

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Letting Prayer Guide

Proverbs 3:5-8

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There is a story from one of my favorite TV shows told by the main character's old priest who has come to visit him:

“(This) remind(s) me of the man that lived by the river. He heard a radio report that the river was going to rush up and flood the town, and that the all the residents should evacuate their homes. But the man said, "I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me." The waters rose up. A guy in a rowboat came along and he shouted, "Hey, hey you, you in there. The town is flooding. Let me take you to safety." But the man shouted back, "I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me." A helicopter was hovering overhead and a guy with a megaphone shouted, "Hey you, you down there. The town is flooding. Let me drop this ladder and I'll take you to safety." But the man shouted back that he was religious, that he prayed, that God loved him and that God will take him to safety. Well... the man drowned. And standing at the gates of St. Peter he demanded an audience with God. "Lord," he said, "I'm a religious man, I pray, I thought you loved me. Why did this happen?" God said, "I sent you a radio report, a helicopter and a guy in a rowboat. What the hell are you doing here?"¹

This is our final Sunday in this series on prayer, and I want to reiterate what Becky shared last week. That God is good, he will love, lead and carry you, and he able to hear your prayer. Through all of life's challenges. I will also remind us all of our spiritual heritage of prayer in the Methodist tradition of Christianity. If you remember there was a place called Hernhut in Germany, and a man name Count Zizendorf. In this place persecuted Christians gathered in a thriving community, but as

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0745683/quotes>

with all people who come together conflict arose. Count Zinzendorf went among the people to read the scriptures and pray with them. After a time they all came together in a worship service, where the Holy Spirit moved among them and they confessed their wrongs to one another. Then they had an idea let's hold a prayer vigil, and it didn't last just 24 hours as intended, but 100 years. It resulted in people going in mission from there to 80 countries around the world.

Some of those missionaries would meet a young man named John Wesley, and those people in mission born from a prayer vigil would help him learn how to help people follow Christ with their mind and most of all their heart. Prayers of our forbearers are why we have Methodist Churches in Montana, and around the globe.

So from our series we know that prayer is a conversation with God, that prayer requires practice to grow with God, that prayer is available to us in the hardest moments and the highest highs.

Throughout this series we have used the following acronym to understand prayer:

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

Today we are going to focus on the E in our acronym, "Engaging in God's will."

In the pastor circles I run, which are often tough crowds, they often use the word "discernment" when we are talking about using prayer and

listening to God to figure out which way we should act or go. When discernment is used I think at times there is a hope that at some point we have let God's will into our choice of direction, instead of relying on our own intelligence alone.

The question I hear from people most is, "How do you know when you hear or receive God's guidance?"

Fair question, right? This question is especially problematic because it generally comes from our place of wondering why God didn't show up to stop the awful things in our world. It really is a question of why God didn't stop the genocide of Jews in Nazi Germany, the violence of September 11th, or even as intimate a dilemma as why God did not stop the untimely death of a loved one.

Some preachers respond to this question with "turn to scripture" and so we find the scripture from Proverbs we hear today:

Proverbs 3:5-8 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart;
don't rely on your own intelligence.

⁶ Know him in all your paths,
and he will keep your ways straight.

⁷ Don't consider yourself wise.
Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

⁸ Then your body will be healthy
and your bones strengthened.

This is helpful advice, because God is bigger than the things we focus on. Maybe we don't understand the grand unraveling of the Universe. The writer of proverbs even understood a spiritual truth that I have found to be true, that opening ourselves to God in prayer strengthens our very being for the journey ahead and keeps us going. We talked the first Sunday about God and the tandem bicycle, letting God drive the bicycle

can help us head down the path of least resistance and we provide the drive to go on.

However, it still doesn't clear up the reality that bad things are still happening despite our prayers and our God. Even saying they are too big for us to understand is unsettling. That is what is unsettling with the first story I shared today. God shows up, but the man still dies. Bad things still happen, even with our God right there.

Here is where I think we struggle with God and with prayer the most in our world. We expect God to give us deliverables. Like every other business we pay our share to, we expect God to give us what we paid for. If we pray hard enough, God better deliver the change we asked for.

Jesus very act of sharing the Lord's prayer and sharing the stories of parable he shared should give us a sense that God rarely operates in the economies of this world, instead God delivers grand compassion and love in a currency we learn in the word grace. The very life of Jesus points to how we should look for this currency called grace, we should look in the forgotten place for God's love to break into the world. Just like Jesus was born in the backwater hamlet of Bethlehem, so too is God's will born in the quiet place off the beaten path, where we least expect it.

Therefore prayer is an act of silencing our frenzied demand for God, to see where God might show up next. Or as one of my favorite Christian teacher's says, "Prayer as a practice is not a requirement. Rather, it's a way of reminding ourselves of the reality of God, taking seriously our relationship with God, and being present to and involved in that relationship." [2]

Engaging deeply in prayer can invite us to notice acts of grace and to help others see grace happening in their own lives. Take for example

[2] Borg, Marcus J. (2014-05-20). *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most* (p. 218). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

this story by Sally A. Brown of Princeton Seminary who shares this reflection about some prayers she heard her parents doing growing up.

“I remember as a child tiptoeing past the living room where my parents, faithful in morning devotions, were praying. Sometimes I heard them praying for my older brother and me. It can be faintly embarrassing to eavesdrop on prayer -- a little like listening in on someone's personal phone conversation. But prayer on our behalf can be a revelation -- about ourselves, and about God.

Hearing my parent's prayers, I learned that to them, the two of us were a sacred trust, worth praying for. The simple fact of their daily praying let me know they recognized their limits as parents. There was so much they could not do for us, so much from which they couldn't shield us. Their praying also told me what they believed about God. They believed they could entrust us to hands stronger than their own, a Love wiser than their own.”^[1]

This love that is wiser than our own, the one Sally Brown speaks of is the same one the great modern theologian, Garth Brooks, sings about in his song *Unanswered Prayers*.

“Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't
care
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers”

^[1] http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1333

This song about running into his high school girlfriend who he never married, and learning they had very little in common. That God may have just known what he was doing in not letting the high school romance come true.

Now again, the challenge with this is sometime it is bigger, scarier things that go unanswered. Things that cause us what seems like unending pain. It can seem we are somehow outside of God's family and yet even then Jesus life and message pulls us back in. Jesus first thing he taught us to pray in the Lord's prayer, which is a prayer to turn the world on end was, Our Father. Now while this seems like a masculine understanding, it was meant to be more overarching than father. It drew on the Hebrew understanding that male and female our God is our parent, an un-estimable parent of love, and we are drawn into God's family. Despite your pain, you still get into this family and while you may never understand the pain, the love God shares can overwhelm this pain and draw us to our purpose in God's story.

Take for example the story of Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia was sitting in one of those church meetings, one of the big assemblies where we try to work out important, but trivial details of our life together as people of Christ. As the session she was in droned on, she turned to a Bishop next to her as the worship team warmed up for a prelude that would follow their work, "Is this prelude going to help or hurt our work?" She joked with Bishop Bruce, Nadia says there is something fun about making fun of worship with a Bishop that feels relaxing.

Then suddenly a woman came up to Bruce in tears, "This is a card from all the Bishop's spouses. We are so sorry." Nadia turned away embarrassed to see such an intimate moment, but wondering how to I support Bruce in the way of Christ. It would be easy if he were hungry, or needed clothing to stay warm, but he is a Bishop and what do I have to offer him. Still, not knowing for sure, Nadia spoke up after the woman walked away she turned to Bruce, "Is your wife ill, Bruce?"

Nadia shares this is one of those questions you ask, and work to maintain eye contact to hear the person. However, at times you wish you could look away as such troubling news is shared. Bruce shared that his wife had stage 4 lung cancer.

Nadia listened and then turned away to participate in the worship service around them. All the while wondering how she could possibly serve God and especially a Bishop when she was just a pastor. All through the liturgy she said she felt squirmy in her chair. Then at the end she did what she said seemed needed to be done. She turned to Bruce and asked, “Can I pray for you and anoint you with oil for this journey you have to take?”

Bruce’s eyes teared up and he said, “Thank you, yes.”

Nadia committed to pray for Bruce and over the next 9 weeks she did. She reminisced that in her parents church, before cell phones, when pagers were still in they would give pagers to people going through crisis and it would go off to let people know they were praying for the person in crisis. Like the pager, Nadia would text Bruce each time she prayed for him. Bruce would send messages like, “This is hard, I don't know how I am going to get through.” Nadia would respond, “You’ll do it, it will feel hard and it won’t be easy.”

A few weeks later Bruce’s wife died and Nadia got a call from his office about when the service was. As she got on the plane for the funeral, she thought, “Why am I going to the service? I barely know Bruce.” However, at the service she could tell it meant a lot to Bruce to see her face. Riding back from the service Nadia realized that sometimes our leaders to need leaders in the moment, to offer them compassion and to help them along

Notice how Nadia’s story, all of the stories we have listened to invite us in prayer to take the little steps toward the hidden grace moments in our

lives. Following God's call can put us in the relationships that make our lives whole, allow us to be good parents and mentors to those around us, and even open us to playing a role of sharing God's love with a person we never expected to support.

Following God's will in prayer means we have to do a few things in our own lives:

1. Admit we are human, that we can get caught up in our own world and that God has the ability to draw us out with Grace.
2. Begin to pray, to open ourselves to the still small voice of where God might use our story in the bigger story of God's love.
3. Follow where we are called, even when it seems strange we are going there by our standards or the world's standards.

At – 10:15 Service - Song

At – 8am Service

This week I am going to invite us to join in a practice of prayer I learned from Richard Rohr, it helps me remember these three things I just talked about.

Prayer from Psalm 46:10

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Nadia story