

“Why Pray?”

2 Chronicles 6:18-21; Psalm 32;
Romans 8:12-17, 26-27; Luke 11:1-13

August 18, 2019
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

How do we pray?

I love phrases that equivocate, that have two different ways of looking at them. So we could look at the question, “How do I pray?” in a very technical way. In some ways this last spiritual discipline is about that. How do we approach prayer? What are some of the different ways of doing that?

And yet, when you ask that question –How do I pray?—we might think of it in another light as well. There are times in our lives, in a particular situation such as grief or uncertainty, or of wondering what’s going to happen next, when we ask, “How do I pray at all?” It can be hard at times to think about how we might pray.

It’s not only the hard moments of life that can bring up that question of “how do I pray.” As we walk through our lives, it sometimes feels like we live in a world that is functionally atheist. We hardly hear a mention of God or get a sense of transcendence. Everything, we think, can be known. That sense of wonder is rarely evident, except perhaps in a moment of tragedy, and then we hear the phrase, “We’ll keep you in our prayers.” It’s an important thing, but when it comes devoid of context sometimes it begins to feel like it’s just a platitude used to try to get around a tragedy and not to address it. We certainly have had our fill of gun-violent tragedies. It feels like over and over again we hear, “We’ll pray for you.” And yet there’s more to praying than just using it as a platitude in the midst of tragedy. That we pray for someone is incredibly important, but there’s more to it.

In the lives that we lead, so often it feels like I can go through the day without thinking about prayer. There’s seldom a moment that the world around me suggests that we need to stop and pray. It feels like prayer has to be something we do when we come together to worship. But throughout our lives, there are a lot of times where the prayer is on us in a way. We have to try to understand it and remember and recognize the value of prayer.

So what is prayer? Why would we think of it as valuable? I think central to it is the idea that God has invited us into a relationship. In any relationship, there is a conversation, and in a way, prayer is that conversation. The word “prayer” in Greek means to exchange wishes. So it’s to bring our hopes and desires, our fears and our needs, and to bring them forward and talk about them.

When we talk with a friend, what kind of conversation we have, how much we bare our souls, may indicate how much we trust that person. Prayer is also a place where it is about the trust we have in God and that I’m not just talking to myself. Sometimes it’s

helpful to hear something, but really, I want to be heard. In prayer, we come to God trusting that we will be heard and that as God hears us, there is an exchange.

Webster's Dictionary, under the definition of prayer, had this acronym that we often use: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication – ACTS. It defined prayer in one of its definitions as simply bringing adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Those are great, but those are all focused on us being the conversation. I wonder sometimes if prayer can be a moment of silence for us to listen for God to speak to us or for God to interact with us in some way, to let go of always needing to offer God our lives and hear a little from God about God's will for us.

I truly believe that it does impact us, that it can happen. I don't know if I've told you this story before, but at one point in my career I was trying to figure out whether I should continue to work in the electron microscope business and move my family from the bay area out to Pennsylvania. We decided to get together with some friends to pray and to talk about that. It was in that moment of prayer where I experienced a sense of God's love and I interpreted it as a call to ministry. It was in that time of prayer that I felt God spoke into my life in a way that changed the direction I took. I believe that God can speak into our lives and that as we enter into prayer, it can change us. Sometimes that's a little scary. We don't know exactly where God might take us, and yet I believe we can trust that God is moving, that God's goodness is in our lives, and that we can recognize God's grace at work in some way.

At moments when it feels like it's too tough to pray, or we come to the prayer and we don't have words, the Spirit is there and the Spirit prays with us, as it says in Romans, "with groans too deep for words." The communication continues.

That's one side of why we might pray. The other side is that if we look at Jesus, if we're following him and watching what he does, he goes off alone to pray. Sometimes it's not just a sweet hour of prayer. At one point, it says he prayed all night, suggesting that he's finding in that time of prayer something incredibly valuable, something about that relationship he experiences, the guidance it gives him, and the hope that it brings into his life. Jesus tells us how to pray. The Lord's Prayer kind of follows that adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication that we can bring in our prayer to God. Then he gives us this funny parable about this guy knocking on his neighbor's door, asking for bread in the middle of the night. How is that like talking to God? Jesus says it's the persistence. It's not something I want to hear because I often think I want to pray once and have God respond. But he invited us to be persistent, to continue in our prayer.

We might recognize that as we do that, he invites us to pray to our father. If you've ever looked at a father responding to a child, you don't always see the father giving the child exactly what he or she wants. It may be that the father sees a little better what needs to be given, or why a particular thing might not be the best thing, or why this particular moment might not be the best time. Yet, the father hears what the child wants and does respond with grace.

So we are invited to be persistent in that relationship and continue that conversation, and to recognize that as we ask, we will receive. As we seek for what God wants and for what we need for our lives, God will help us find it. As we knock, we will be able to enter in. Sometimes I think in our asking we will receive answers we didn't quite expect. In our searching we'll find something we didn't realize was there. In our knocking we may enter into a place we were not quite expecting. But I can't see the future and I can't always see what's best, so I am thankful I can trust in God to continue to lead and to guide and to care as we ask and seek and knock.

In the end, it seems that what's incredibly important about prayer is not so much exactly how we do it. It's not so much what it does. It's that we do it, that we enter into the conversation, that we recognize we are in a relationship with our God and that God is present. God is listening. God does hear. In that relationship and in that conversation our lives change. Prayer changes our lives, the lives of those around us, and perhaps it changes the trajectory of the whole world. So we are invited to pray. Amen.