

## *The Art of Prayer*

*Psalm 85; Luke 11:1-13*

In the Bible, Jesus says to us - not once, but many, many times - "Do not be afraid." Where does Jesus find his confidence and strength to proclaim this to all people? His strength and confidence come from God. Prayer is where Jesus finds strength; Prayer is where Jesus finds direction; and prayer is where Jesus knows he is not alone. Throughout the Gospels, we hear over and over again about either after teaching or before being met by a huge crowd, that Jesus would go off by himself to pray. To center himself, to receive direction, and to know that what he was called to do by God was what he was doing.

It's no wonder, then, that the people who follow Jesus look to him for answers - and in this case, look to him for direction on how to pray. I entitled this sermon "The art of prayer" because it truly is an art. There is no right way to pray and no wrong way to pray. Prayers are based on feelings. Prayers speak the context in which we are living, in which one's life is happening and in the world. Prayers are as unique as any painting would be, and it will mean different things to every person who engages with that painting.

I've often found that the mystery of faith is both a blessing and a challenge. The mystery and the unknowing brings with it this sense of intrigue, power beyond our imagining. Yet at the same time, the mystery of faith, the institution of religion, can make faith at times feel inaccessible. We begin to believe that we're not capable of doing anything. We need someone who is educated in order to lead us in our faith.

Like many of you, I'm sure, prayer was something that scared me. Being asked to pray in a group setting was worse than speaking in public for me. Before meetings, before heading to a visit in the hospital, I would fret over what I would say if I was asked to pray. Would I find the right words in that moment?

Some of these fears came from experiences along my faith journey. I was a Youth Leader for many years, and I had this very Evangelical young man helping me with the Youth Group. He asked me to meet him on campus at the U of A. We sat on the grass and I wasn't quite sure what he was looking for, and he said, "Could we pray together?" Worst fears came to light. "Sure," I said. So, in traditional United Church fashion, I began the prayer. You know, I said, "We can jointly do this." So my prayer was probably a minute and a half. And then he prayed for nineteen minutes. During those nineteen minutes, I went through every emotion you can imagine. Feeling inadequate, feeling like I wasn't the one who should be the minister here, etc. etc. I had a similar experience with another family of two youth who are now kind of like adopted children to me. They lost their mother and lost their father two years later. When we went to

the aunt's house, they said, "Well, you're the minister, you pray." So I started praying, and the same thing happened...I was done, I said "Amen", and they jumped in and decided - this is how I interpreted it - that my prayer wasn't enough. So you can see where our sense of inadequacy can sometimes come.

But things changed drastically for me when I came to the realization that it doesn't matter how many words you use. It doesn't matter how long the prayer is to make it better or worse. It doesn't matter if you use the right words or not. What matters is that in that moment, we turn our whole being to God. What matters is that we take whatever is in our hearts to God in prayer.

What also brought me great relief is the realization that there is an infinite amount of ways to pray. As I began to pray more and more, I found peace and relief in taking my questions, my fears, my hopes, my dreams to God. We heard in the scripture today the promise: "Ask and it will be given you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who searches, finds. And everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Persistence in prayer is where we need to begin." How many of us pray to God for something, and when the answer we expect doesn't come, we either give up or assume that we're not meant to receive what we've asked for. That somehow, we're not worthy of it. How many of us, after asking, actually begin to search? To seek out the answer? I wonder if sometimes, we are too passive in our prayers. How many of us give up after searching for something for a few minutes? How many of us, while we are searching, also knock on the door?

As I've mentioned, Youth Ministry is a passion of mine. We spend a lot of time playing Sardines in this church, which is Hide and Seek. It is my favourite thing to do to hide first. One Saturday night, I was hiding for two hours. It took the youth two hours to find me. I was back there in a closet, in a closet. On some beautiful cushions; it was quite lovely, so I had a very nice evening. What was interesting about it is that I thought they would give up. But they didn't. They were persistent. As they persisted, they started opening more things; they started searching in more places; they started working together. They started with divide-and-conquer. And then they got really smart and they phoned my phone. They did. They phoned it, and I was like, "Ah!" I was trying to hide it in the cushions, hoping to silence it. That was all it took: they heard it, and they found the sound and they found me.

Now, whether that was answering their prayers, I don't know. But the point of it is persistence, sometimes, is the only way that we are going to truly figure things out. Find what it is that we are looking for. As we were reflecting in the Scripture Reflections and praying on the passage from Luke this week, I began to wonder if the door to my soul, the door to your soul, is truly open. Is my soul curious and willing to listen for God? Not just in that one-to-one prayer, but through the people. Through the things that we encounter in a week. How do we open ourselves up to God and faith? What doors of our soul have been shut and have kept us from turning to God? Are we, like the words found in the hymn which we will sing a little later, called "What a Friend we Have in Jesus": "Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care? Oh, what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

The psalmists in the Bible give us hundreds of examples of prayers. Maybe you haven't considered the psalms as a prayer, maybe just a psalm. But a psalm in itself can be a

prayer too. And in the psalms, we talk about psalms of thanksgiving, prayers of lament, prayers of seeking guidance, prayers expressing anger and frustration...there are prayers in there for oneself and prayers in for the community. So if you want some examples, head to the psalms.

The psalmist in 85 today is speaking to a community that is facing a really difficult time. And the psalmist speaks words of encouragement and confidence in God. The psalmist challenges the listeners to truly hear God's word of peace. Listen to the words again. It says in Psalm 85: "Restore us again, O God of our salvation." *Restore us*. What would that mean for us as a world, as a community, as a nation? Restore us again, O God.

Jesus, in teaching the disciples to pray, gives a template for prayer. A place to start and end. We begin by giving thanks to God. Reminding ourselves that we are in relationship with God. We don't need to simply rely on ourselves. There's a petition: "Give us." What is it that I can't do alone? Where do I need my faith to sustain my love? To help me through all of these changes and challenges? After we've asked for something, we then ask to be forgiven, to be released of the things that are burdening us, the harms that we have committed, the places where we haven't done enough. Then we ask to be led. "Lead us." Guide us when we feel lost, when we feel alone and vulnerable. And finally: "Deliver us or restore us." Lead us to a life, to a place of peace, understanding and love.

Kenneth Leech writes in a book entitled *True Prayer; An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, that "at its heart, prayer is the process of self-giving, and of being set free from isolation. To pray is to enter into relationship with God, and to then be transformed by God."<sup>1</sup> Prayer is a process. Like I said, there is no right or wrong way to do this. It's a process, it's ongoing. It's an art. It's something that evolves through our faith journey. Prayer is a process of liberation, where we awakened to God's words of peace, salvation, and the call to always come back to God.

Now, some of you may wonder, does prayer really work? Is there power in prayer? For me, the most profound moment where I saw the power of prayer happened at the national meeting of our church, in 2006 in Thunder Bay. Right now, The National Church is also meeting. At that time, we met in a huge arena with 800 people from across Canada that were all United Church members, both laypeople and people in ministry. The youth that day were leading worship. And unlike what you would normally expect the youth to do, they led worship with twenty minutes of silence. Now, when I told the organizers what we were going to do, they were like, "Oh, maybe just make it five minutes. I don't think we can do twenty." Something told me that we had to hold it longer. For those twenty minutes, people prayed, and we discerned together and listened for where the Spirit was calling the church. Towards the end, some people did a walking prayer. So some walked quietly around the space. Some knit. Some journaled. Some just sat quietly looking at the candle. Whatever it was that worked for them, they did it.

Out of nowhere, a single voice of a youth sang: "I am one voice, I am singing, I am not alone." A young man came out and they sang together: "We are two voices, we are

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer; An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1980), p. 6-7.

singing, we are not alone.” And then out of nowhere, everyone sang together: “We are one voice, we are singing, we are not alone.” The spirit, the sense, everything in that room shifted. God was within, around, guiding the church, the body of Christ as a whole. To come together, to recognize the diversity and celebrate that diversity. To rely on the gifts that all had brought that day. Prayer isn’t just about getting what we need. When we pray, *we* are changed. Our outlook can be changed; how we approach something can be changed.

In light of the fact that the Pope is arriving today. Finally, the Pope will apologize to the Residential School survivors, to be in person with them. I believe that we are all being called to pray. Not individually, but as a community of faith. We are called to pray for healing, for forgiveness, for truth, for wholeness and for peace. One person is important, but the whole has so much power.

We need to open our souls to God today and be persistent in our prayers. This hour is not enough. We need to search for answers and wisdom. We need to knock on the doors that have isolated us, that have separated people. That have kept us from living out our faith in this world. I hope and I pray that your prayers will be a way of transformation. Will be a way to healing. Will guide you and this community of faith in taking the next steps as we move forward together. May God hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken this day. Thanks be to God.