

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

July 10, 2016

“What’s So Great About Prayer?”

Love to Pray, part 1

Romans 8:22-30

One of the beautiful things about vacation is that you get to unplug from the world for a while. Between my trip to California and my week of counseling at camp, I had very little time to check my phone, email, or the world news.

However, the real bummer about vacation is that it has to end at some point, and often times, you are accelerated back into the mainstream of life as quickly as an airplane taking off. Such has been my feeling this week, especially in the wake of the unthinkable tragedies involving the police recently. Folks, if this news is not a wakeup call to us that we need to pray, I don’t know what else is.

I’d like to begin with a moment of silence for all the lives lost in the shootings last week, and then we will continue. *(Silence)*

Would you pray with me? O God, it is hard to believe in your goodness when so much darkness surrounds us. Yet you promised us that if we put our hope in you, we will not be disappointed. Lord, please heal our hearts. Heal our land. Humble us, drive us to our knees, and in your grace and mercy, lift us up. We truly want to hear from you. We want our lives to be changed. You are the potter and we are the clay. Mold us into your image this morning, God, and we will give you all the praise, honor, and glory. In Jesus strong name we pray, Amen.

My wife, Katja, and I had a long-distance relationship for two years before we got married. We lived about 4,000 miles apart – Germany for her, Indiana for me. During that time, we did a lot of talking on the phone. You know, that device you used to plug into your wall and speak into, before video chatting? I

remember trying to find all the cheapest ways to call Germany. We even tried Instant Messaging when it was still in its infancy. There was a three-second delay between our messages. It was nerve-wracking! I remember one night calling her and talking for about an hour, not realizing I didn't have an international calling plan. The bill was \$100. But the thing was, it was worth it, because those conversations sustained our relationship.

Since I first started preaching in Bellaire, I have said that your relationship with God is the most important love relationship of your life. Over the next several weeks, we are going to focus on how prayer is that conversation piece between you and God, the part that sustains your relationship and helps it grow. The goal in all of this is for us to become stronger in our prayer and more effective in our witness as we grow more deeply in love with God. Considering all the darkness that seems to surround us, I hope you'd agree with me that the world could use a little more love.

Al VanderGriend, the author of the book we are studying over the next few weeks, admits that he doesn't always know what to pray. I think a lot of us are in that boat. We don't understand prayer, we are frustrated by our attempts at prayer, or we are intimidated because we literally don't know what to say when we are praying.

Let's talk about what makes prayer so hard. If we identify the problem, we can better focus on a solution.

First, prayer is a conversation with an invisible and inaudible God. I know my conversations with Katja were natural because I knew her voice. I could picture her face in my mind. That's not the case with God. Many times, we want

to hear God's voice, but we don't. And as for seeing his face, we don't really have any idea what God looks like, do we?

Prayer is even harder in an increasingly secular world. In many places where people just assumed they would pray, they no longer do. I'm not ranting on the separation of church and state, I'm just pointing out what has happened. Places like public school used to include prayer as part of the culture. That is no longer the case.

Finally, how we even know how prayer really works? What if two people pray for opposite outcomes? How can God even listen to and answer billions of prayers at once? Why does God fail to answer so many sincere and righteous prayers? It gets confusing, doesn't it? And frankly, more than a little frustrating.

Don't be dismayed. God's Word has great encouragement for us regarding prayer. In Romans, we read this passage...I've placed it in the bulletin for you to memorize...Romans 8:26-27, which says, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

Can I point out the good news to at least one of our questions? Even the Apostle Paul didn't know how to pray. But he told us a fundamental truth about prayer. Prayer starts with God. God initiates the prayer, through the Holy Spirit, in our hearts. The scripture we read earlier says the whole creation has been groaning from the very beginning for God's will to be done. Another way to say that is creation longs for, yearns for the things that God places in our hearts.

The other wonderful truth is that the Holy Spirit is actually praying with us and for us. Paul calls it “wordless groans” or longings without words. The Holy Spirit can express for us the things that we find difficult to communicate. How wonderful is that? We don’t have to have the right words! Even the Spirit prays without words! Folks, if you want to just go ahead and groan in your prayers, be my guest! You do it all the time, anyway! Just go to any sports event, you will hear the whole crowd praying after a missed shot, a third strike, or a bad foul. You all know how to groan, so you should be able to pray in that manner, at least!

God places a longing in our hearts, and that becomes a prayer, if we acknowledge it. Al VanderGriend says, “the Father initiates prayer, just as he initiated the plan of creation and the plan of redemption. Prayer was the Father’s idea. He knows what he wants to accomplish in our lives and in our world, and he provides for us the help we need to pray in accord with his will.”

I admit, I learned to pray in church. We said the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday. In fact, in a few more weeks we will examine that prayer for more insight. My parents prayed at meals and at my bedside at night. But I don’t think I was comfortable praying out loud for a long time. And I can only imagine for some of you the fear that might strike your heart when you think, “Oh my goodness, I have to pray, here, now?”

But before you submit to that fear, let me tell you three great things about prayer. First, prayer is for intimacy with God. No matter what your image of God is, I am guessing it’s something great. Big. Awesome. And God has invited us into an intimate relationship with him. Can you even believe it? Some people can’t. But it’s true. When we pray, we are saying, “God, I love you.” And He loves us in return. Through prayer, “life is refocused, sin is dealt with, joy is birthed, faith is

strengthened, hope is kindled, and power is released.” God, the God Almighty, wants to spend time with you in conversation. That is great news.

But wait, there’s more! Prayer enriches our lives. Through prayer, we see the world as God sees it. We are challenged, we begin to ask for the things God wants to give us. There is a scripture, Matthew 7:7-8, that tells us, “Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will open for you.” Through prayer, we are inviting God to give us the good things that he has in store for our lives. James 4:2 tells us many do not ask, so they do not have. Prayer is our way of accessing the blessings God has for us.

Finally, when we pray, God works. It’s a partnership. Instead of making the foolish mistake (as I often have) of trying to do everything ourselves, prayer puts us in a working relationship with God. “Without him we can’t, and without us he won’t.” If there was one thing that we decided to do to make our church vital and effective, it would be to pray about every ministry we undertake. There is so much God wants to do with us and through us. We need to pray to keep our connection with the true miracle worker.

The fact is, prayer is going to be different for every single one of us. And that’s good. No one should ever feel boxed into a certain type of prayer. But everyone should know that God is calling you to pray. God wants a deep, personal relationship with you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. God wants to hear your longings. The Spirit is already interceding for you with silent groans. God is calling us, wooing us, cleansing us, conforming us to his will, challenging us. This love relationship needs to be fed, and prayer is the main dish.

We can be people devoted to prayer. We can listen to the Spirit and act on the promptings God puts in our hearts. This morning, I want us to do just that.

Usually we take time as a church for “popcorn” prayers – you know, someone just says a prayer out loud here and there and we close together with the Lord’s Prayer. But if we are going to learn and apply God’s Word, we are going to have to try something different. Something that awakens our senses. I would like us to gather in groups of three or four and answer the second reflection question in your bulletin. What is the easiest and hardest part of praying for you? Please, be honest with each other. After a few minutes of discussion, I will call us back together and we will pray together. Go ahead and gather now into groups of three or four.

(Close with corporate prayer, and use the words, “Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.”)

Memory verse

Romans 8:26 - “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

Reflection questions

1. Who, if anyone, taught you how to pray?
2. What is the easiest part of praying for you? The hardest?
3. How does it help you to know that prayer begins with God?
4. How would your prayers be different if you could see God as you were praying? Would it be easier or harder for you?
5. Whom are you praying for? What are you asking God to do in their lives?