9-11-16 Springboro First UMC Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 11:1-13, James 5:13-16

Participating in Our Ministries:

Participating By Our Prayers

In the United Methodist Church, there are currently seven vows of membership.

With Confirmation Sunday being celebrated next week, my first sermon series will look in depth at our sixth vow of membership, which asks:

Will you faithfully participate in the ministries of the United Methodist Church

by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?

Some form of this question has been asked since the 1916 Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It has survived 2 mergers and multiple tweaks,

and whether or not you are a currently a member of this or another congregation,

this vow is also a call to all Christians to commit to follow Christ in specific ways, in a specific context, with a specific group of God’s people, at a specific time in history.

This vow asks us to participate, to take part, in the ministries of the church—local and universal—in five particular ways. When we commit to following Christ,

we are called to be more than mere spectators, observing, cheering or complaining from the sidelines. We are called to be on the field, on the court, so to speak, to be an active partner with Christ and the church in this world.

So today, Christ calls us to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church

by our prayers.

When was the last time you prayed for someone?

When was the last time you prayed with someone?

Already in this service we have shared in praised and prayers, we have prayed through song and scripture, and we have recited the Lord’s Prayer together.

Already this past month I have participated in your faithful prayer team, observed the activity of the prayer chain, and experienced your prayers for a smooth transition.

15 years ago 2/3rds of our nation was in worship on September 16th, praying for peace and comfort following the tragedy of 9/11. New York City’s churches were standing room only. A desire for care and community was found among the churches there. People came together to pray for the good of all. Yet within a month many not directly affected returned to their normal routines, which included pulling away from the church and finding themselves too busy to pray.

According to the Barna Research Group, in 2014

Only 55% of Americans said they pray at least once a day.

The number of those who never pray has increased to 23%.

Four in ten Americans say they meditate at least once a week,

yet many who meditate do so for reasons other than religion or spirituality.

- pewforum.org/2015/11/03

If we were honest with one another here today, would you admit to having a faithful prayer life or a sporadic prayer life? Would you admit to prayers that are more of a laundry list of wants or prayers that truly seek to listen to God? I admit there have been times in my life when I have struggled with intentional prayer,

and times in my life when I have been blessed by the peace of God in prayer.

..Father Barry Foster, a priest in Dublin, Ireland, parked his car on a rather steep slope close to his church. His little cairn terrier was lying on the rear seat and could not be seen by anyone outside the vehicle. Father Foster got out of the car and turned to lock the door with his usual parting command to the dog. "Stay!" he ordered loudly, to an apparently empty car. "Stay!" An elderly man was watching the performance with amused interest. Grinning, he suggested, "Why don't you just try putting on the emergency brake?"

To the mind of the unbeliever, watching someone pray is the equal of watching someone say "Stay," to their automobile fully expecting it to obey. To the unbeliever prayer is an exercise in futility. But to the believer, prayer is the most powerful and the most reliable force in the world today.   
 -- King Duncan, Collected Sermons, sermons.com

When the disciples begged Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” they were asking for the power to follow God modeled firsthand in the life of Jesus. They were asking for a prayer that would mark and form them as followers of Jesus growing in relationship with God.

Think of someone who does something well that you would like to learn. Maybe your mentor’s skill is how to bake pies or how to play piano or how to throw a fastball or how to use a computer. Have you ever went up to that mentor and asked, “Teach me to do what you are doing. I want to learn.”

The disciples wanted to learn from Jesus how to pray, how to harness the power and possibility for kingdom living they saw evident in Jesus’ daily life and ministry.

..Read through the gospel of Luke, and you will find Jesus praying consistently at every turn in his life. He prays as he senses God's call on his life; He prays before choosing his disciples; He prays as he serves and heals other people; He prays as he feels the demands and pressures of his ministry; He prays as he faces the cross; He prays as he finishes his work on the cross. Jesus is continually praying. You could say that prayer for him was as vital as taking his next breath. He knew that in order to live out the life God called him to live, he needed to be continually connected to God in prayer; God was the source of his power.

-- Charles Reeb day1.org 9-17-05

Jesus offered to his disciples what we now call the Lord’s Prayer. Initially, the Lord’s Prayer was never meant to be memorized in and of itself, to be repeated each Sunday, in school, at weddings and at funerals. Instead, the Lord’s Prayer is meant to be a model prayer for disciples to learn how to pray and what to pray.

When you pray the Lord’s Prayer, do you really pray for the power behind the words? Intimacy with and dependence on God, God’s kingdom ways in our life, forgiveness of ourselves and others, protection from times of testing.

Victoria Rebeck once said,

..Those who have prayed the Lord's Prayer with an open heart, as an act of humble discipleship, know that the prayer is powerful and even dangerous. In praying the Lord's Prayer we ask God to lead us down some risky and unfamiliar paths. Praying the Lord's Prayer compromises the sense of security we fumble to maintain within our own power.

--Victoria Rebeck, The Christian Ministry, Jan-Feb 1995, 2.

in Homiletics 7-26-98 Not Ready for Prime Time

Whether I am talking to youth in Confirmation or adults in Bible study, I often define prayer as communication with God. With words and sighs, song and silence, prayer is our conversation with God, our times of talking to God and our times of listening to God.

At first our prayers may seem awkward. However, as Mark Trotter wrote in his book "*Grace All the Way Home*": "Throw anything up there. Stumble, use bad grammar, have long embarrassing pauses, split your infinitives and even dangle your participles. It doesn't matter. Just groan or sigh if that's all you can do, because God's hearing your prayer does not depend on your eloquence but on God's grace, which is already at work in your life."

-- Robert Holmes, day1.org, 7-29-01

The more time we spend in prayer, the deeper we will delve into our own lives, hearts, and souls and the more we will be able to genuinely lift up others in prayer.

The more we grow in our relationship with God, the more we may begin to pray about about our deepest desires, struggles, fears, and hurts. We may begin to forgive ourselves for deeds long ago. We may begin to discern more where God is calling us to be in ministry in our daily lives.

Prayer is a lifelong process, one of those basic practices of faith that we will continue to learn how to do until the day we die. The more we practice prayer, the more we will understand the power of God. And the more we communicate with God, the more we will be like Jesus.

Imagine being friends with someone and never talking to them. Imagine living with someone and never listening to them. Imagine if you only talked to your spouse, your kids or your boss for a few minutes each day. Is that any way to sustain and grow a long-term relationship?

Mother Teresa once told her novices:

No prayer, no faith, no faith, no love,

no love, no devotion, no devotion, no service.

--Jana Childers csec.org 2-15-98 “A Shameless Path”

Prayer is foundational to our faith lives.

Without prayer, we are like a running back who has never learned to catch.

Without prayer, we are like a fountain without a water source.

Without prayer, we are like a pianist who has never practiced scales.

Church consultant Thom Rainer, in his book “Autopsy of a Deceased Church”

says that one of the nine factors that lead to the death of a local congregation includes the fact that the church rarely prays together outside of a few moments in the Sunday Service. And in Sunday service, the prayers are limited only to members, friends and families, and their needs.

While intercessory prayer is important, as noted in the letter of James, we are also called together to pray for discernment, for guidance, for vision, for grace.

What is God’s desire for Springboro First?

Are we called to focus on a certain demographic or region of the city?

How are we called to reach out beyond our walls in mission?

Are we praying for the leading of the Holy Spirit?

How are we called to be examples of God’s love and grace?

Jesus calls us to participate in the church, local and universal, by our prayers.

Jesus also calls to be persistent in our prayers.

Can you imagine anyone showing up at your door in the middle of the night, banging at the door until you let him in and give him three loaves of bread?

Most of us would be annoyed and tell them to call us in the morning. Yet Jesus reminds us that the friend got up and gave the bread because of the persistence of the nocturnal visitor.

Think about spouses that bug us to fold the laundry or take out the trash or fix the leaky faucet. Most married couples know how to pester one another until the task at hand is completed.

Think about little children. They bug you and bother you when they want to read or play. They are pushy and persistent when they want something new.

Pastor Edward Markquart concludes,

“Through the years, I have discovered that you bug and bother people who are closest to you. You don’t bother and bug family who are not close; you don’t be persistent and pushy with neighbors who are not close friends. It is only people who are the closest to you that would tolerate you being so pushy and persistent.”

(Pastor Edward Markquart, sermonsfromseattle.com)

While Jesus is **not** telling us to nag God until God does what we want God to do,

Jesus **is** telling us to be in constant communication with God. We are to ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking. We will not change the ways of God but we may, with persistence, change ourselves to be more receptive followers of Christ.

God is seeking to respond to our prayers. God is seeking to give us good gifts, especially the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s ongoing presence with us. But God is not seeking to give us what we want when what we want is not in our best interest.

Yes, there have been times in my life when what I have prayed for does not happen. I prayed for my Dad to be physically healed; instead I saw relations healed within my family. I prayed for the easy path through struggles in ministry. My path was not lessened, yet I realized I was not alone, and that my experiences then helped shape me for experiences down the road.

Pastor Charles Reeb once said,

.. I remember playing with the pew pencils in church when I was a kid. And the pencils always had these words inscribed on them: "Prayer Changes Things."

As I have grown in my faith, I have learned that prayer does indeed "change things," but it is not God who changes. It is me. There is a wonderful old phrase that gets to the root of what I am saying, "Prayer does not give us what we want, but prayer helps us want what we need." How true that is. You see, prayer is not designed to change or persuade God; it is designed by God to change us! Prayer is a spiritual discipline through which we are formed into disciples of Jesus Christ.

-- Charles Reeb day1.org 9-17-05

Today, we are called to commit as disciples of Jesus to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers. Some of you are seasoned prayer warriors. Some of you may be scared to be in prayer for 5 minutes.

Yet as Roberta Bondi once said,

“Prayer is a pretty ordinary, everyday kind of thing. Yes, it has its high moments,

but a lot of prayer is just a matter of showing up.”

--Roberta C Bondi, article from The Christian Century 3-96,

found on www.religion-online.org

I invite you this week to be intentional in your prayers. If you need a starting place, start with the Lord’s Prayer and ponder the words you pray. If you need structure, set an alarm on your phone to spend five minutes a day in prayer.

Pray for one another.

Pray for our confirmands who next week take the vows of membership.

Pray for the ever widening circles of our ministries and church community, our city, our nation, our world.

Pray with your ministry team.

Pray for your ministry team.

Pray with your families.

Pray with a prayer partner.

Remember the words of a UMC billboard from 2001that had a picture of hands folded in prayer and proclaims, “Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.” --UMC billboard following 9/11

Prayer is the power of God at work in our world, and more importantly, in our lives.

May prayer change you, may prayer change me, may prayer change us together.

May it be so.