

“Pray More”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Lent
March 4, 2018

First Scripture Reading: Amos 5:21-24

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Introduction

As we move through Lent, we continue to reflect on passages of scripture which draw our attention to God’s desire for us to live lives conformed more closely to God’s will. This passage from the prophet Amos may sound harsh to our modern ears, but the nation of Israel had wandered from it’s roots as a people set apart by God. The prophet addresses their tendency towards obeying the rules of sacrifice and worship while ignoring the rules of love for God and neighbor. This passage from Amos (the whole book, actually) is a call, not to more rituals and worship, but to more righteousness and justice; so much so, that they are like a great waterfall, unstoppable, rushing down upon the land, and a stream that never dries up.

These images remind us that we too, are the people of God and that we too, have been called to lives that more closely reflect God’s will. Giving something up as a part of our Lenten observance is a nice ritual, but it is meaningless if it is not accompanied by adding practices that will bend our lives more closely to what God wants them to be. What God really desires of us is changed lives that reflect a desire to live into the principles of God’s Kingdom. With this in mind, we continue our Lenten series which explores spiritual practices we can *add* to our lives to enrich our faith and strengthen our walk with God.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 18:1-17

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹⁵People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is too such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”



Sermon: “Pray More”

Here’s a quick pro-tip: if you ever want to get a group of adults to stop talking, just say in a loud voice “Let us pray.” Most people will quiet right down because we’re taught from the time we’re tiny not to talk when someone is praying. Alternately, you can say in a loud voice “Who would like to lead us in prayer?” At that point, most people will stop talking and aggressively look at the floor so as to avoid making eye-contact or uttering any word that might be misconstrued as an attempt to volunteer.

Both reactions speak, at least in part, to our understanding of prayer. We don’t talk when people are praying because it is disrespectful to interfere with someone’s communication with God. At work, during a staff meeting, when the boss is talking or when someone is directly addressing the boss, it would be not only rude, but also incredibly disrespectful (and a bad career move) to start up a side conversation with a co-worker about your weekend. Silence during prayers also shows our respect for God and probably a little bit of fear that if we don’t stop talking, we might make God angry.

The reluctance of people to pray in a group often speaks to their fear of being judged by their peers. Jerry Seinfeld once said that statistically, more people are afraid of public speaking than they are of death, which means that at any funeral, most of the people in attendance would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy. Praying out loud in public is probably even more daunting, because humans, by nature, tend toward being self-conscious. We don’t want to be judged for saying something dumb out loud where people can hear us, particularly if we’re trying to be ... holy ... in front of people who may know us as somewhat less than holy most of the time.

There’s also a tremendous amount of pressure in having to speak to the almighty on behalf of our peers. But maybe more importantly, prayer is intimate ... and it can be hard to bear your soul and be vulnerable in front of other people. Where we may have no problem praying in private, we may balk at the idea of praying in public in the same way that you might have no problem being affectionate with your spouse or partner at home but feel a little less comfortable doing so in front of other people. Or for a teenager, hugging your parents and telling them you love them might be perfectly fine when no one else is around, but certainly, definitely not in front of your friends.

The Bible consistently describes our relationship with God like that of a child to a parent. And we often hear marriage language used to describe the relationship between Jesus and the church. Those kinds of familial relationships are close and intimate, so it is perfectly natural that we would be somewhat uncomfortable making them public. But just like the relationships of parents with their children, and spouses and partners with one another, if our relationship with God is to be strong and healthy, then we need good communication. Which means we need a strong and healthy prayer life.

Think about it, you are closer with your spouse than you are with your dry-cleaner because you talk about more and deeper issues with your spouse than you do with anyone else. In a close relationship there is intimacy; you can be vulnerable; you can share the things that frighten you and talk about the things that keep you up at night. In a close relationship, you lean on one another for support when things are difficult,

and you share the victories because that person knows you and understands why, what may seem like a small thing to someone else, is actually a big deal to you.

When I was a campus minister, one of the things I tried to impart to my students was that for their relationships to be real, they had to be based on something more than looks or what that other person can do for them. You can't really have a relationship with an attractive smile or an advanced understanding of electrical engineering.

And the same goes with our relationship with God. If we expect it to be meaningful and to have any real depth, we're going to have to put some work into it and that means talking to God, regularly, and not just about that college acceptance letter you want or that raise you need; and not just when we're worried that it's past curfew and the kids aren't home yet, or frightened about those test results the doctor called about.

We pray because we need to be close to God.

And there are lots of passages of scripture that talk about prayer. Usually they talk about *how* to pray or *why* we should pray but most assume that we *already* pray. Prayer is a given. So that means it needs to be an important part of our lives. If we want to draw closer to God, then we should build a stronger and healthier prayer life. So, in the interest of that, here are five thoughts about prayer.

1. We Don't Pray Because God Needs Us to Pray. We Pray Because We Need God.

We've already touched on this a little bit, but it bears repeating. As Matthew tells us in his gospel, God already knows what we need before we ask it.¹ God is not sitting around, watching the problems of the world happen, doing nothing until someone prays. God is active. And God's response to us is not based on how well we ask, or on how good we are, or on how long we pray.

Now, the Luke passage we just read seems like it might suggest the opposite; that the widow gets what she wants because she keeps on pestering the judge. But Luke begins this passage by writing that Jesus tells the disciples this parable about "their need to pray always and not to lose heart." The moral of this story is not that persistence equals getting what we want. We can't use our prayers to beat God into submission.

This parable is about faithfully going to God in prayer, even when the situation seems hopeless. It is too easy to simply give in because things are not going the way we think they should. Jesus assures the disciples that God will always do what is right, but we need to remain faithful.

2. God Answers Prayer, But Sometimes the Answer Is "No."

Faithfully Going to God in prayer doesn't mean that we're going to get the answer we were hoping for. On the night before his arrest, Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He knows the cross awaits and He doesn't want to face it. So, He prays to God saying, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not what I want but what You want."² Jesus knows what *He* wants. But He is willing to accept God's will because He knows that God's will is going to work out better in the long run than His own.

Likewise, when Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, He gives them a model prayer that we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer. In it He teaches the disciples to pray "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."³ This line, like Jesus' prayer in the garden, acknowledges that we want God's will to be done because we trust that everything will turn out better with God in charge than if we are

making the decisions. That means sometimes, maybe even most of the time, God's answer is either something like "Well, we could try your way, but let's try mine first," or more frequently, an outright "No."

Some of you will remember Garth Brooks' song *Unanswered Prayer* from his 1990 album *No Fences*. In it he tells the story of the girl he dated in high school and how he prayed "that God would make her mine." And of returning home many years later with his wife and running into that old girlfriend, and the realization that his life was pretty good because God *didn't* answer his prayer the way he wanted. The song's chorus makes the point:

*Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs,
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care.
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.⁴*

3. Prayer Is Not for Show.

In the second parable Jesus tells here, he describes two men and their prayers. The first, a Pharisee, would have been a respected man in the community. We have come to see Pharisees as the bad guys. But in Jesus' day, his audiences would have seen them as noble, and wise leaders of the faith.

This one prays thanksgiving to God for all that he has, and for not making him like the lowly tax collectors and sinners around him. He knows what he has done to earn God's favor, fasting twice a week and tithing 10% of his income. His is a well-intended, but arrogant prayer.

Contrast him with the tax collector. Listeners of Jesus' time would have likely seen the tax collector as a lowlife, profiting off the backs of the poor and the faithful. Tax collectors were contracted with the Roman authorities to collect taxes. As long as they paid Rome what was due, they could keep everything else they collected. And they usually collected a lot more than Rome was owed. There was tremendous profit to be had in collecting taxes and the process was rife with corruption.

This man knows he has cheated people and gotten wealthy doing so. He knows he is a sinner. He can't even allow himself to approach the Temple, nor even to look up towards heaven. He confesses himself a sinner and pleads for God to grant him mercy.

As is often the case, the audience would have been surprised to find out that the cheating businessman and not the religious leader was the one who received God's grace. Why? Well their prayers tip us off as to what is in their hearts. The Pharisee is well aware of what he has done and what he feels he deserves. But he seems woefully unaware of just how much he needs God. The tax collector, on the other hand, is just as self-aware, but knows that without God he is lost.

In this parable, the Pharisee *is* arrogant, but his greatest failing is, as Marjorie Proctor-Smith writes, "His inability to see and name his dependence on God."⁵ When we pray, we are acknowledging not *what* we need, but *that we need* God.

4. Prayer Should Be Honest, At All Cost.

In the last part of this passage, Luke tells the disciples let the children come to him because the Kingdom is for them, too. "Truly I tell you," he says, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." This part isn't specifically about prayer, but it does teach us that in coming to God we

should do so more like children. That is not to say that we should use small words or simple ideas and it doesn't mean that we come to God wide-eyed and unquestioning.

That may be how some people understand this passage, but it doesn't take into account how children really are. Children are curious and bold and often ask challenging questions that you'd rather not have to answer. Children are very keenly aware of justice, knowing what is fair and unfair. Children are dependent upon the adults in their lives for nurturing and for their daily bread. Children tend to be more open and vulnerable, loving freely, forgiving easily, and trusting completely.

To come to God like a child then, is to acknowledge that we are not in charge and that we need God in our lives. It is to come with our honest questions and our heartfelt laments. It is to come to God boldly, but willing to listen and be taught. Coming to God like a child means coming to God in trust and with the knowledge that God loves us and wants what is best for us.

5. Prayer Can Be Simple.

At every meal that I can remember from my growing-up years my father offered grace by saying "Thank you Lord for supper (or breakfast or lunch)." It didn't matter who was a guest at the table or how big or important the meal (Christmas and Thanksgiving included), his blessing was always the same. He would bow his head and simply say "Thank you Lord for supper."

And if you ever go to lunch with me, I'll probably say grace when our food comes to the table, and it will probably involve me saying something like "Are you thankful? So am I. Thank you Lord for lunch."

In her book *Travelling Mercies*, Author Anne LaMotte muses on the simplicity of prayer. She writes:

*"Here are the two best prayers I know, 'Help me, help me, help me,' and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' A woman I know says, for her morning prayer, 'Whatever,' and then for the evening 'Oh well,' but has conceded that these prayers are more palatable for people without children."*⁶

There is certainly more we can say about how and why and when we should pray. But the most important thing is *that* we pray.

Several years ago, one of our friends named Danny was supposed to lead a morning chapel service at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia where Mary and I both went to school. He was a good student, if somewhat undisciplined. When chapel time arrived, no one had seen him. So, the organist began playing the opening hymn, and another student ran off to find him. Turns out he had overslept. Roused from bed, he quickly threw on some shoes and a wrinkled shirt and ran to the chapel. The truly bad thing was that he had nothing written. He had planned to wake up early that day to compose his sermon, but obviously, oversleeping killed that idea.

So, when the time came for him to deliver his remarks, Danny stood before the small congregation of faculty and fellow students, and delivered the sermon which made him a legend and which I will now share with you in its entirety:

"Pray, pray, pray."

Then he sat down.

We laughed about that sermon; about its brevity, and the circumstances that made it so. But when I think about it these many years later, that admonition to pray, and then to pray, and pray some more, may actually have been the most profound thing he could have said. If we want our lives of faith to flourish; if we desire a closer relationship with God, then we need to pray.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come, Amen.

End Notes:

¹ Matthew 6:8, NRSV

² Matthew 26:39, NRSV

³ Matthew 6:10, NRSV

⁴ Garth Brooks. "Unanswered Prayers." *No Fences*. Capitol Nashville, 1990

⁵ Proctor-Smith, Marjorie. "Luke 18:9-14, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 2010. 217. Print.

⁶ Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. Anchor Books, 2006.