

WITH WHOM SHALL WE PRAY?

TEXT: Luke 11:1-13

With whom shall we pray? Perhaps that sounds like a strange question. But when I was thinking – and praying – alone about today’s message, that question came into my mind. And it brought with it all the similar question: Why do we pray, how do we pray, what do we pray for, what do we expect when we pray? I don’t remember many specific instances of praying. But there is one that stands out for me. It was the morning of September 11, 2001. I was in a small motel in the town of Cleveland, Tennessee, not far from Nashville. I had arrived the evening before, preparing to present a Retirement Planning Seminar for the employees of Weyerhaeuser’s box plant in that community. As I came down for breakfast, the television set was tuned to CNN. Before I sat down with my English muffin the screen showed the first airplane plowing into one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. I stared at the screen in disbelief, thinking that it couldn’t be real as no flight path comes anywhere near that location. But then the second plane arrived and the horror of that day was beyond belief.

I quickly called the Mill Manager to see what we should do about our plans for the day. I just couldn’t imagine that we could go forward with a full day of planning for the future of these employees in light of the circumstances. But, here is what he told me - the entire crew of the plant had gathered as the news was coming in. The first thing they did, standing on the machine room floor, was to pray together. With whom shall we pray? We pray with those who are around us, whenever we feel a need for joining with others, wherever we are gathered.

Why did this come as such a surprise to me? I guess partly because in our part of the country this probably never would have happened. There were a wide variety of reactions to the events of that morning. My friend Nina’s oldest son worked in the financial district of New York, where he watched the twin towers fall. His reaction was anger, almost more than he could contain. Yet, he was raised in the church and his mother was an ordained pastor. Others responded in despair, in hatred, in a sense of huge

loss, and probably any other reaction you can imagine. But those workers in Tennessee came together and prayed.

Jesus prayed, and his disciples watched how he prayed. They saw when he prayed, and they knew that his time of prayer was crucial to his ministry and his life. So they asked him: “Lord, teach *us* to pray”. They did not ask Jesus to teach them “a prayer”. They wanted to know how to pray. They wanted to learn to emulate their teacher and friend so that they too could come together and share in this meaningful activity.

But the response from Jesus was probably not what they expected to hear. As was his custom, Jesus taught by example, and he gave them the perfect “pattern” for prayer.

The first thing Jesus taught was the value of praying in community. Each Sunday members of our church community and many others lift up the names of the sick, grieving or troubled, and those who have something to celebrate, or concerns for our community and world. Together the congregation reacts with sympathy or joy, and we see the beauty in our communal prayer. So when we pray in unison, we speak in unison, “*Our* Father, who art in heaven”.

Then we together affirm in unison that God’s name be hallowed above all others. Our prayers to God acknowledge God’s supreme authority over the universe and over our lives. There’s not a person here who hasn’t had a prayer go unanswered, or who has not struggled with what God is up to in the world. Yet prayer is still upheld by Jesus as the way to connect with the almighty. We pray for God’s will to be done here, in our world, in our lives, as we believe God’s will is done in God’s Kingdom in Heaven.

Then Jesus tells us to ask God for daily bread. Jesus was speaking in an agrarian society that readily understood this. It’s easy to get bread when there is plenty of grain right after a good harvest. Even the poor can afford it, and those who have enough don’t mind giving some away to the hungriest among them. But when the harvest is small

because of too much or too little rain, from insect infestation or disease, or when the food starts to run out before the next harvest, then one's daily bread becomes expensive. The poor may have to eat less; the poorest may go without. The high cost is not just monetary. Our tendency to cling to what we have, when others go without is costly in faith terms as well.

When we ask God to give *us* each day *our* daily bread, the word "our" is more than just a filler. It must refer to more than just we few, however that's defined: our group, our family, our kind. All of God's children are included in the prayer for daily bread. When we pray this prayer, we are asking that everyone be fed. We identify with those for whom abundance is just a dream. In partnership with God, we determine to see that no one goes without food.

From here on out, the pattern of prayer becomes a little more difficult. We, the community, ask to be forgiven our trespasses (those other folks may have debts, but we Methodists are admonished not to transgress any divine law or duty). The difficulty for us here is that there is a contingency for our receiving divine forgiveness – we must forgive others. Again, it is a collective "we" so none of us are exempt. I would suggest that each of us give this serious consideration when we get to this part – "Forgive us *as we forgive others* is an active phrase, and therefore puts us on the giving end – not just God.

In our service today we are saying two versions of this prayer. And the next phrase has more than one interpretation. We usually say "And lead us not into temptation". But some versions ask "save us from the time of trial". I like these words as I don't think God leads us to be tempted, but if God can keep us from the trials of life, what more could we ask? I especially like Eugene Peterson's take in *The Message* "save us from ourselves and the Devil". That is probably a more realistic request.

Jesus closes his prayer with a strong affirmation of who God is, and our acclamation of God's power and glory – forever. Here the prayer comes full circle by

closing with a reminder that all things originate in God. And it is then that together we express gratitude and appreciation for the beauty that surrounds us and for the everlasting love and grace that comes to us from Our Father.

So, what is the relationship of personal, individual prayer to corporate – or communal prayer? Is there a difference between our formal prayers recited during worship and the more personal prayers we offer in our hearts or homes? Of course, and each is an important part of our communion with God.

As we recite the more formulaic prayers together in our corporate worship, we form our habits for prayer; we develop the practice of God's presence. Our regular recitation of The Lord's Prayer imbues in us the foundation for our more personal time with God. Saying our prayers forms a consistent habit, mobilizing our mental and spiritual forces to establish a degree of regularity.

Personal prayer is far more complex, yet sometimes easier. Personal time of prayer ranges from ordered times and places set aside to be alone with our Creator, to the quick but sincere "Thank you, Lord", or "I really need you now, God", or "My God, how great you are!".

Prayer comes first and foremost from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. There are those who think of prayer as a business transaction or as something they have to do just like checking something off a do-do list. But that isn't really prayer at all. Prayer is an intimate relationship, like a conversation between close friends.

We learn to pray by listening to Jesus' words in answer to the disciples' question "Lord, teach us to pray". We learn to listen to God by taking that pattern and making it a part of our daily lives. And that is the ultimate learning about prayer - listening to God. If we do all the talking, we will never learn what God is saying to us. Prayer is a two-way conversation.

Back in Cleveland, Tennessee on that fatal day in 2001, an unlikely group of workers came together and opened their hearts and ears to hear what God might say to them. Through their tears and their fears, they prayed. They were strengthened and comforted, and they determined that they would carry on with the day that was planned for them. Yes, there were tears, and there were fears, but there was also an overriding sense that in their unity of resolve God was with them. They had been taught to pray by the master. Amen