

“Praying”
February 3, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Matthew 6:7-18

[Jesus taught them, saying,] “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

My first ordained call in ministry was serving as the Associate Pastor of Spiritual Development at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Des Moines. This was back in 2005, right after I had graduated from seminary. So here I was: a fresh-faced, eager new pastor, with this very sober title of “Pastor of Spiritual Development.”

As I was saying “yes” to this call, as Matt and I were moving out here to Central Iowa, I kept thinking, “Here I am, going to be a pastor of spiritual development. And, if I’m leading the effort in my church’s spiritual development, that probably means *I’d* better be a spiritually-developed person. I’d better be a *very* spiritual person, and it had better be *obvious* to everyone that I am a very spiritually-developed person.”

I was taking this very seriously. So I started reading all these “spiritual” writers (Kathleen Norris; Thomas Merton; Marjorie Thompson). I started making sure I was praying every day, and in the right way. *And*, I made sure everyone knew about it. I talked (bragged?) about my praying life. I made sure the whole Westminster staff knew I was going to “do my prayers.” (“Well, I guess I’m going to pray now,” I would announce, loudly, every morning). And, I tried very hard to “seem” spiritual. I tried to look serene all the time, or holy – whatever that even means – I really tried to look the part of a prayerful person.

Yep. Kind of embarrassing. And I kind of hate admitting this to y’all, but there it is: back in 2005, I suddenly became very invested in presenting myself as a so-called spiritually-developed, prayerful person.

It seems like Jesus might have a word or two to say to me about that.

Today, in our passage from Matthew 6, Jesus is preaching. We catch him here at the end of what some scholars call his “Sermon on the Mount,” which begins over in chapter 5. He’s been saying a lot of really good stuff, and the end of this sermon – what we read today – is certainly no exception.

Jesus is talking about prayer today. “When you are praying,” he begins, “Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Wow. Imagine that. A prayer that is not complicated, or fancy. I’ve heard some of my friends talk about the way some of us ministers pray as “Throwing up a big bag of words to God.” I know I am guilty of doing that. And, to be honest, a lot of that – as Jesus knows and puts his finger right on – is simply for show. It’s been a while since 2005, and I am happy to report that I have matured some in my approach to prayer, but I still struggle. Especially as a pastor, I sometimes feel this need to be “smart” or “articulate” before God. Thus the bag of words. Good words, fancy words, smart words, words that might impress you – a bag of words before God.

But here, Jesus says, “God already knows what you need. God knows before you do. So relax. No need for that big fancy bag of words.” I love that. It’s almost as if Jesus is saying, “Really, all you have to do is *be* before God.” Have you ever heard the expression, “We are human beings, not human doings”? Jesus may be getting at that here. We only have to “be” before God, not “do” anything special like impress God (or others) with great words and ideas. Just be. And God knows.

So that’s a real corrective for me. Thanks, Jesus!

Jesus then goes on to teach what we now call “The Lord’s Prayer” to his listeners. Most of you know the Lord’s Prayer, probably by heart. As I was working with this scripture passage this week, the one piece of the Lord’s Prayer that kept stirring for me was the forgiveness piece. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says it like this, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

We say it like this, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

No matter how we say it, though, it seems like forgiveness is a pretty important part of praying. It’s almost if one of the first moves we need to make when we pray is emptying ourselves: emptying ourselves of any resentments, or grudges, that we might hold against another person -- maybe even including ourselves! (And, if you’re like me, you’re probably harder on yourself than you are anyone else).

I could preach a whole sermon on forgiveness (and, I have), but what I’d like to say today is simply this: it’s hard to open up to God when we are blocked. It’s hard to let in the flow of the Holy Spirit when there are walls, or *something* that gets in the way. And, for me, one of the things that often gets in the way is resentments. So, when I pray, I need to ask myself: why this grudge? Why this resentment? For me, they’re

usually petty; it's usually about my ego being bruised. When I go to God, sometimes I can see this, and then I can pray for God to help remove it.

I know, easier said than done. And I want to be really clear here that forgiveness can be pretty complicated. If someone has really hurt you – I'm talking really hard stuff like abuse – forgiveness is not a cheap and easy thing. And I want to be clear that forgiveness doesn't mean going back to someone who has hurt you badly. Forgiveness doesn't mean "accepting" that what they did to you was okay, when it so wasn't. But I wonder if it can mean holding our pain out to God – telling God the way we were hurt – and asking for healing. And then, accepting that that healing may take a lifetime.

What I want to say about forgiveness is this: when I hold a grudge, or even when I hold onto a deep wound, these things will block me from God's healing grace. Forgiveness doesn't mean that I'm saying the way someone treated me was "okay," but rather, it is telling God the truth about all my pain – from petty pain (like a bruised ego) to much deeper, even un-nameable pain. And, it is remembering all the while that I don't have to have the perfect words to describe it. That, as we talked about earlier, if I can simply "be" before God, God already knows exactly what I bring. I can be before God, with everything, and God can do the rest.

Towards the end of our passage, Jesus says, "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Wow. Remember when I was telling you about how, in my first call to ministry, I tried so hard to seem so very spiritual, to "look the part" as a praying person? This speaks directly to me here. When we pray, we don't need to look like it. We don't need to bring attention to ourselves about our prayers, and how "spiritually-developed" (ha ha!) we are.

Y'all might not struggle with that as much as I have. But maybe the word for you here is that there is no such thing as "looking like" or "seeming like" a so-called spiritual person. That prayer is simply showing up to God exactly as we are, and then showing up to the world exactly as we are. Maybe the word for all of us here is simply this: prayer, maybe at its root, is all about being honest. It's all about authenticity. And that's kind of a relief.

You are having a bad day? You are full of ego, or resentments, or weariness, or doubt, or fear? That's okay, God already knows it. So go to God with it. You don't need fancy words to describe it. Just go to God, with what you've got, and be with God. And then, when you face the world, know that you don't have to put on a "spiritual" face for that, either. Maybe this is one of the fruits of prayer: that being honest with God just might help us be more honest with one another. And without our facades, without our masks, without our "no, no, I'm fine's," the kingdom of God just might start to creep a little closer.

Thanks be to God!