

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Luke 22:39-46, Psalm 84:5

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What is Prayer?

Once there was a new pastor to a congregation, a young associate pastor. A woman called and asked for that young pastor to go and pray with her father, who was facing serious illness.

The young associate showed up in the room of the man, and saw an empty chair to his left. He jokingly said, "You must be expecting me." The woman's father had no idea the pastor was coming, and he looked up. Sharp as could be still, he said, "I had no idea you were coming." The young pastor said sheepishly, "Your daughter asked me to come and I saw the open chair and well...hi I am the new associate pastor at the church."

The old man smiled, one of those wise smiles. He asked, "Can I share why I have that chair there?" The young pastor responded, "Of course."

The man said, "I had trouble praying over the course of my life. A friend of mine, a pastor himself, once said to me, 'Just get an empty chair and talk as if Jesus was sitting there, Jesus said, 'I am always with you.'" Well it worked very well, I have felt so much lighter in life since I started doing it. However, you cannot tell my daughter, because I am embarrassed she will find it silly or worse yet think I have lost the last of my mind."

The young pastor promised not to tell the daughter, said a prayer with the old man, shared a few more words, and then left. After a

few weeks he got a call from the daughter. She said, “My father passed away.” The young preacher asked if he was in pain and the young woman shared how he had passed. “You know he was not, I left to go get some groceries and when I returned he was gone. The funny thing is that he took the time to place his head on the chair next to his bed.”¹

Over the next 3 weeks we are going to be taking a close look at prayer, and what prayer means in the life of a Christian. Prayer tends to be one of those things that we as Christians assume is a part of every person’s life, but what we find is many people find themselves unsure of what prayer is or how to make it a part of their life.

A few weeks ago we had about 16 people from our church gathered to plan our worship for this series. That group helped create the acronym on the back of your GPS for today, we will learn more about this acronym next Sunday.

During the planning one group working on this Sunday said to me, “We hope people learn from this series that prayer is just a conversation with God.” It brought such joy to my heart to hear this, for this is the exact phrase I learned one dark winter night as my youth group gathered in an upstairs room of a church. It is a phrase that has stuck with me throughout my life.

Prayer is a conversation with God and the different types of prayers are just like the varied conversations we have with God in our life. Some positive, some challenging, some eye opening, and others leave us wanting more.

¹ Adapted from a story found at <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/prayer/>

As we journey through this series I invite you to find some time to practice your conversations with God. We will be offering different ways to pray each Sunday, and also offering a prayer class on Tuesdays at noon on the 11 and the 25th. These will be available online too, so if you can take your lunch with us, we invite you to do so. However, you do it, we ask you to take seriously your practice of prayer to re-energize your prayer life over the next three weeks.

Our scripture today is one that we usually hear during the season leading up to Easter, known as Lent. Instead, today we read it to learn about a moment when Jesus prayed, and the reminder of what prayer means to our savior and sacred friend. A reminder to us all that this is a time in Jesus life when he is digging deep into trusting God's path for his life, because he knows all too well that the path will lead to death. Yet, Jesus still pauses in prayer, even in his certainty to allow something in him to be changed.

Luke 22:39-46 Common English Bible (CEB)

³⁹ Jesus left and made his way to the Mount of Olives, as was his custom, and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he arrived, he said to them, "Pray that you won't give in to temptation." ⁴¹ He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed. ⁴² He said, "Father, if it's your will, take this cup of suffering away from me. However, not my will but your will must be done." ⁴³ Then a heavenly angel appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ He was in anguish and prayed even more earnestly. His sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground. ⁴⁵ When he got up from praying, he went to the disciples. He found them asleep, overcome by grief. ⁴⁶ He said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so that you won't give in to temptation."

Let me take one moment to remind us of the intensity of this moment. Disciples are nervous, prophecy is being fulfilled, swords are being drawn, people are coming to arrest Jesus, and what does he do. He stops to pray. And his prayer was not a passive, check in, but instead a moment to truly allow God to show up in his journey. Not only that, but when he leaves he does not tell his disciples to jump into an action plan, but instead is frustrated they are not fervently in prayer too. Knowing they need to be filled by God at that moment, more than they know.

One of my favorite authors writes this about Jesus and prayer: "Jesus prayed a lot. In the way wind and water give shape to dunes and valleys, Jesus fashioned his human nature and created it in the way God fashioned Adam in his own image and likeness. For Jesus human nature wasn't simply an empty jug into which his incarnation automatically flowed. Prayer brought things into his human nature that were not there before." -Huston Smith, Religion Scholar

Prayer is by its nature a willingness to let something into our lives that was not there before, and for us Christian prayer is a willingness to let God's way into our lives.

One of the scriptures that we will carry with us throughout this series is Psalm 84:5.

Psalm 84:5 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁵ Those who put their strength in you are truly happy;
pilgrimage is in their hearts.

A reminder that the life we choose as Christians is a journey, and prayer is putting our strengths in a God who responds to us and participates in this journey with us. Pilgrimage being a journey toward the holy.

Along with sharing that prayer is a conversation with God, the team of folks planning worship also shared the ideas of prayer as like riding a tandem bike.

I need to list a disclaimer before I start part of the sermon. I have never ridden a tandem bicycle, however as someone shared this metaphor for prayer at our worship retreat a few weekends back the image stuck. I have spent the past few weeks reading up on tandem riding and while I am not willing to attempt it yet, especially with my wife Crystal because of the number of jokes in the tandem literature about breaking up relationships, the metaphor of tandem riding and the life of Christian prayer is a telling one. FYI Crystal and I are starting to see if anyone has a tandem bike we can try, because we like to challenge our relationship in healthy ways.

One article I ran across described a couple arriving at a tandem bike shop, and their experience learning to ride in tandem. The writer of the article stated, that he knew he would be riding in the front seat, the seat who steers the bike, known as the captain's seat. The general knowledge is the stronger rider, and generally the larger rider goes in the captains seat.²

Let me stop for a minute and share a few things you need to know the front seat of tandem bike is called the captain seat. This person generally is the one who needs to share directions, steers the bike, shifts the gears, and is basically calling the shots.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/tandem-cycling-tests-more-than-just-fitness/2014/09/30/0cdad834-42c0-11e4-9a15-137aa0153527_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6696d83c82f4

The stoker is the back seat and they provide the power from the back.

Back to the article I was reading, the gentleman writing, his name is Des, knew he would be the captain, being the stronger rider. However, before the shop would send them out a ride, the shop owner forced this Des, to do what he called a “Stoker Empathy Ride.” Meaning Des had to ride as the Stoker while the shop owner was the captain.

Des learned a few things about being the stoker: You do not wiggle the bike. You do not give incorrect turn signals. You do not pedal quickly and then go into “leg freeze.” You don't try to make sudden stops on a tandem. And you always warn the stoker about pot-holes.

The warnings was the most important thing because for some reason the engineering of a tandem the stoker receives more the jolt from bumps, gear shifts and braking. The captain needs to communicate very clearly what is coming up.

Christ's very life is a “stoker empathy ride” for God. What a better metaphor for our prayer life than this tandem idea? Also, good tandem teams over time get good and pedaling together and actually sync up. Stoker's powering and sharing challenges they have, and the captains communicating, steering and giving direction on the journey.

Now the piece that isn't always true of tandem, is you often don't switch seats, a good team tends to keep their seat. However, in the life of prayer and looking at Jesus life. I imagine sometimes we switch seats with God, steering at times, and at others we drive the bike on. God doing the opposite sometimes driving us

on, and other times gently steering and calling out to us what is ahead.

Different times of prayer, and types of prayer might guide us to which seat we are in at different times.

We will talk about many types of prayer during this series, but there is a common joke there are two types of prayer: Help me, help me, help me, and thank you, thank you, thank you. However, as you know with a relationship those are not the only conversations, just the most common.

Thanksgiving is a prayer of us as the stoker, knowing that God is guide us. Prayers that look for discernment or a search for insight might have God powering us, but we have to make the decision and take the risk to go with God. Sometimes the Holy Spirit might be switching our seats mid prayer, to remind us that it is a constant conversation that we are in as we journey with God together.

As I think to my own prayer life, I can't help, but go back to my earliest memory of prayer. My mother coming into my bedroom each night and asking me to say my prayers. I kind of made up my own prayer after the written beginning, "Now I lay me down to sleep." I would break into a thank you for all of our family and friends that were in our lives.

Those prayers would continue on to be joined with the fervent prayers before tests, "Please God help me pass."

To other more intense prayers, prayers like the one Jesus shared in our scripture today. I wonder how many of us have had those intense moments with God, most of us have. One of my favorite

mystics, Theresa of Avila warned against sharing these openly in a group, because people would start to compare. So, I am going to share with you one of mine, but I am not sharing for you to compare I am sharing it so you might learn a way of prayer from it.

Last year I was dealing with a lot of personal turmoil, I had the blessing to be on Flathead Lake at our beautiful United Methodist Camp, which you all should take some time to visit. There on the lake shore I found myself in a prayer to release some deep and painful burdens to God, and something in me just said, “Just do it.”

I almost turned completely around as if God was behind me and said, “What are you God some Nike commercial?” Then I looked into the water and there was a small piece of seaweed drifting and it looked like a hand. I had the same urge. So I reached my hand into the water and picked up a rock, I prayed to release my burden and thanks for God in my life. Then I placed that rock in the hand of seaweed.

Prayers are meant to be simple, conversations with a God who journeys with us, sometimes steering, sometimes powering the journey, but always with us.

Today I want to invite us to consider practicing two prayers this coming week. First, don't complicate this. Take 5 minutes, three times this week and just talk to God. Talk to God as if he was sitting in a chair, listening to you.

Second, we have rocks from Flathead Lake right here. Take one with you. You have a couple options for this rock. One take it and carry it, and when you have something to share with God reach in your pocket, purse, backpack and share that message

with God. Or if you have some things you want to share with God and let go. Take this rock home this week and when you return next week or soon thereafter to Shiloh place it in our sea rocks out front. Trust that this place called Shiloh can help lift your prayers to God.

Friends go this week and remember, that prayer is journey, a pilgrimage with our God, that it is a simple conversation and that even Jesus used prayer to invite things into his life that even he chose to not bring with him. Remember that you believe in a God that took a “stoker empathy ride,” to remind you that you are loved and that you are a child of God.

Shalom and Amen, my friends.