

## (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler  
February 3, 2019  
Matthew 6

What is "prayer?"

In his book, *Godric*, Fredrick Buechner writes: "What's prayer? It's shooting shafts into the dark. What mark they strike, if any, who's to say? It's reaching for a hand you cannot touch. The silence is so fathomless that prayers like plummets vanish into the sea. You beg. You whimper. You load God down with empty praise. You tell him sins that he already knows full well. You seek to change his changeless will."

What is prayer?

Every Sunday, we say various "prayers" as a part of our liturgy. Some are responsive, some are in unison, a few, like the Pastoral Prayer, are offered on the spot, hopefully from the heart. Do we actually pray them, listening to their words, letting them soak into our thirsty souls, and nourish our hunger for God? Or do we mindlessly and without much thought, rush through them, mumbling the words?

What is prayer?

One of our standard prayers, is the Lord's Prayer. Of all the many prayers we have said in our lifetimes, this is the one that we have said most often. We pray it during worship. We pray at funerals. I have prayed it with people in hospital and hospice rooms. Prior to Christmas, when I was with the family of the middle school student, Sarah Cooley, as we waited for her to take her final breaths, her grandmother and aunt asked me to lead them in praying the Lord's Prayer. We did.

I hope is this summer to take the time to explore this prayer more in-depth, but for this morning, I want to talk about prayer in general.

Who taught you to pray? Your Parents or Grandparents? A previous minister? Do you remember the first time you prayed?

Was it a bed time prayer, taught to you by your parents? We use to pray this one with Sam: **"I see the moon, and the moon sees me, God bless the moon and God bless...."** And then we would name off people.

Was it a prayer before your family said before a meal? **"God is great and God is good, Let us thank God for our food?"**

Perhaps it was before a test at school: **"Help me not to fail this test!"**

I would imagine we all have some similar prayers we learned as children, ones we have taught to our own children or grandchildren, and still pray them today.

Let me ask you if your remember the first time you really prayed? I don't mean a liturgical prayer in church, or even reciting the Lord's Prayer as we do each week. Those are indeed prayers, and meaningful ones. No, I am wondering about other prayers we all pray. You know, the ones we pray every day at around the house, at work, at school, while shopping, behind the wheel of your car or in the long, lonely hours of the night.

I really like what author Anne Lamott says about these prayers: **"I'll say to God sometimes, 'You have got to be kidding! Or I say, 'It would be so much skin off your nose to cut this person a little slack.' I think you can say anything. You can say, 'I'm mad at you, and I'm not going to be a good sport about it. How about that?' And that's prayer. Silence can be prayer. Rage can be prayer. It's truth. It's all prayer. When we are talking to something that the rest of the world may not be seeing right that minute and we're talking about the deepest part of our heart, we're trying to tell the truth. That's prayer."**

I agree, that is what prayer is for me. It is real, it is honest, and it is intimate.

Prayer is also less about the words we say and more about being open to and listening for God. Sometimes we are so busy talking at God, sharing our thoughts and concerns that we forget to listen. We don't like the sounds of silence, so we think the only way to pray is to say something, say anything to God.

Prayer is about being open to and aware of the sacred presence found in the common and ordinary, which is really the true "sanctuary" of God.

Years ago, Staci introduced me to a poet, Mary Oliver, who became one of my favorites too. Mary Oliver died recently. Through her poetry, she taught me about being present to the sacred presence of God in nature and the world around me.

In her poem, Thirst, Mary Oliver, says of prayer:

**"It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch  
a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway  
into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak."**

Have you ever thought about prayer in the way Anne Lamott or Mary Oliver talk about it?

When you pray, how do you pray? Where do you pray? Why do you pray?

In his book, Prayers For A Privileged People, Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggeman writes: **"Prayer is an act of openness to the One who sits on the throne of mercy. When we pray, we participate in the ultimate practice of humanness as we yield to a Power greater than ourselves. Our best prayers engage in candor about our lives, practice vulnerability, runs risks, and rest in confident trust."**

Prayer has been around for a long, long time. Prayer exists in all religious traditions, and I would venture to say, it is also something that people who claim to have "no faith" engage in from time to time.

We know that Jesus prayed, often going off by himself to pray alone, out of ear shot from others.

In Luke's Gospel, it was when Jesus was off praying by himself, the disciples came to him, asking him to "Teach us pray as John taught his disciples to pray. Jesus said to them, when you pray..."

However, Matthew takes Jesus' teaching on prayer to a larger audience as a part of the "Sermon on the Mount" which we read together this morning.

Prayer is public, it is private, it is offered in community and for community. However, as we Jesus taught us, it can be used in self-serving, look-at-me-I-am-more-holy-and-better-than-you, ways. It can be a form of gossip about someone else. Jesus referenced this in his teachings on prayer. So Jesus teaches those listening how not to pray and who not to model your prayer life after. "When you pray, don't do or be like..., but when you pray...."

So maybe there is something in the words of Jesus about prayer that we continually need to remind ourselves of as we, like the disciples, continue to learn how to pray as Jesus taught his disciples and us, praying: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**