

Message – Why Pray? *(by Susan Silverthorne)*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to God.

Our passage from Luke 18; 1-8 gives us the story of the Persistent Widow. There are a number of ways that we can unpack this passage, but the text that caught my eye was in the first sentence. The idea is that Jesus told this story to demonstrate that it is necessary to pray consistently and never quit. It was this idea of prayer as a foundational Christian practice that caught my interest. For today, the gem within the selected lectionary passages, is the topic of prayer.

So, aside from following the directive that we should pray, why do we do it? Three common elements that will be familiar are praise, pardon, and petition. If we look to the Lord's Prayer as a template for prayer, we see that it begins and ends with praise. The phrase at the beginning "Our Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name" and the concluding words "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever," give recognition that God is Holy; God is to be exalted and worthy of complete never ending devotion.

A modern version of the Lord's Prayer by James Burklo starts out as, "Dear One, closer to us than our own hearts, farther from us than the most distant star, you are beyond naming," and ends with, "Yours alone is the universe and all its majesty and beauty." These are beautiful words of praise to which we can easily relate. I invite you this week to think very intentionally about praising God in your prayers. What images do you use and of the time that you spend in prayer, how much is devoted to praise?

As we proceed in the Lord's Prayer we see a request for pardon in the words, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," and we see the element of petition in the words, "give us our daily bread," and "lead us not into temptation." A modern version of the phrase that addresses temptation was penned by Tom Hall who writes: In times of trial and temptation, help us to be strong; When life seems overwhelming, help us to endure.

Dr. Lisa Watrous who is a feminist theologian suggests that often "people don't pray until they have run out of options." Hopefully, that is not the case for many Christians, but many of us can likely relate to the idea that we tend to pray more fervently when we are in dire need. When one of us or a loved one becomes seriously ill, when we experience job loss or see our children going through difficult life experiences, we may become more active in our prayer life.

That leads me to ask how you view these conversations with God. We likely are aware that our prayer petitions are not analogous to walking up to a service counter, placing our order and then getting exactly what we want. The answer to our prayers is often not of our own timeline and may not necessarily be the outcome that we might have anticipated. The story of the persistent widow, however, gives us encouragement to pray without ceasing and to be confident that our loving God will respond with blessings. It also encourages us be persistent with prayer, just as the widow continued to make requests of the judge until she got results.

Now that we have considered some of the basic components of prayer, let's take a quick look at how we pray. On our own, we likely pray silently. Tanya Thurmman is an anthropologist who has studied prayer and the result of prayer in people in an evangelical church environment. In her anthropologic study of prayer, she notes that we use imagination in prayer. She talks about individuals imagining sitting next to God, with a God's protective arm around the shoulder of the person praying or imagining feeling the warmth of God.

Now, if you have just tuned out at that suggestion that imagination can be used in prayer, reminds us that engaging the senses has a long tradition in Christianity that dates back to medieval monastic practices. She suggests that the more we take time to imagine God (through prayer), the more we increase our sense of God. She talks about people who report hearing the voice of God. In our conservative, United Church approach we might be more hesitant to admit to hearing God's voice than those in a more evangelical environment, but she found that as the people whom she observed built their prayer habits through visualization, they were more likely to have a sense that God was talking back or that God was giving tangible guidance.

We also pray in community through both spoken word and song. Through communal prayer we have a sense of connectedness and of being part of a collective of believers. In all cases we demonstrate a belief that we are not alone. We are in communion with a power that is greater than ourselves, a power that is ever present and loving.

Earlier, I asked, "aside from following Christ's directive that we should pray, why do we do it?" Well, as it turns out, prayer has numerous benefits and these benefits are beginning to be documented through studies that use a scientific approach. A number of studies point to an association of prayer with a sense of calmness, peace, encouragement or social support.

One article in the Journal of Behavioral Medicine cited a study that compared secular meditation to spiritual forms of meditation. The secular meditation participants centered on words or texts of self-affirmation while the spiritual meditation group focused on words that described the loving nature of God. Results of this study found that the spiritual meditation group was less anxious and more positive than the other groups. That is, people who meditated on a loving God benefited in their outlook on life. Interestingly, it was reported that this group also tolerated higher levels of pain.

A 2011 study on the effects of prayer on those who were doing the praying posits that prayer reduces anger and aggression after a provocation. These authors suggest that whenever people are confronting their own anger and tendencies to aggress, they might consider the age-old advice of praying for one's enemies, with the result that the one who is praying is the one who will be transformed.

Our personal conversations with God often are relatively straightforward - that is, we generally give praise or thanks to God, ask God for forgiveness and/or ask God for help. If you have a well-established practice of prayer, you might find it useful to reflect upon the balance and shape of your prayers. Do the bulk of your conversations with God land in the petition or request category?

Do you spend time reflecting upon how you could be more loving to those around you and ask forgiveness for those times when you don't show up as your best self? Lastly, do you spend enough of your prayer time counting your blessings, praising the Creator and giving thanks. Just to take a bit of a deeper dive into this idea of giving thanks, there is a good body of research that indicates that gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.

Kristin Francis, MD, a psychiatrist at Huntsman Mental Health Institute notes that "Expressing gratitude can positively change your brain," "It changes neurotransmitters in the brain that improve your mood immediately, giving you those positive feelings of pleasure, happiness, and well-being." Each day, when we practice gratitude, we foster a strengthening of these neural pathways in our brains in ways that lead to and ultimately create a permanent grateful, positive nature within ourselves.

Just as an aside, at this point, I think of Christ's teaching as a template for a fuller, more satisfying life. Although there are some who question whether miracles really happened; was there really a virgin birth, etc. For me, the gift of Christ's presence and teachings is that by following this example, we live better lives. Generally, when we show loving kindness to others, we get positive feedback. We know from studies on generosity, that sharing wealth is rewarding to the giver and not just the receiver and prayer to a higher power is just another one of those life habits that enhances the quality of our lives. . . . so regardless of where you sit on the xxxx that stretches from a literal interpretation or a xxxxx view of the Bible, I think that you can see that prayer is a habit that can enhance the quality of your life.

If you already have a well-established prayer life, you likely have experienced many of the benefits to which I have alluded and if you are one of these people, Know that you can be a rich resource to those who might have a less well-established habit. Just as there are tips to establishing a regular fitness regimen, there are likely some tips that you have to help others make a routine of daily prayer. Being open about your prayer habits might provide some valuable nourishment to others.

If you don't have a regular or routine habit of dedicated time for conversations with God, I invite you to begin by taking some time to reflect upon what keeps you from prayer and what you might do to break down those barriers. **Amen.**

