

Prayer: It's About Relationship

Matthew 25:36-43

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be together this morning. I missed you all last Sunday. I took very seriously the commandment to treat Sunday as the day of rest, and Taylor came into our bedroom at one point and said, "Emily, it's 10:30 in the morning." I got up shortly after and ate pumpkin pie for breakfast. I felt very spiritual.

The sermon that Roger facilitated for you last Sunday was Doug Klassen's message from National Gathering this year, "Losing and Finding," such a great sermon. I was very encouraged and inspired by that sermon when I heard it in Edmonton. There's lots that can be discussed from that sermon, but I'd like to hone in on something that Doug mentions near the end of his sermon, "We need to reclaim prayer and praying, not just for minutes, but for hours at a time." In our advisory and worship meeting a few weeks ago, we talked about possible topics for a sermon series, and a series on prayer was one of the suggestions, so that is what we're going to embark on this morning. This prayer series will take us through to Advent.

Returning to Doug's suggestion that we need to pray for not just minutes, but hours at a time is a stirring challenge, and one that I find daunting. Hours at a time? The only thing I'm successful at doing for hours at a time is sleeping. But I also don't doubt that hours

spent praying are beautiful, sacred and transformative. What keeps me from that sort of prayer life? As I've been mulling over how to begin this series for the past week, I keep returning the question: why do we pray? What's happening when we pray? How can I cultivate a prayer life that is authentic and God honoring?

All this mulling also helped me to realize that I have some baggage around prayer.

Perhaps some of you feel that way too. So, when I was a kid, I used to listen to these audio dramas called Adventures in Odyssey. Has anyone ever heard of those? They were put out by Focus on the Family, and while I really loved listening to them as a kid.

Anyway, there's an episode where one of the characters is crying, because his grandfather had died. She's beating herself up because she thinks that if only she'd prayed for him more, he would not have succumbed to his illness. The wise fatherly character in the program, Whit, tells her that's not how prayer works. Heartbroken, she asks, "Well, then why do we pray?" And his answer is "Because God tells us too." And I remember this scene so clearly, because as an eight year old kid, I felt so ripped off.

That's why I'm supposed to pray? Because God told me to? How is that fair at all? Keep in mind, I was not the sort of child who did anything because somebody told me too. My mom tells me I was a terrible toddler.

And I think somewhere along the way in my faith journey, I had absorbed this idea of prayer as a sort of battle of wills; mine versus Gods. A lot of popular books on the topic of prayer seem to have similar struggles: they focus on methods, systems, or techniques to enhance prayer. Or this idea that it's a numbers game, the more people pray for a specific thing, the more likely it is that thing will happen..

As I was wrestling back and forth with the question of “Why do we pray?”, I stumbled upon a podcast that was really helpful for me in re-framing that question. It was the Everything Happens Podcast with Kate Bowler, and she is in conversation with Father James Martin, a Jesuit Priest, and the thrust of his response is that the question is not “Why do we pray?”, rather the question is “Who do we pray to?” He describes prayer in this way: “Prayer is a conscious conversation with God that takes place within the context of a personal relationship with God.”

The way Martin talks about prayer is that prayer is about relationship. It's about relationship. And if we begin with that idea as our starting point in talking about prayer that strips away a lot of the push and pull language around prayer, a lot of the idea of metrics or best practices. You and I, really all of humanity, are being drawn into a relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:4-7 describes this act of God of calling us into loving, communing relationship with him, “But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.” Jesus is the summation of God's grace and kindness towards us, his calling of us to him. And prayer is one of the ways that we can respond to God in our relationship

with him. So that's the first thing, prayer is about relationship- our relationship to God and God's relationship to us.

Because prayer is rooted in our relationship with God, prayer is the language of intimacy with God. Prayer is the language of intimacy.

When Taylor and I were star-crossed young adults, dating in college, we would spend our summers apart. I would return to Minnesota and he would come home to Saskatoon. The first summer we managed to see each other once, and the next summer we weren't able to see each other until the fall. And so, from May-September of those two years, we talked a lot. On the phone, on instant messenger, on emails, in sweet sappy letters we mailed across the border. We talked and talked and talked. Because there was no seeing one another, no dates, no shared activities, talking was the only thing we had. And as hard as those months felt at the time, it deepened our relationship tremendously. We learned how to communicate better, argue better, ask better questions. We learned more about one another than we would have otherwise. It fostered a kind of connection and intimacy that likely wouldn't have happened had we lived geographically closer.

Now, I'm by means saying that my love life is analogous to how we should respond to God, but I tell that story to illustrate that it was talking and sharing with one another that deepen our relationship the most-not activities, not working together, not in person stuff,

but the honest, sharing of our two lives even as we sought to join our lives together someday.

And prayer is like that. It's the opportunity to talk openly and honestly with God about the things we are thankful for, the things we need help with, the things, both precious and shameful, that are rattling around in our hearts and minds. Father Martin said this, "God meets you where you are, right, that God meets you where you are, and that therefore the way that you like to pray, the way that Kate likes to pray, the way that Jim likes to pray, the way that whoever's listening to this podcast likes to pray is where God is going to meet them. And so you don't have to pray in the way that your neighbor does, your friend or your priest or your spiritual director does. And that's really consoling for people because it relieves them of this notion that there's one right way to pray."

Further, because prayer is a way to grow deeper in relationship to God, prayer is a reciprocal activity. True intimacy in any relationship requires a back and forth, a give and take. I've often heard it said that prayer is a conversation. I've struggled with that concept because it's not as though God talks back to me in prayer. At least not as an audible voice or even another voice in my head, I know that happens for some people, but I've never experienced that. I have a few friends who are Spiritual Directors and one of the biggest principles of spiritual direction is to help directees notice where God is already at work in their lives or in a given situation. It's about cultivating the practice of paying attention, and that same principle applies to listening in prayer. Father Martin, again, " And so it's (prayer) intentional. Right. And it's a two way street. Now, what does

that mean? When people hear about listening to God, they say, oh, my gosh, what does that mean? Like you're hearing voices or seeing vision said, no, it's about paying attention to what happens in your prayer as well as in your daily life. But it is a conversation. It's a back and forth. It's you sharing yourself with God, and it's also God's sharing God's self with you in different ways." For me that takes some pressure off in listening in prayer, God will speak, God is speaking and it's my role to be attentive.

And just in any relationship, it is honesty and openness that begets intimacy. To truly grow closer to someone, person or to God, we must be honest and vulnerable in our sharing. You hear those stories about people who live a double life, or even have two families who are unaware of each other and people will say, "I fell for it. I thought I knew them, but I really had no idea at all." God has shown his fullest self to us in the person of Jesus Christ. John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." We're invited to offer the fullness of our own selves into conversation with God through prayer.

Which is perhaps not as easy as it sounds. Henri Noewen, a Christian who wrote prolifically on the brokenness of vulnerability says this, "Praying is no easy matter. It demands a relationship in which you allow someone other than yourself to enter into the very center of your person, to see there what you would rather leave in darkness, and to touch there what you would rather leave untouched."

We see a beautiful example of honesty and vulnerability as well as this attentiveness to God in Jesus' prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane. I'll read the verses that Carrol read for this morning. "And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You *will*." And He *came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and He said to Peter, "So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, so that you do not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this *cup* cannot pass away unless I drink *from* it, Your will be done." Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more.:

Let's peel this apart a little: and here I'm borrowing from Father Martin's ideas again.

Jesus' prayer, which is offered from a place of crisis, a moment steeped in fear has three key ingredients of intimate prayer to God: **Honesty, Trust and Acceptance.**

Honesty, Trust and Acceptance. Jesus is being totally honest with God, not presenting some stoic spirituality, Father, I would really like to not do this. I don't want this to be the way. I'd like to get out of this." Then there's trust, "Not my will but thine,"-Father, I believe you are good and have a good plan and you are with you, so help me to want the same things you want. I don't want it, but I trust that you can help me to get there. And then into acceptance "Your will be done." You are with me, and I'm accepting that will be enough. I am submitting my kingdom, that is what I control into the service of your kingdom." Honesty, Trust and Acceptance. For most people, this is not a

one pray thing, it's a journey through prayer and relationship with God that gets us to a place where we can express ourselves in those three facets.

So Friends, maybe your prayer life feels easy, robust. Maybe it feels complicated or wanting. I feel both, depending on the day, but I hope that as we spend these next few weeks before Advent talking about prayer, that we can keep Jesus, the one who called us and who we are in relationship with at the centre, bringing our fullest selves as grow deeper into communion with God and with one another through prayer.

To close, I'd like to offer this blessing:

Blessed are you in this terrible, wonderful now. Fumbling around for the right words. You need so much and it seems impossible to say at all. Blessed are you for whom prayer feels hopeless, disappointing, futile. Blessed are you in your radical honesty, in the ways you speak of your grief. The long, sleepless nights in an empty bed. Of the physical pain you feel, the joints that don't work like they used to, your brain fog or chronic migraines, who speak of your loneliness, the empty home or nest or womb. Blessed are you who have the audacity to ask for the miracles you need, the healing or a new friend or a redeemed family. Blessed are you as you learn to trust, trust a God who hears, who listens, who hasn't left your side, who prays on your behalf, interpreting those deep groans you can't quite put into syllables or sounds. Blessed are you, as you settle into acceptance. And blessed are we who live here in this someday, but not now.