

“How is it with your Soul? Enjoying Prayer”

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Psalm 139; Romans 8

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For the past several weeks we’ve been exploring the questions that John Wesley asked of himself and others, as a way to delve into our United Methodist heritage. Through our visioning process many of you have asked how it is that we think of the world differently as United Methodist Christians, and so we’ve been looking at some of the theology and practical ways that Wesley helped people follow Jesus. Today’s installment of *How is it with your Soul* is focused on John Wesley’s question: “Are you enjoying prayer?”

Now, I want to take a moment and address those of you who grew up in a church, or those of you who didn’t but may carry a lot of cultural baggage around prayer anyway. I’ve found that people hold a lot of “shoulds” when it comes to prayer. For example, you may have been told from an early age that you *should* pray; or that you *should* pray a certain way; or even that you *should* pray a certain prayer in order to be loved by God. So I want to be very clear: while all of those “shoulds” that you may be weighed down with may very well be well intentioned, they have little to do with the Bible and Jesus’ own practice of praying.

I remember being at a workshop once and when the speaker got up to talk about prayer, he said, I want you to imagine what your relationship with your best friend would be like if every time you saw them, you immediately told them all the ways you had failed in your relationship with them. Or, imagine the reverse: think about what it would be like to try to be friends with someone who is always apologizing that they aren’t worthy to be your friend. It would be embarrassing at first; and then tiring; and then waring; and pretty soon, it would be difficult to be friends at all. The speaker that day was addressing some churches’ practice of starting every single worship service by saying to God, “I am not worthy. I am a sinner.” Now, there are places to pray that prayer, absolutely. But Wesley questioned the doctrine behind the practice, called total depravity. Wesley wondered if it was helpful to the human spirit to declare how awful we are every time we pray to God. Does it make us better followers of Jesus? Is it how Jesus taught us to pray? Wesley thought the answer was probably no. He pointed out that when we go back to creation in Genesis 1, we hear God calling everything and everyone good. And Wesley thought we could start there instead. That when we start from a place of being loved by God; of being called good, then that actually helps us to question all of the things we see in the world that aren’t right, and to live into God’s dream of love and goodness.

Which is one of the reasons why I love the question Wesley wants us to ask ourselves and each other about prayer: “Are you enjoying prayer?” because it disrupts the narrative in our heads that prayer has to be shaming or groveling or even that it has to be hard or boring. No, prayer is a gift— God wants to be in relationship with us. And the main way to grow in our relationship with God is to pray— which means spending time with God.

Trevor Noah, the South African comedian, wrote a book called, *Born a Crime*. It's called that because at the time he was born in South Africa, he was born to an African Mom and a Swiss Father and it was literally against the law for his parents to be together, which meant he was against the law because he was proof that they were. Because of this law, his parents did not live together and Trevor lost track of his Dad for awhile in his teenage years and he was busy with his own teenage life. As a young adult, Trevor reached out to his Dad to build their relationship again. He decided he needed to know everything. So the first weekend he stayed with him, he began to pummel his Dad with all the things he wanted to know and his Dad was caught off guard and told him to stop interrogating him. He said, the answers to all of your questions aren't going to give you a relationship with me. Just spend some time with me, and then you'll get to know me. So Trevor switched tactics and began to just hang out— doing the things that he loved to do and his Dad loved to do; watching sports together; talking and laughing and making meals together. When it was time for Trevor to go back home, his Dad said to him, "So, did you get to know me?" And Trevor replied, "All I know is that you are very secretive!" And his Dad said, "See, you're getting to know me already!"

Sometimes I think we approach God in prayer as though interviewing God is going to create relationship; or asking for everything we've ever wanted is going to deepen our relationship. If you've tried either one of these tactics, as I have, then you may have come to the same conclusion I have— it's a very one sided relationship. Instead, when we enter into prayer to share what's on our hearts and to listen to what God may want to share too, it becomes pretty clear that the relationship is in the time spent together— even if we don't get clear answers. The people I know who have deep prayer lives, are the same people who will admit that what they know most about God is how little they know about God. God is a mystery. And while prayer grows our relationship, there is a sense that of course we are not going to ever know God fully in this life. So we may as well just spend time together and enjoy it.

Our scriptures remind us this morning that prayer is all about relationship. Psalm 139 is often a favorite Psalm because it names how well God knows us— that God knows every hair on our heads. God is with us no matter how far away we try to hide. And, there is some acknowledgement here that we *may* try to hide at times, and that's okay. God will wait. God will stay. God will not leave us, even when we try to leave God. This Psalm is reassurance that no matter what we do, God will always be God— patient and loving and kind.

The Romans passage this morning is also a favorite of mine because it reminds us that we don't have to pray perfectly! This was one of John Wesley's favorite passages because it reminds us that we are children of God— we didn't do anything to deserve that distinction which means we can't do anything to get rid of it. We just are. We are loved and we are God's children. And there's nothing we can do about it. AND so, with that assurance of unconditional love, we try to respond to that love and one of the ways we do that, is through prayer. But just like we can't make ourselves children of God, we also often don't know what to pray— and that's okay. The

Holy Spirit, in sighs too deep for words, takes our prayers and makes them into love. We don't have to get it right. We don't have to pray certain words or refrain from praying certain words. We can speak what's on our hearts, and God will listen and love us.

Prayer is just talking and listening to God. And we don't have to know what to say or even to pray in a certain way for the Spirit to show up and be present with us in it. Richard Foster, a Quaker theologian, once wrote:

Prayer is a spiritual dialogue between God and our soul... Prayer is not so much trying to find an answer or asking for help to overcome this or that. Prayer is the creating of an open space; an empty place by which God can come in and be our friend."

Wes Granberg-Michaelsen, wrote basically the same thing in his book, *The Soulwork of Justice*. He writes about the importance of taking care of our souls when we are connected to justice work. To just be focused on a cause and forget about the health and care and relationships of the community we are a part of, is to do violence to each other. Taking time to rest and pray and be connected to that which is greater than us is vital to our work of helping the world heal. "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves," Wes writes, "but we must open space to notice that presence."

John Wesley, being the man that he was, knew that he needed a method in order to create that space for God in his life. So Wesley got up at 4 or 5am each day and prayed for a couple of hours. He fasted regularly as a part of his prayer life, and he devoted himself to reading scripture each day and journaling as prayer. But he never meant for all of us to copy what he did. He was way too practical for that. What he wanted, was for all of us to find an intentional way to make space for God so that we too could enjoy prayer.

I know, for myself, that my prayer life changes as my life changes. There have been times when I've taken an hour each morning to immerse myself in scripture and prayer and silence. And then there was a time when that was impossible— with three little ones, I didn't have an hour of silence! But I did have a lot of time nursing, and that became my prayer time. Or when I was commuting, my time in the car became my prayer time— it's a bit tricky because you still have to pay attention, of course, but it was time I could set aside to just be with God. Your practice will change over time, but the important part is to create that space— to find time to delight in God as God delights in you! So are you enjoying prayer? If the answer is no, I encourage you to notice how the "shoulds" of prayer may be working against you and to let them go; to recognize the barriers so you can remove them. I can tell you this— I have never regretted spending time in prayer. It is a true gift. Why wouldn't we enjoy time with the creator of the universe? Why would we waste such a precious gift?