

January 29, 2012: Week 1
Magic? Mystery? Miracle?: *Movement in the Practice of Prayer*
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Bethany UMC, 855 and 11am services

Scripture: *The Message* John 17:20-21
*I'm praying not only for them
But also for those who will believe in me
Because of them and their witness about me.
The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.*

I read this week that some years ago a doctoral student at Princeton asked, “What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?” Albert Einstein replied, “Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer.” (Phillip Yancy’s *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*, p. 11)



I’m not sure whether or not that student took Einstein up on his suggestion, but what I do know is that there is a lot of stuff out there written about prayer. On the Cokesbury Christian bookstore website, if you key in, “prayer resources,” there are 50 pages worth of materials you can select. A quick search at ChristianBookStore.com netted 1,283 results. Amazon.com = 72,273 results. And Google? 38,800,000. It seems that Einstein wasn’t the only one trying to find out about prayer.

What is it that people are searching for that they think prayer will answer? Are we looking for whom to pray to? How to pray? What happens when we pray? Is it magic? As Christians we believe not. Is it mystery? It seems the deeper you get in prayer the bigger mystery it holds. Is it miracle? Sometimes. Or always. I think it depends on how you look at it.

Merriam-Webster defines prayer as an address or petition to God or a god. To make an address in a humble manner, to entreat or to implore. Or to address God with adoration, confession, thanksgiving or supplication. We call that the ACTS model of prayer. But really, if it’s as simple as all that – if all prayer is about is lifting a request to God, or telling God how much we love him, then why all the resources?

Why the nearly 39 million Google results? No, I think there's more to it than that. I think the quest for whatever it is that prayer is runs deeper.

In Genesis 3 we find Adam and Eve and the story of their disobedience in eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Scripture says that when they ate the fruit, their eyes were "opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." (Gen 3:7 NRSV) Then, scripture continues, "they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." (vs. 8) They hid, because they knew they had disobeyed and they were maybe ashamed or maybe frightened and we know this story, don't we? But here's what I'd like to explore just a little today – when the Lord God didn't find Adam and Eve where He thought they should be, God said "where are you?" God was looking for Adam and Eve because apparently it was God's custom or habit or desire -- to be walking in the Garden of Eden talking to, speaking with, communicating with -- *having a relationship with* those whom God created in God's likeness. God didn't set about creating, give humankind dominion over the earth and then just leave to go on to another Creator project: God wanted a relationship with those He created. God still wants a relationship with those He creates.



I've heard it said that there is a piece of our beings that is God-shaped – and only God can fill that space, that chasm in our lives. Likewise, there is an "us" –shaped piece of God's heart – a space that only we can fill. In other words, each one of us is incomplete without on-going relationship with God, and God longs for each and every one of us until we choose to seek that relationship out.

Prayer is the key to that relationship: the key to God's heart. It is the key to conversation with our Creator, with our Savior – and conversation means listening at least as much as speaking. It means spending time with, getting to know, being honest with and vulnerable to our God who loves you and me more than we can fathom.



In his book *Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?*, author Phillip Yancy notes that prayer is universal -- every single culture has some form of prayer. Even atheists, Yancy remarks, pray. He points to the height of Russian communism where the government set up "red corners." They were spaces set aside in public areas that had sort of an altar with a big picture of Stalin and Russian people were told that if they were having difficulties, if they were in need of confidence or direction, then "think of Stalin" and their way would become clear.

I can't think of a more poignant example of the fact that seemingly all humans are in search of some thing or Some One bigger than ourselves – some One to thank for the beauty we see around us: some One to cling to in times of uncertainty or

desperation, heartache or anxiety. Some One to reveal to us that we are not as small or insignificant as we sometimes feel. Some One to fill that God-shaped void in our lives.



The word “prayer” is from the Latin word *precarius* which is also where we get the English word precarious. Uncertain, insecure, unstable. As in --that’s the kind of situation we find ourselves in when we “pray.” And I wonder if that’s not why, in this age of uncertainty and instability, that there are almost 72,000 resources on prayer available through one retailer called Amazon.com. People are seeking ways to get in touch with or to get answers from or develop relationship with the Other, the One we call Lord God. We are desperate to fill that God-shaped void.

Now, you might think, what with our scripture and all, that Christians would have a pretty good handle on what prayer is. It is certainly modeled for us throughout the Bible – the Psalms are filled with wonderful prayers that reflect every human emotion from joy to desolation and betrayal. King David’s prayer for cleansing and pardon in Psalm 51 teaches us about true repentance: “Have mercy on me, O God according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” David prays.

Solomon’s prayer for wisdom is renowned and when he consecrated the temple he had built for the Lord, 2 Chronicles 7 tells us that “when Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.” The prophet Elijah prayed that God would show the people that God is God and Baal was not, and fire came down from the sky in the presence of more than 500 people and ignited the sacrifice on the altar he had built. Those men knew how to pray!

Jesus talked about prayer: he talked about going to our prayer closets to pray in private; he told us a story about a persistent widow that was meant to encourage us to never give up praying until we get an answer. He told us to look into our hearts when we pray. He told us to ask and we would receive. He discouraged us from praying out loud and in public for the sake of “looking the part” of a faithful person. He prayed to God to bless 5 loaves and 2 fish that were miraculously multiplied to feed over 5000 people. And there are many passages that tell us Jesus went off by himself to pray.

We have this book filled with prayers we can model, prayer postures we can model, clues to how not to pray and some miraculous results of prayer. So why is prayer such a difficult practice for us? I wonder if it has something to do with how we approach the practice. I wonder if our expectations are off the mark. What is the expectation we have when we pray? What are we praying for?

How many of you have ever been running late for an appointment and as you are driving prayed “God, please make that light turn green” and it did?

How many students – or how many of us when we were students-- prayed for a good exam grade, thinking that God could pull it out for us even if we neglected to study?

Or how about this: Last weekend we were watching *the* game. It was down to the wire, about 3 minutes left on the clock. We were down by 3. My sister-in-law Terri apparently isn't a huge football fan, but she *is* a very faithful Catholic and she was sitting next to me and I looked at her and I said “Terri, it's time to pray.” There was an interception, then we miraculously got the ball back and I looked at Terri and she said: “I know, it's time to pray harder.” And then we watched the ball sail sideways. It was over. And I looked at Terry and I said “sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes the answer is no.”

I know these are trivial matters of prayer, but they happen, don't they? And I'm not sure it's wrong of us to lift those kinds of things as concerns. But I also know that many of us gathered here this morning have prayed for much deeper concerns: the healing of our selves or our loved ones, protection for our children, restoration of relationships, clarity and discernment. And I don't know about you, but there have been times when the healings didn't happen the way I prayed for, and times when healing and restoration happened in ways that were greater than anything I could ever come up with on my own. And that's part of the confusion around prayer, isn't it? How come some things we ask for are provided and some things we ask for are not?

What I'd like to suggest to you this morning, and what I hope that you take home with you today and wrestle with, is this: prayer is *not about God doing something for us*.

But that's what we've come to think of prayer, isn't it? God doing something for us? How about the first prayer many of us learn and many of us have since taught our children: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And bless my family. And my dog. Amen.” This is what I need you to do for me, Lord: Bless me. Bless my family, take care of my loved ones: Amen. Now, there's nothing wrong with this prayer – it's a sweet, sweet prayer on the lips of children, but as our relationship with Jesus matures, our prayer life is supposed to mature as well. Our prayer life is not supposed to be about God doing something for us.



In the powerful words of the Rev. Tyrone Gordon: “Prayer is not God doing something for us; prayer is not God becoming a spiritual, cosmic bellhop to entertain our whims and desires; prayer is not rubbing on a magic lamp or bottle and out pops

a miracle at our request; but prayer is allowing God to do something with me, my life...prayer causes us to look up to God, who is seen (for who God is) and who then becomes our strength for abundant life..." (F.O.C.U.S: *Living the Lord's Prayer*, p. 4. parentheses mine).

Prayer is not about what we want God to do *for* us; prayer is about what God wants to do *in* us. Prayer is not about what I want God to do for me; prayer is about what God wants to do in me and through me. And if we look at it from that perspective, then prayer begins to shape our lives and penetrate our thoughts and begins more and more to inform our decisions and influence how we conduct ourselves and it becomes who – we – are.

Jesus did some amazing and miraculous things, amen? He took some spit and mud and smeared it on a blind man's eyes and after the man washed it off, he could see. A woman touched just the hem of his robe and she was immediately cured of disease that held her captive for 12 years. Jesus called demons out of men and women who experienced instant relief from mental and physical torture. He even called back a few people from the dead. And as his disciples watched him work and learned more and more about who he was, they were somehow able to connect the power-filled life that he led with his prayer life. And so they asked him to teach them how to pray. And their lives became power-filled as well, as they allowed God's will to work in them – as they allowed God's power to work in them so that things they once thought impossible to accomplish were possible. Like when Peter healed the crippled beggar (Acts 3:1-10).

What Jesus did, what the disciples did, was not done in their own power and strength, but because they were united with the will of God for their lives, the power of God worked through them.

I think that's what Jesus was praying to God about, when he prayed for his disciples and all of us, too, on the night just before he was given over to the authorities. We



used Eugene Peterson's translation called the Message today, and in it I think he was saying that the goal is for all of us is to become one heart and mind— Just as the Father, and Christ were of one mind. Jesus wants us to be one heart and mind with them. And when you are in unity with someone, it means that what you want is put aside for the best that can be for the union. That means to be in unity with God the Father and Christ the Son and the Son's Holy Spirit, all we are has to be surrendered. We do that, as Jesus did, through prayer.

And that's how prayer becomes who we are.

No one has modeled that prayer is to be who we are more than Jesus did. The prayer that we read today was recorded in the Gospel of John – but the Gospels of

Matthew, Mark and Luke record a different prayer that Jesus prayed when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested.

He was so united in Spirit with God the Father that he knew what was about to happen – in our Advent series we talked about how Jesus knew the plan from the beginning of time – and so now the time has come and Jesus knows that even though he is Divine, he stands in his humanity as he faces the betrayal, the arrest, the trials, the beatings, the torture, the cross and whatever happens between death on the cross and the resurrection. And scripture says he prayed this prayer: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”

God’s will was that every one for all time would be saved in the one act of Jesus being crucified on the cross and raised up on the third day. Jesus knew that -- and I have to think that he was scared – scripture says he was sweating blood as he prayed – and yet even as he asked to be saved from the excruciating pain, the humility, Jesus said: but it’s not about what I want, God -- it’s about what you want to do in me. Jesus spent his entire ministry -- and even his death --in prayer and living out what it was that God moved him to do. Jesus allowed God to do something with his life, and each step of the way God provided the strength and power Jesus needed to accomplish God’s plan.

What Jesus modeled for us in his life was that his prayers to God were not about what he wanted God to do for him, but always about how he could allow God to work in his life so that God could accomplish what God wanted to do in and through Jesus. It informed Jesus’ decisions and influenced how he conducted himself. Prayer was who. Jesus. was.

And if we are followers of Jesus Christ, then we follow the patterns he set before us. If we seek to live in High Definition faith, then we examine our disciplines and our practices and go deeper – be clearer reflections of Jesus. For me, that means we need - -I need – to learn how prayer can be who – I – am.

If prayer is supposed to be who I am, who you are, how do we get there? Well, I invite and whole-heartedly encourage you to participate in a small group study ... what we call GIFT groups...for the next four weeks. If you’re not signed up for one, please let me know, or let Tim Ferrell know; he’s our Director of Group Life and we’ll get you hooked up. The awesome thing about the time spent in group life for this series is that the focus of your time together is not the study of prayer – it’s the practice of prayer...so you’ll be spending time in group first becoming comfortable with the idea of group prayer, and then exploring different forms of prayer – and every day on your own (and you can do this even if you’re not in a GIFT group)...you’ll be participating in the practice of devotional prayer.

There is a mystery about prayer to be sure. None of us know all the answers. None of us are “the expert,” because God is just too big – what God can do in us and through us to accomplish God’s purpose is nothing that we can define. But over the

next three weeks in worship we invite you to explore prayer with us. Prayer is one of the ways we can experience the mystery of God, the mystery of the Trinity, and so the Trinity: God the Son, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are going to be our guides as we explore the ways that prayer helps us understand the way that God reveals God's self to us and in us. We are calling the worship series movement in the practice of prayer.

Next week we'll be talking about movement inward in our prayer, learning to pray to God the Son, Jesus Christ. Inward movement is about inviting Jesus Christ in so that we can be changed. In two weeks we'll be talking about movement upward in our prayer, learning to pray to God the Father. Once we invite Christ to change us, we are somehow transformed and that transformation beckons us upward, to seek the heart of God. And on February 19th, we'll be talking about moving outward – learning to pray to God the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live our lives as witness to the gospel news.

William James once said: "The reason why we pray is simply that we cannot help praying." Over the next few weeks, may each of us come to deeper understanding that "We are never more "ourselves" before God than when we pray, because when we pray, we bring nothing with us...we are giving God our (very) selves. (May we experience) Prayer (as) being "at home" with God...spirit to Spirit, life to Life.

Prayer is discovering that the God who made us wants to receive us and relate to us.

(and then may) These deep moments of intimacy and fellowship provide the (kind) of faith which inevitably compels us to go into the world to act in Jesus' name."
(Steve Harper, *Prayer & Devotional Life of United Methodists*, p. 23. parentheses mine).

Amen.