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First United Methodist Church

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Series: “The Gifts of Easter”

Message: “The Gift of Prayer”

Scripture: John 17:1-19

It’s still Easter! It’s like the Energizer bunny…it keeps going and going. And so we keep celebrating and celebrating! And, we still have gifts to unpack and use in our lives—gifts that Jesus gives to us through his resurrection. Gifts that he describes in detail in John 13-17.

Today as we look at the first half of John 17, we find the gift of prayer.

As we begin to unpack this gift, let’s define prayer first. Prayer, at its most basic level, is conversation between us and God.

And just like the way conversation grows and changes as you get to know someone, our prayer life grows and changes as we get to know God. At first, conversation is often a little awkward and formal. We focus on pleasantries and the weather. But as you get to know someone better, your comfort level grows and then you end up talking about the things on your heart, the real things that you only share with certain trusted people.

As you move to this point, you will find that God is a very good listener. In fact, God delights in those moments when we are willing to pour our hearts out to Him.

But then there comes a time when we realize that we’re doing all of the talking and that maybe, if we would start to ask a little more and stop and listen for God’s response, amazing things might happen.

At this point our understanding of prayer begins to deepen. We begin to think of prayer not just as talking to God, but listening to God. We begin to show up to our prayer time without an agenda or a laundry list of needs.

Like in friendship, we soon realize that there is joy in just being together. The time doesn’t have to be completely filled with nonstop talking. But we also realize that sometimes even when we’re ready to listen, our friend isn’t ready to pour out their heart to us on our time frame…in the few minutes we’ve set aside to listen. And when our friend does speak, it isn’t always what we want to hear. And so we have to learn to be ready to hear when our friend is ready to speak to us. In faith it is the same, we have to learn how to be ready to listen whenever it is that God chooses to speak to us.

And so we begin to cultivate our ear and our heart to listen to God more and more. And our prayer life then moves from communication to communion.

Communion goes beyond words. It is a deep awareness of and attentiveness to God. It is a oneness and an understanding that leads us to realize that in the words of Ruth Haley Barton, “every breath we take can be a prayer, uniting our heart to God and harnessing the energy of our life to His great purposes.”

I think this is what Mother Teresa was describing when she was asked about her prayer life when interviewed by Dan Rather. When he asked what she said during her prayers she replied, “I listen.” So he turned it around and asked, “Well then, what does God say?” And she smiled and answered, “He listens.”

That was the kind of relationship Jesus had with his Father. This sort of prayer life was the foundation of the unity with God that he describes so beautifully in these chapters of John.

And when we can follow his example and practice this life of prayer, it helps us to focus our attention and our lives on what is most important. It helps us to remember who we are and the life God wants us to live, and then it gives us the momentum and the courage to live into it.

So often we are an odd mix of distracted (from the important things) and hyper focused (on our worries and problems and plans) that we miss out on what is most important. Prayer teaches us to focus on the most important things, to let go of the rest, and to trust God.

Jesus shows us how to do this in John 17. In this chapter John lets us overhear Jesus’ prayer that we usually think of him praying in the garden before his arrest.

As he enters into this time of prayer, his first prayer is for himself. This is a good idea, considering everything he will face in the next 24 hours.

He begins this prayer by asking God to glorify him so that he can glorify God. As we hear the word glorify, it might sound a little arrogant to us, like someone wanting to be the center of attention, a rock star.

But here, glorify has a slightly different meaning. It means, to be revealed in. Jesus is asking God to be clearly seen in his life so that he can make God clearly known to the world through his actions.

He asks for this as a way of completing the work God has given him to do. This work is to give the gift of eternal life.

Have you ever wondered how to define or explain eternal life? Here we have it, in Jesus’ words: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Eternal life is knowing God and having the friendship with God that we talked about last week. It is having this oneness of communion with God that comes through prayer.

This eternal life begins now and lasts forever because God and God’s friendship last forever. It is faithful even when it means going to the cross and it endures all the way to Easter and beyond.

So as we think of how Jesus beings by praying for himself, I want to invite you to consider your own prayer life. What would happen if we each followed his example and began and ended our day, each day with this same prayer that Jesus prayed for himself, “God, help me complete the work that you have given me, that through me, others might know you and that friendship with you that is eternal life.”

God has given us each a purpose and gifts to bless others and to make the world a better place. Prayer helps us to remember, refocus, and direct our attention to that purpose.

After he prays for himself, then Jesus prays for his disciples. They are the inner circle of people that God has given him to teach, empower for ministry, and to be supported by.

I believe that God gives us each a similar circle of people who we have the opportunity to teach and empower and be supported by. We have the opportunity to interact with this group regularly. No, they are not perfect. They can frustrate us. We can feel like we’re wasting our time. But remember Peter, Judas, and Thomas? But part of your purpose and the work that God has given you to do is to pray for this group and to teach and empower them to grow in faith and friendship with God.

Who is on your list? Or perhaps you need to create or develop yours? Who has God placed in your path that you can help to grow in faith? To do that begins with praying for them. Like Jesus, first, we pray that they will know their purpose, the work God has given to them. And then we pray for their protection, not that life will be easy for them, but that they will be protected from the things that will distract and steal their focus and purpose from them. And finally, pray that their friendship with God and doing the work that God has given to them will sanctify them—make them grow even stronger in their friendship with God which is eternal life.

As we engage in this gift of prayer for ourselves and those close to us, it spills over to impact the world. And that’s where we’ll pick up next week with the rest of the chapter as we unpack “The Gift of Unity.”