start making plans for our days and leave God out of the picture completely! What if we plug into the power source FIRST and THEN start planning and working our plan? If leaders like Labberton and Hunter need to remind themselves many times a day of their need for Jesus and his mercy, I guess the rest of us could try it too! I love how your mission study team, and nominating committee, and session all pray for guidance in their work. That fills me with hope. When you keep first things first and connect to the power, get ready to be surprised by what God will do!

Paul says that we should devote ourselves to prayer and be watchful. Keep alert! We should pay attention and watch for what God does in response to our prayers. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he gives very similar advice—"pray in the Spirit on ALL occasions, with ALL kinds of prayers and requests. Stay alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Why is it important to be alert, to be watchful? I think it is because we are so easily distracted that we miss out on what God is doing. How often have you stepped outside and noticed a beautiful sunset or a starry night? Or the laughter of a child or the gaze of someone you love? There they are, just waiting for us to notice! But how often do we bother to notice? And when we do—Oh wow! Thank you God!

I think one of the biggest problems in our culture today is that we are distracted. Distracted by phones, TV, radio, social media, email, and texts. We rush from one thing to another without any reflection or even taking a moment to reconnect with God. We forget to notice when and how God might be present in what we are doing. Prayer is not so much an activity that we do and then check the box as it is an ongoing awareness.

Being watchful requires us to be quiet. To be present to what is happening. You know—we often live our lives dreaming about the future or reminiscing about the past; but the only place where we can live fully is in the PRESENT. We need to practice being in the present.

R.S. Thomas describes it this way in a poem called Bright Field:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field for a while,
and gone my way and forgotten it.

But that was the pearl of great price,
the one field that had the treasure in it.
I realize now that I must give all that I have to possess it.

Life is not hurrying on to a receding future,
nor hankering after an imagined past.
It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Turn aside and find the eternity that awaits you! Be persistent in your prayers and stay alert and thankful. My favorite author Frederick Buechner says that the best way to connect with God is by listening to your life. God is always at work in us and around us, and we just need to pay attention! That is how we connect to God's power in our lives.

Be persistent in prayer and we also are called to partner in prayer. Paul reminds us that our praying is never alone. Paul invited the Colossians into HIS work, saying "pray for me also." —We can join in the work of ministry of others by our praying. The Colossians had never even met the great apostle Paul, but here he is, asking them to pray for him, including them in his ministry.

What does Paul ask for prayer for? He doesn't ask for rescue from prison. Not for a warmer blanket. Paul prays for an open door. Not a door out of the prison but an open door for the mystery of God's message to go out far and wide! Paul seeks prayer for his ministry-- that the good news of Jesus will spread. He asked the Ephesians for the same thing too—"pray that I'll know what to say and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all."

When Pope Francis was elected Pope he addressed the huge crowd in St Peter's Square. At the end of his talk he asked for help—he too said "pray for me." That has become a tag line

for Pope Francis, he always asks people, no matter how humble, no matter how needy they are, to pray for him. He invites everyone into his ministry. I think every successful ministry is built on prayer, especially prayer by many people who you would never know were involved.

Charles Spurgeon was one of the great preachers on the 19th Century. Once he was giving some people a tour of his church in London. They went past the large worship room where thousands gathered each week to hear Spurgeon preach and down to a big auditorium in the basement. Spurgeon said this is the engine room of the whole place. During each service the church had hundreds of people down below praying. Praying for Spurgeon and his words, praying for the people worshipping, praying for receptive hearts and open ears. Praying for an open door for the message of Jesus. Those services had spiritual power because of all those people praying! Our church in Bellevue also always has people in prayer at each service.

One of the things I am most hopeful about at First Pres is our active prayer groups. I love that people gather each week to pray for our ministry together. I invite you to join in those groups. Add prayers for our ministry to your own prayers. As your Immerse Group meets, you can pray for each other, but also pray for our congregation—for all the other groups and for our leaders and pastors. Pray during worship! If a song or a sermon isn't connecting with you, don't tune out or start griping to yourself, pray! Pray that this will connect with other people. Pray that God's Spirit will be at work through the worship. We gather for worship to connect with God. If you are distracted by something, start praying and connect anyway!

Finally, Paul calls us to pray with purpose—to pray for others to come to know Jesus. Pray that this new life in Christ will spread to more people. While Paul asks the Colossians to pray for his preaching, he also assumes that EACH of us will have our own opportunities to share the good news. Look at verses 5 and 6: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace and seasoned with salt, so you may know how to answer everyone."

When we persist in prayer and partner together in prayer, our purpose is to be Jesus' ambassadors to other people. As we start living aware of God's presence with us and his action around us, we will have opportunities to share about this new life with the people we meet. Notice that Paul calls us to conduct ourselves wisely towards others—be thoughtful in how you

approach them. But there is urgency too—make the most of the time, don't waste the opportunities we have. And look at *how* we should talk—full of grace, not harshness or judgment. The Message says: “Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in conversation, not to put them down or cut them out.”

Church—the way we can live this new life in Christ, the ONLY way we can do it, is by staying connected to the power source for that life—God's Spirit. We stay connected by devoting ourselves to prayer—both special times set aside for prayer, but also those constant little prayers—thank you, help! I'm sorry, wow! Pray with persistence—don't give up but stay alert and watchful and thankful. Pray in partnership for each other and for our ministry together. And pray with purpose so that you'll be prepared to share about your new life with the people you meet. Friends, we can live this live, together!

Let's pray: Lord Jesus: Thank you for inviting us into a new life with you. Help us to put on the clothes of that new life and shape us into the people you made us to be. Help us to connect to your power source through prayer and help us to stay continually connected to you by Your Spirit. Enable us to walk with you all the time, all through this week. In your name we ask it, Amen.