

## **Sermon for May 16, 2021**

### **Shivon Miller**

In today's scripture readings there is repetitive mention of prayer. In our first reading, the disciples pray as they discern who will take Judas' place in ministry. Our Gospel reading today begins "Jesus prayed" and we hear the words of Jesus as he prays "on behalf" of the people.

Throughout scripture, Old and New Testament, people pray. Throughout his ministry here on earth, Jesus prays. But what is prayer? How do you pray? Why do we pray?

Prayer is a mysterious thing – it is after all connection with the divine. Our human constructs and imaginations often limit or warp our understanding of prayer.

Too often our concept of prayer has "Genie in a bottle" syndrome. We envision an all powerful being at our beck and call, ready to listen and respond, anxious to fulfill our every desire. Our prayers become a laundry list of wishes and we test the truth of God's divinity by our receiving what we have requested. Our praying can begin to look like a scene from Aladdin. Just fold your hands versus rub the lamp and wish away...

Our concept of prayer is often limited to language. Our ability to pray is linked to our skill at stringing words together. We feel pressure to bring eloquent statements before our God. I remember growing up speaking poetically beautiful, memorized prayers and listening to the perfectly structured Prayers of the People spoken from the front of the church each week. Starting my career in ministry I remember being intimidated when it came time for me to pray in front of people. Praying carried with it an element of performance before God. I will never forget my first service when I worked at Peace United Church of Christ, when the pastor asked for prayer requests and people casually spoke about concerns and joys in their life. At the end she simply said "Amen." Had we really just prayed? Could prayer be that simple? Naming joys and concerns – Amen?

Prayer often becomes all about God hearing our words – our talking to God and God listening. But I remember one of my early seminary professors saying "How many successful relationships do you have where you do all the talking?" If prayer is part of our relationship with God, how is prayer a two sided relational conversation? Prayer is then not only talking but listening. Prayer is not only us bringing things to God, it is opening space to receive from God. How does one listen to God? How do we receive from God?

Henri Nouwen writes "Being useless and silent in the presence of our God belongs to the core of all prayer."

Prayer also often has the tendency to become an expected task relegated to the Christian's "to do" list. We should pray at meals. We should make time for prayer throughout our day. We must pray during worship. When I ask Sunday School or Confirmation classes "Do you pray?" there is often a tangible sense of guilt that pervades the space and the mumbled, whispered reply "I know I should."

Martin Smith in his Book "The Word is Very Near You" states "It is pathetically common for people to be operating under the tacit assumption that prayer is a duty, a requirement, a task. What if God does not demand prayer as much as gives prayer? What if praying means opening ourselves to the gift of God's own self and presence? Instead of prayer being another demand that threatens to deplete your energy further, it could become the place of replenishment and access to the love which gives life meaning... Our prayer is not making conversation with God. It is joining the conversation that is already going on in God."

Prayer is a mysterious thing – it is, after all, connection with the divine. It is a mystery that begs us to let go of human constraints to see prayer not as bringing wishes to a divine genie, not requiring eloquent statements, not dependent on our ability to fill empty space with endless strings of words, not as a task that is required but as a gift of God's own presence - of recognition of the relationship God has initiated and maintains with each of us.

My understanding of prayer changed...expanded... when our son Brayden was admitted to intensive care as an infant. His small intestine had telescoped into his large intestine and there was extreme risk to surgery, high risk of fatality in someone so young. What does it mean to pray? How is one to pray?

I found I could not pray to God as if God was a Genie ready to grant my wish. We were surrounded by parents wishing for wellness. What if my prayer did not have magical results? What if Brayden did not survive? Would I then doubt the reality of God? The purpose of prayer?

I could not form eloquent statements. I could not organize and string together words to bring to God. I could not even listen. I was afraid of what I might hear. My ears were numb. Prayer was not a task at that moment. I did not find myself in prayer out of obligation or guilt.

I simply found myself surrendering - "useless and silent" - and experiencing the truth of prayer, the gift of God's own presence, the recognition of the relationship God was still initiating with me, with my son, with my family - dwelling in God's presence, receiving God's love, the mystery of prayer.

And all those around us, as they prayed on our behalf, carried us in this presence, in this love, as well.

In our Gospel today, Jesus prayed "I am asking on their behalf... because they are yours." What is prayer? Many things. A mystery. But maybe most importantly it is being carried into the truth that we are God's at all times and in all the circumstances. What a powerful truth – that we have a God, revealed in Jesus Christ, who holds us in prayer, in constant presence and love. Better than a genie, more impressive than eloquent statements, beyond any words we can find to speak, exceeding our ability to listen, certainly more meaningful than a completed task...we come into God's presence in prayer... Amen.