

“Prayer”
June 28, 2020
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.”

Welcome back to our summer preaching series, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith”! Many of you know by now that I am basing this series on a book that has influenced me immensely over the last fifteen years or so – a book also entitled “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith” by Kathleen Norris, one of the most beautiful spiritual writers I know.

In her book, Norris takes words like salvation, or incarnation, or prayer – words that many of us may have heard all our lives if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

...And that's what I would like to do during the summer with you all. I'm going to choose some of my favorite words from Norris' book, and explore with you how we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are hearing them anew.

Last week, we looked together at the word “exorcism.” We talked about how whatever is possessing us – whatever it is we need to be “exorcised” of – might actually come more from our own self-wills than from anything on the outside. As my friend Sherri said to me so many years ago, “The demons are *me*, Mary Beth.” We tried to reclaim the word “exorcism” as something that happens slowly, and yes, often painfully, as God patiently removes whatever is blocking us from loving God and loving neighbor.

That was last week. Today our word is “prayer.” Unlike the word “exorcism,” “prayer” is most certainly a word we throw around a lot in church... *and it’s* a word that describes something we *do* a lot, too! What do we do, people of God? We pray!

But what is prayer, really? What are we doing when we pray? Why do we pray?

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, green new pastor, with this very sober job 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 (including my favorite, or course, Kathleen Norris). I started making sure I was praying every day, and in the right way. *And*, most importantly, I made sure everyone knew about it. I talked (bragged?) about my praying life. When I was at work, I would announce loudly in front of the whole staff: “Well, I guess I’m going to pray now.” Oh church, I tried so very hard to seem spiritual. I tried so very hard to look the part of a 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 – is simply for show. It’s been a while since 2005, and I am happy to report that I have matured in my approach to prayer, but I still struggle. I still sometimes feel this need to be “smart” or “articulate” before God, to throw up 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 our great words and ideas. We just have to *be*. And God knows. And does the rest.

And maybe, just maybe, being honest with God 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.

But my favorite part of our lesson from Matthew is when Jesus teaches 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. Sometimes it is a resentment. Sometimes it is fear. Sometimes it is our shame that won’t let us tell the truth to God about what we really need.

Sometimes, it’s our control that gets in the way.

I have to admit that I will often pray, giving God a great big list of what I want done and when it should happen. I know, this is probably pretty common; and I’m sure God doesn’t mind. But lately, I’ve been trying to move my prayers beyond simply giving God my to-do list, and simply asking God to help me accept whatever is happening. See, my control still wants to get in there, and tell God what to do. “But in the hardest situations, all one can do is ask for God’s mercy,”¹ Kathleen Norris writes. And acceptance, I would add.

In her chapter on prayer, Norris tells us about a Benedictine friend of hers who had been in constant physical pain for years and, at the time of Norris’ writing, was confined to a wheelchair. He had given up long ago on asking God to remove his pain, and told her one day, “Often, all I can do is to ask God, ‘Lord, what is it you want of me?’” Norris goes on: “From him I have learned that prayers is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can’t imagine.”²

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 60.

² *Ibid.*

What about *that*, church? What if we started to go to God, not so much with a bag of words, not so much with a to-do list, but rather, with a question: “Lord, what is it you want of me?” Lord, what do you want of us?

And then, what if we started to listen?

What might happen then?

Thanks be to God!