

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Practicing Prayer

Luke 18:1-16

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September 9, 2018

Practice matters in life. We all know this, we teach our kids that practice matters from the time they are very young. Now that is not to say that everyone needs to practice anything at the same level, I do not practice running like an Olympic track star, nor do I practice gardening as well as Ron Wrye or most of the people in our community garden. However, we all know that practice makes things easier and more natural over time.

Practicing prayer matters. You will see on the back of your GPS for today an acronym for prayer. This is meant to be a guide during this series for each of us, about what prayer can mean.

**Personal conversation
with God**

Reverence of the Holy Spirit

**Asking for connection
to Jesus' Way**

Your time with God

Engaging in God's will

Releasing cares & burdens

Last week in worship we talked about prayer as a personal conversation with God. We used the image of a tandem bicycle to discuss how it is a conversation that is about journeying together, sometimes we are the captain, and sometimes God is the captain steering us on our way. The real point here is that the conversation does not need to start out perfect, and in fact our very understanding that Jesus came to earth is a

reminder that God wants us to start from our own human place in this conversation. God has empathy for our existence and just seeks a relationship with us.

Today our scripture comes from Luke 18:1-16, it is a series of parables from Jesus on how to pray, and pray continuously throughout our lives.

Luke 18:1-16 Common English Bible (CEB)

18 Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, ‘Give me justice in this case against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don’t fear God or respect people, ⁵ but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me.”⁶ The Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ Won’t God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?”

⁹ Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: ¹⁰ “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ ¹³ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves

up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

¹⁵ People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. ¹⁶ Then Jesus called them to him and said, “Allow the children to come to me. Don’t forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children.

Prayer is about a conversation with God, it is respect and reverence of God’s actions still capable in this world found in what we call the Holy Spirit and grounded in parables of the woman asking continuously and something happened, it is following Jesus way to humbly ground ourselves to know showing off takes us further from God like the second parable, it is our time to experience God’s presence, let God guide us, and release our cares and burdens.

Prayer though, practiced is not a hyper-refined process. When I talk about practicing prayer it is not something to be perfected, only God can help us get that far. Instead I want to remind you what Jesus adds to the end of these parables, come to me like these children do.

I don’t think I totally understood all this language about practicing prayers and vital lines until I learned about the life of a man, named Gary Turcott. Gary is one of the people I served as a Pastor in Helena, and Gary was a girls basketball coach at Carroll College. What is interesting is Gary isn’t known for winning the most national championships, instead he is known for his ability to support others in becoming coaches. A high percentage of his athletes went on to coach others in the sport. In a newspaper article from 2016 he stated that growth and success comes through a give and take process, a relationship of support encouragement and then letting the person try their own style. Back and forth, practicing and growing together. ¹ I think we can take a note from this coach about prayer, because it is a

¹ http://helenair.com/sports/college/carroll-college/basketball/turcott-coaching-tree-continues-to-grow/article_a36b4105-8c65-5f9d-b96b-a47b8cee9d28.html

give and take with God. Just like we have seen in relationships with children, offering support and companionship, and then letting them try it on their own.

Additionally, Jesus is saying, "Be willing to try it like a child. Each day reaching out and giving it another try." The theologian and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel said it this way, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

This give and take practice of prayer is part of spiritual heritage as Methodists. If you don't know the name John Wesley, he was the founder of the Methodist movement. John Wesley was a do it by the book preacher in the Church of England. In his early life he was pious and connected to God, mostly thanks to his mother, and in college got a group of his friends to go be the Holy Club. They would pray together daily, take blankets and Bibles to a local prison, and lived out their Christian faith.

The other students at Oxford begin to make fun of John Wesley and his group, and called the Methodists. It was not a kind thing to say, in fact it was quite a rub. I can see how it is hard to see now, but for them it was because they were so Methodical in their living. John's fame would have ended there if not for some people who taught John the need to pray not just with your mind, but like a child with your whole heart.

In what people would have considered the most successfully years of John's life, he felt himself a failure. Then he met a group of people one night on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean. During a horrible storm they did not appear outwardly scared like the rest of the passengers.

Instead he saw them singing songs and praying together. This intrigued him. Upon his return to England, still a failure in his endeavors, John befriended some of the people, called Moravians. With their help, John in prayer found a new calling in ministry that spurred a movement of prayer, worship and Godly action that carried Methodists to Montana, the Philippines, Angola, and even to the Moravians home in Germany.

The Moravians are who I want us to remember today, for it is their practice of prayer that inspired the founder of our tradition of Christianity.

First, I want you to learn the name of a place, Hernhut. Second, I want you to remember the name of a person, Count Zinzendorf. The story goes that Count Zinzendorf was a pious individual and acquired some property to create a place where Moravian Christians could live and practice their faith. This little place in Germany became so alive with God's Holy Spirit that the town grew quickly, and not just Moravian Christians joined them there.

Well the community of Hernhut became known for its diversity of people and the way they worked together. However, as happens with all groups of people with difference, the differences began to draw a rift between people. Count Zinzendorf saw what was happening and it broke his heart. So, he moved his family into the hamlet from their larger estate. Then he began going from home to home, praying and reading scripture.

The problems did not go away, but somehow the people decided it would be a good idea to gather and have a prayer vigil, asking God to guide them through their disagreement. They gathered together and prayed together, then one person stood up and confessed how he felt he had hurt others, then another did. After a while they had all confessed their faults to one another in this prayer vigil. Then they

made a decision, they would continue the vigil. The vigil lasted for 100 years, and they sent missionaries to 80 countries.

The vigil sent missionaries on a boat where a young Pastor named John Wesley saw them praying and singing, sent a minister that encouraged John at his lowest, and Count Zinzendorf and John would befriend each other in their work too.

Our spiritual heritage comes from a 100 year prayer vigil, and would lead to John Wesley organizing groups of people in prayer and sharing the work of Jesus Christ in the world.

Now John organized people into groups, because he believed it was the give and take of relationship that would keep people praying and growing in God. He set up rules for them to practice prayer together, to serve God in the world together, and encouraged them not to compare their connection with God, to out do one another, instead to encourage one another to maintain these conversations.

Just like a conversation with a good friend, John knew that his relationship with God had changed over time. Sometimes it was incredible and felt like that friend you had always known, other times you wondered if the God even understood your problems, and other times it would be like a comforting old mentor or grandparent offering you sage advice. However, Wesley knew that you had to keep going back to experience any of these things and it started by knowing that God loved everyone, that we were all children of God.

This idea of accountability or coaching, was not new for the Christian church around living and prayer. We can see it in Paul's writings, in the writings of Teresa of Avila from the 14th century, and many more.

Before you think this is just an ancient practice let me share with you something. I think prayer happens right here in our real world, when we let go of the exact right way of doing things and try to trust where a good God might be leading us. When we like children trust that God might speak to us through a friend, a wise one or even children.

A friend sent me this story just the other week, and a great mom and writer shared this:

Every Friday afternoon Chase's teacher asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they'd like to sit the following week. The children know that these requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one student whom they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her.

And every single Friday afternoon, after the students go home, Chase's teacher takes out those slips of paper, places them in front of her and studies them. She looks for patterns.

Who is not getting requested by anyone else?

Who doesn't even know who to request?

Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated?

Who had a million friends last week and none this week?

You see, Chase's teacher is not looking for a new seating chart or "exceptional citizens." Chase's teacher is looking for lonely children. She's looking for children who are struggling to connect with other children. She's identifying the little ones who are falling through the cracks of the class's social life. She is discovering whose gifts are going unnoticed by their peers. And she's pinning

down — right away — who's being bullied and who is doing the bullying.²

Friends I didn't spend today's sermon teaching us how to pray, because we can do that in smaller groups where we can really learn. Today I wanted to teach us why the practice of prayer matters. It can make us aware of how to work with God to bring the love Jesus showed us into the world. It can change the course of history, and God can use it to bring us to this place. Where we can learn in conversation, our part in God's story of love. Friends, this is why we are in church, to coach and hold each other accountable to joining together in this story God is unfolding.

We are going to start this prayer accountability and relationship in worship today, if you are willing. Today there are a couple of ways you might do this.

1. If you love what that teacher is doing in the last story, you should know there are people right here in Billings doing those exact things they need your prayers. We have a few people at both Big Sky and Meadowlark school who need letters and prayers from us as we set out to write letters to teachers and staff, and you can write a letter of support as a prayer to the one you get and other teachers you know too.
2. Like John Wesley we sometimes feel we have failed or the world has failed us. We get burdened by challenges, hurts, or the things that have wounded us. I invite you today to take the bottom of your GPS. Write your burden and tear it off. Then bring it forward during communion and place it in this bowl. This afternoon the youth and I will burn these

² https://www.today.com/parents/love-ninja-mom-shares-one-teacher-s-amazing-strategy-combat-t76251?cid=sm_npd_td_fb_ma

things, without looking at them, and mix them with the palms we burn for Ash Wednesday. Letting the old die and reminding us that burdens can be carried away by God.

Friends go today remembering, that prayer is a practice, it is worth taking the risk each day to converse with God, and living in wonder of what God is doing in the world.

Shalom my friends, and Amen.