

WHEN YOU PRAY, PRAY LIKE THIS

Luke 11:1-13

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Last weekend, Doug and I saw the movie, "Where the Crawdads Sing." We'd both read and enjoyed the book a few years ago. I won't issue any spoiler alerts this morning - it's a good suspenseful story about a woman named Kya who grows up almost entirely on her own. From the time she is about nine or ten, she lives in a cabin in the marsh by herself. She is remarkably resourceful and brave, yet her story shows us that none of us can be completely independent. We all need help from time to time. Some of the most touching and poignant moments in the film are interactions with the kind couple who runs the little grocery store. And some of the tension in the story arises because of Kya's loneliness and the decisions she makes because of her loneliness.

Also last week, I finished reading a short book by a man about my age. He has spent his life writing and teaching about environmentalism, but this book is more wide-ranging. He takes a reflective, critical look at the state of our nation - the decline in church involvement, the polarization, the persistent racism and economic inequality, the sense of despair that many people feel, as well as the global environmental issues - and he asks himself, as a Christian and a person who loves this country, "What is it that has gone wrong in my lifetime?" One of his theories is that hyper-individualism has replaced a sense of community. Americans have always been proud of our rugged individualism, but he believes that the pendulum has swung too far, that we tend to think too often about

“what’s going to benefit me and my family?” and think too seldom about “what’s going to benefit our community as a whole, our nation as a whole?”

Certain technological advances, despite their many benefits, contribute to this focus on ourselves. We don’t have to “go to the movies” any more. Our homes have become entertainment centers. Restaurant food can be delivered to your door; you don’t even have to speak to an employee in order for that to happen. Our children are learning this even more quickly. One parent recently said to me, “Remember when it was a punishment to be sent to your room? Now we can’t get our kids to leave their rooms.”

Yet somewhere deep within us, we know that we need community.

The gospel of Luke gives us one version of the Lord’s Prayer. It appears in both Matthew and Luke, and in both places, this prayer is communal. There are many different translations of this prayer - here’s the one Beau read this morning.

‘Father, uphold the holiness of your name.

Bring in your kingdom, your reign.

Give **us** the bread we need for today.

Forgive **us** our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who has wronged **us**.

And don’t lead **us** into temptation.”

The word “us” appears four times in the short prayer. This is not a prayer just about **me** and **my** relationship with God. This is a prayer that reminds us that the religion of Jesus - Judaism - and the religion Jesus initiated - Christianity - are both communal, as are most other religions. This is a prayer that reminds us that our well-being is tied to the well-being of all other of God’s beloved children.

It is perfectly okay to pray for yourself, for your needs, for your loved ones. It is perfectly okay to talk to God about your worries and your fears. I believe God wants to hear from us. The more we connect with the spirit of divine love the more healthy and whole we will be. The point is to not stop there. Our prayer life certainly can include our personal petitions - I cannot imagine an authentic prayer life that wouldn't...but from there we move outward, remembering that our lives are bound together, remembering those who live in hunger, all who are in the shadow of war and violence, and remembering that they, too, are beloved children of God.

How do you feel when someone asks you to pray out loud? I know that many people do not like public speaking in general, and many people feel as if they just can't formulate a prayer. Being asked to pray in public is anxiety-producing, if not terrifying, for some.

Not everyone needs to be able to pray in public, but everyone who wants to can learn to pray. For me, prayer is calming and centering. In a world full of noise and distractions, prayer helps me listen both to God's voice and to my inner voice. In that way, prayer has helped me make decisions and clarify my thoughts.

I often pray while doing other things - it's a kind of multi-tasking that works for many people. In the 17th century, a man named Brother Lawrence lived in a monastery in France. His job at the monastery was dish-washing. But he approached washing dishes several hours a day as an opportunity for prayer. He wrote down his thoughts about prayer; his book, Practicing the Presence of God, is a spiritual classic. For Brother Lawrence, there wasn't a time for prayer and a time for the rest of life. He incorporated prayer into the everyday activities of his life. He approached his life **prayerfully**, being aware of

God's presence in every moment. In other words, prayer wasn't so much something he did, as it was the way he did **everything**.

I find walking to be an opportunity for prayer. Sometimes I listen to music or a podcast, sometimes I walk and talk with someone else, but often I just walk by myself, nothing in my ears, no phone in my pocket or hand. I walk prayerfully. I focus on what I'm seeing, what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling. I express gratitude for the world around me, for the ability to walk and see. I work through problems and dilemmas, sometimes walking further until I feel that I have come to a place of wisdom in my mind.

If you struggle with prayer, if you have a lot of "shoulds" in your mind about prayer..."I should pray more often...I should be more eloquent...I should be less selfish in my prayers..." then I suggest you try shifting your mindset entirely. Don't think about prayer as something you do in a specific time or place. Think instead about being aware of God's presence in the activities of your daily life.

Some people find that words are an obstacle. For them, quiet meditation is life-giving. It can be practiced - and I believe our meditation group here may be starting back up in the fall.

Anytime the church building is open, you are welcome to stop in here. You may sit in the sanctuary or in our lovely prayer room. And a Stephen Minister is available every Sunday after worship in our prayer room if you would like someone to talk or pray with you.

For the times when we like to pray with words, Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer as an example. Then he goes on to say, in our passage for today, that prayer involves persistence. It is to be continual - asking, seeking, knocking - but in the context of a healthy

parent-child relationship where the child knows that the parent wants to provide good things.

Here's a portion of the end of our passage again -

“That’s why I tell you, keep asking and you’ll receive; keep looking and you’ll find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you...If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will God give to those who ask?”

Jesus is acknowledging that human life is hard, and that we need more than our own resources alone to make it through. We need one another, and we need help from God, the source of strength and encouragement for our mothers and fathers in all generations past. Prayer helps us tap into that divine lifeline of hope.

One of my favorite writers and preachers has said this: “There is more to prayer than the answer to prayer. There is also the pray-er, who is shaped by the praying.”

The things we do most often shape us. If we spend our time complaining, we become people who only notice what is bad about the world. If we spend our time gossiping, we’ll only be looking for the worst in the people around us. If we spend our time praying, we’ll be shaped into people who are more grateful, and more open to what God is doing in the world.

I talked on the phone to one of my closest friends this week - he also happens to be one of my brothers. Like me, he is generally an optimistic person, but he works in the field of homelessness prevention and that is daunting work these days. He said to me, “I don’t know that there’s been any moment in my lifetime when so much of the news seemed so bad.” He’s not alone - I don’t know anyone who doesn’t feel discouraged right now. When

I feel that way, I turn to words like these; this is from an ancient piece of Jewish wisdom literature: “The Talmud states, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

In times like these, I realize I cannot rely on my own resources. And we don't have to! The Lord's Prayer reminds us that God, the Essence of Love, is the only defining power of our lives and of this world. God's name is the only name that is to be holy and honored.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are admitting we cannot do by ourselves and of our own agency what needs to be done in this world. We need the gift and the power of God's Holy Spirit to be at work in and through us. God's Spirit is the midwife who will help God birth reconciliation and justice into our world. We are God's partners in this work, together.

Prayer in community, and the prayerful work we do together help us resist living in anger, fear, cynicism and despair. Prayer changes us. It energizes us to face the challenges of our lives with wisdom and hope, and to be the hands and feet, the listening ears, the compassionate hearts that God's beloved world needs.

Let us pray.

Holy God, we thank you today for the example of Jesus who shows us how to be a human being in this world. Like him, we need you. Like him, we need to be in community, to be around others who are trying to walk in faithfulness. Like him, we need prayer, a life-line that connects us to you, the source of love. Show us the way. Amen.