10/26-27/19 Committed to Prayer Rev. Amy Haines

Phil 4:4-7, Lk 8:4-15 Stewardship: Committed to Christ

Have you ever listened to the prayers of children? Sometimes they are routine, sometimes their honesty will break your heart, and sometimes they will make you laugh.

My daughter Rachel, age 6, has gotten into the habit during prayers for meals to also pray for those who are sick and hurting.

Hank, age 7, thanked God once for the nice day that even fooled the weatherman. Jimmy, age 6, and his sister once asked God who was smarter, boys or girls. Lois, age 9, once asked God for help at school, but only in spelling, adding, history, geography and writing. That covers most school subjects! --adapted from sermonillustrations.com: children’s prayers

And anyone who says prayer is not allowed in school forgets that there are still tests taken in school.

When Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy he once remarked to his mother, "Momma, you can't be good without praying." "How do you know, Robert?" she asked. "Because I've tried!" he answered.

This brings to mind a story about another little fellow – one who had been sent to his room because he had been bad. A short time later he came out and said to his mother, "I've been thinking about what I did and I said a prayer." "That's fine," she said, "if you ask God to make you good, He will help you." "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me be good," replied the boy. "I asked Him to help you put up with me."

*- Our Daily Bread*, June 15, sermonillustrations.com*:*prayer

Every year during confirmation I ask the youth, what is prayer?

Today, I ask you, what is prayer? How would you define it or describe it?

Whether I am talking to youth in Confirmation or adults in Bible study, I often define prayer as communication with God. Prayer is our conversation with God, with words and sighs, song and silence, praise and lament. Prayer is when we talk to God as well as when we listen to God.

What a gift! The God of the universe, the God who sent Jesus to live and die and offer us the promise of life eternal with God, wants to be in relationship with us! And the way we grow in our relationship with God is through prayer.

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?

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.

Prayer is a foundational practice of our Christian faith. Yet prayer is also a lifelong process that we will continue to learn more how to do until the day we die.

Brennan Manning tells the true story of a father dying from cancer who struggled to pray:

The old man’s daughter had asked the local priest to come and pray with her father. When the priest arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. “I guess you were expecting me,” he said. “No, who are you?” “I’m the new associate at your parish,” the priest replied. “When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up.” “Oh yeah, the chair,” said the bedridden man. “Would you mind closing the door?”

Puzzled, the priest shut the door. “I’ve never told anyone this, not even my daughter,” said the man, “but all my life I have never known how to pray. At the Sunday Mass, I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head. Finally, I said to him one day in sheer frustration, ‘I get nothing out of your homilies on prayer.’

“‘Here,’ says my pastor, reaching into the bottom drawer of his desk. ‘Read this book by Hans Urs von Balthasar. He’s a Swiss theologian. It’s the best book on contemplative prayer in the twentieth century.’ “Well, Father,” says the man, “I took the book home and tried to read it. But in the first three pages I had to look up twelve words in the dictionary. I gave the book back to my pastor, thanked him, and under my breath whispered, ‘for nothin.’ “I abandoned any attempt at prayer,” he continued, “until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, ‘Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here’s what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It’s not spooky because He promised, “I’ll be with you all days.” Then just speak to Him and listen in the same way you’re doing with me right now.’

“So, Padre, I tried it, and I’ve liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I’m careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she’d either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm.”

The priest was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, anointed him with oil, and returned to the rectory. Two nights later the daughter called to tell the priest that her daddy had died that afternoon.

“Did he seem to die in peace?” he asked. “Yes, when I left the house around two o’clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek.

When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange, Father. In fact, beyond strange—kinda weird. Apparently just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside his bed.”

--Brennan Manning, Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus, Revell/Chosen, 1986, 129–130. on thepastorsworkshop.com:prayer

Prayer is our connection with God, as well as our power source to live the Christian life.

We best see this power modeled in the life of Jesus.

…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 prayed all the time. And the disciples noticed. Then they requested Jesus teach them to pray. And Jesus taught them what we now call The Lord’s Prayer.

Consider what The Lord’s Prayer all covers: We are praying for intimacy with and dependence on God, for God’s kingdom ways in our life, for forgiveness of ourselves and others, and for protection from times of testing.

We are praying for God to guide us in our relationships with others. We are praying for a deeper awareness of God’s ways in our lives. We are praying for a deeper relationship with Almighty God.

This is what Jesus desires for us, when we, as modern-day disciples, open ourselves to prayer.

The more we pray to God, the more we begin to understand God’s ways. The more we pray to God, the more we open ourselves up to God’s ways in our lives. The more we pray to God, the more we become aware of the world around us. Prayer expands our lives, and our relationships with God and one another. Prayer changes us, and deepens our faith.

Intellectually, we know about the power of prayer. Many of you are prayer warriors. Yet practically and spiritually, how many of us still struggle to pray? How many of us still struggle to commit to a regular habit of prayer amid the busyness of our lives? How many of us still struggle to allow prayer’s power to transform our lives? How many of us still struggle with prayers that appear to go unanswered, or answered in ways contrary to what we expect?

Remember I defined prayer as conversation with God. Well, a conversation has to start somewhere. So, start talking to God.

You don’t have to use fancy words, church-y phrases, or pious talk. Just be real. Be you.

Share with God what is on your heart and mind—what you are grateful for, what you are struggling with, your hope for the future, and your compassion for others.

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

God is more willing to listen than we often are to pray.

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

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 ten minutes a day in prayer.

Or say a prayer on your way out the door in the morning. Say a prayer on your way to work (with eyes open, of course.) Say a prayer before you close your eyes to sleep.

Consider praying through the word ACTS, for adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. Offer God praise, then confess what you’ve done wrong, then give thanks, then pray for others.

Pray for our community, our schools, our government, our world. Pray for our church, its ministries and its leaders. Pray for God’s ways to become your ways. Pray alone, and with others. Pray with and for your families. Pray with and for your ministry teams and Sunday School classes. Pray with and for a prayer partner.

1 Thessalonians encourages us to “Pray without ceasing.” To get to the point where prayer is as natural as breathing, offering up prayers throughout the day.

As you pray, also give thanks. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own needs, or praying for the needs of others, that we forget to give thanks. We forget to rejoice.

Our Scripture passage today from Philippians reminds us to bring everything to God with thanksgiving. The Scripture proclaims: “Rejoice always! Don’t be anxious! With thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.”

There is much to make us anxious in this world. Yet we are reminded to take all of our worries to God in prayer. And when we take our worries to God, we are also to take our thanks.

In 2001 the UMC plastered the country with a billboard that 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

There is power in prayer!

Think about what you are thankful for today. Maybe you are thankful for a positive outcome to a troubling situation. Maybe you are thankful simply for a house that is warm and dry. Maybe you are thankful that you feel better today than yesterday. Maybe you are thankful for friends and family. Consider three things for which you are grateful, and start there each day to give those thanks to God!

Also give thanks for God’s presence in your life. Give thanks for God’s promises in the Scriptures. Give thanks for God’s call to follow Jesus. Give thanks for your salvation!

When we offer to God our prayers and our praises, we also then open ourselves up to God’s transforming grace. Consider the varied relationships you have experienced in your life, from romantic to friends to coworkers to brothers and sisters in Christ. With each new relationship, have you not been changed in some way, big or small? Each person we meet has an impact on our lives.

When through prayer we deepen our relationship with God, we also open ourselves up to be changed. We become more aware of our sins and shortcomings. We become more aware of the world around us. We become more aware of God’s ways that are different than the world’s ways. We become more aware of God’s redeeming love and transforming grace.

Yes, there will be times when our prayers do not appear to be answered, or looking back, are answered in a way different than what we expect. God is not a genie in a bottle, granting our every wish. There are times when we will struggle to pray “Not my will, God, but thine” trusting God’s care. Faith does not exempt us from the struggles of this life. Instead, faith may lead to more struggles and more to pray for.

Prayer leads us into a deeper relationship with God, and as part of the faith community, deeper relationships with one another.

Are we willing this day to commit to prayer, to commit to a deepening relationship with God, to commit to an openness to be changed?

We are called to be good soil, open to God’s seeds of faith in our lives. For the next four weeks in worship, we will listen to the same Scripture story from the Gospel of Luke, the Parable of the Sower, or the Parable of the Soils. This parable of Jesus reminds us of the extravagant love of God, and the surprising ways of the Kingdom of God. If God is the sower, God will sow the seeds of his Word, the seed of faith, the seeds of salvation wherever God can. On the path. On the rocks. In the thorns. And in good soil.

Consider today the hard, packed earth of a well-traveled path. Before our rain this weekend many yards were beginning to look like this path, especially the marching band field at the high school. That field is so bad there is not even grass left growing, let alone any chance of a seed taking root.

Instead seeds would simply get trampled. If a seed falls on such a path it bounces off, gets trampled on, or is carried away by the birds for food. The path doesn’t have much soil in which the seed can take root.

Sometimes, in our lives, the path is like men and women who are so close minded to the Gospel that they adamantly refuse to even consider the good news of God’s love for them. They will deny any hope and transformation based in faith. People of the path may feel that faith is a waste of time in the midst of their busy lives, that prayer is a cry of weakness when they need to be strong, and that God has better things to do than deal with someone like them, listening to their praises and prayers. People of the path may speak words of faith without any intention behind the words, or make demands of religion without any basis in a relationship with Jesus,

or deny the power of prayer, even when they cannot prove the power scientifically.

God does not call you and I to be people of the path. Instead, God invites us to be people of the soil, those who open up hearts and minds and souls so that God can take root, grow us in God’s ways, then encourage us to bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

Consider the final verse of the parable explained:

“The seed that fell on good soil are those who hear the word and commit themselves to it with a good and upright heart. Through their resolve, they bear fruit.” (v15 CEB)

Today, we are called to be those willing to hear and ponder and commit to God’s ways in our lives. This is true as individuals, and as a community of faith. Prayer is not just a private exercise of faith. Prayer is also foundational for our life together as a church.

Earlier this year I invited this congregation to pray a Breakthrough Prayer for our lives and for our congregation. At 7:48 am and pm each day, you joined me in prayer for God’s vision for our congregation.

Remember these words? Pray them with me one more time:

“Faithful God, pour out your Holy Spirit on us,

to lead us into a new season as your church.

Breakthrough what holds us back from living for you

in our lives and in our congregation.

Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, faith to respond,

and the courage to follow where you lead.

We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Several of you shared stories of how God did breakthrough what holds you back, the path, the thorns, or the fear in your life.

Pastor Doug and Brian Schlise organized a vision team that began with this prayer, inviting God to offer them a vision to move our congregation forward in hope not fear, in ministry not contentment, in faithfulness not routine.

Our vision team prayed for God’s desire for our congregation, and heard a vision to reach out to senior adults in our congregation and community, as they are a growing yet often forgotten segment of Springboro. Our leadership has also been invited to pray over this vision for a new avenue of ministry, and God is opening up possibilities and ideas that will be shared in the weeks and months to come.

We can only move forward in ministry, however, if we take our commitment to Christ seriously, those vows spoken over us at our baptisms, those vows we spoke when we became members of this congregation.

Today, I invite you to commit to Christ through a commitment of prayer. The Christian life is not a spectator sport—we are all called onto the playing field, no matter our age or ability, together as a team for Christ. Everyone can pray, and everyone is called to pray.

So today, as you go forth from this place, I invite you to commit to intentional prayer. Will you be intentional in how often you talk with God? Will you be intentional in who you pray for? Will you be intentional in offering your thanks to God? Will you be intentional praying for our congregation?

Give thanks for the gift of prayer! May we all will be more intentional in our prayer lives, so that we may deepen our relationships with God and with one another.

God, guide us as we pray!

Amen.