

When You Pray

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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7th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 11:1-13



When you pray...

Have you ever been asked to pray aloud in a group setting and felt the anxiety tightening within your chest? Or have you witnessed that panic in another's eyes when they were asked to pray? Prayer is not meant to cause anxiety.

When you think of prayer, what immediately comes to mind? Many first think of prayer as words spoken aloud or silently, but prayer isn't limited to that form. Prayer can happen when we intentionally pause and focus on exact words, and prayer can occur as we go about our day. We can pray when we are in a certain place like the sanctuary using certain words like the Lord's Prayer, and we can pray as we take a walk or drive down the road paying attention to the world around us. So, what do you think makes a prayer a prayer?

Prayer is a foundational part of our individual and communal faith. Most weeks you hear me say just prior to the Prayers of the People, that I am grateful to be part of a faith community that prays for one another. I trust that to be true, and I believe prayer binds us together. Prayer binds us when we are physically together and when we aren't.

Prayer is an integral part of our worship from beginning to end. Let's think about our service for a moment. The prelude offers space for silent reflection as we individually center our hearts and minds to worship. The Call to Worship communally centers us in our purpose for gathering together to worship God and includes a prayer. We joyfully sing our prayers through hymns and other sung responses. We come to the baptismal font to offer our communal and individual Prayers of Confession. We pray along with our children at the conclusion of our Time with the Young Church. We offer a Prayer for Illumination prior to the Word of God being proclaimed through the Scripture and sermon. We offer intercessory prayers during the Prayers of the People or during the Great Prayer at the Lord's Table which both conclude with a form of the Lord's Prayer which we hear in Luke's gospel today. We offer a Prayer of Dedication in response to the offering of our gifts. And we are sent out from this place with a blessing at the Benediction.

Prayer is woven throughout worship which is an excellent model for how to live. Like worship, our lives can be filled with various forms of prayer. I am reminded of Paul's words from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Pray without ceasing. Paul says this is the will of God, but if we are honest, this can feel daunting when we think of prayer only as specific words. Prayer can most certainly be specific words like we hear in today's passage, but prayer can also entail a wide variety of expressions. We can pray aloud or silently with words. We can use breath prayers like we talked about with the children a couple weeks ago. We can pray through music, whether it be in hymns, in instrumental music that moves us emotionally, or in anything that moves us to dance. And simply being in nature can spontaneously lift within us prayers of awe or thanksgiving.

One way to add prayer to our daily lives is to turn our "almost prayers" into prayer. Almost prayers are those remarks that begin with phrases such as, "I am worried about..." or "I am glad to see..." With just one adjustment, we can transform our almost prayers into prayer. Through adding awareness of God by intentionally directing our words to God, our statement becomes prayer. "I am worried about her" when shifted to "Lord, be with her" is transformed into prayer. "I am glad to see him" becomes a prayer when changed to "Thank you God for bring us together." The words are similar, but the orientation of them has shifted. Even "Blessed her heart!" can be transformed into prayer when actually directed to God. Similar words when addressed to God become prayer, and this is just one example of a simple shift in our awareness transforming our prayer life.

It is good to practice praying in new ways as long as we remember that the goal of prayer isn't to follow a tutorial in hopes of creating a magical equation that produces results. Prayer isn't about results. Prayer is about being in relationship with God. Prayer is about accepting the invitation to deeper relationship with our loving Father. Jesus offers us this simple prayer to show us that prayer doesn't have to include elaborate prose. Jesus is inviting us into an intimate relationship with Abba, a relationship between a child and their divine parent.

Prayer is conversation, between beloved child and Heavenly Father, enabled by the Holy Spirit and offered in the name of Christ. Prayer is rooted in trust and honesty with love at its foundation, and like any good conversation, prayer involves both speaking and listening.

I admit my dialogue with God is often too one sided with me talking more than listening, and I must remind myself that strong relationships entail give and take. So, if I want to deepen my relationship with God, my prayer life must involve listening in addition to speaking. I must make space for silence and listen for the Spirit guiding me.

Praying through words, whether formal or conversational, is important, but prayer is also a posture of the heart. Prayer is a way of living in constant awareness of God and conscious dependence on God. John Calvin spoke about prayer as a way to express our humility and reliance on God.

Prayer should remind us that we are not in control. Yet, when we pray, too often the focus is on us - on what we need to do or say in order to pray well. We focus so much on where to pray, and when to pray, and how to pray that we can lose sight of our main focus which should be on why and to whom we pray. We pray to be drawn into a deeper relationship with our Father to whom every prayer is offered.

When looking for guidance about faith, it is always helpful to open our Book of Confessions. The 98th question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is “What is prayer?” with the answer being, “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies.¹”

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God. Prayer involves our participation, but prayer is ultimately about God. So, to come back to our earlier question, “What makes a prayer a prayer?” Prayer is any expression of our desires offered to God. What makes a prayer a prayer is the person to whom it is directed. What makes a prayer a prayer is our Triune God.

We have reflected on forms of prayer, but I want us to also think about the content of our prayer. Nothing is off limits to God in prayer. We can bring every emotion about ourselves and our world to God in prayer. If you doubt that to be true, just open The Psalms, because there are more psalms of lament than psalms of praise. According to Walter Brueggemann, psalms of lament “express the pain, grief, dismay, and anger that life is not good.” People have been bringing their pain, anger, and despair to God for as long as people have been in relationship with God.

¹ <https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/boc2016.pdf>, p. 214

This is comforting to me as those emotions are certainly present when I pray for the people of Gaza who are starving and are risking their lives to find food. My prayers are a mix of anger and pain and grief when I hear that at least 50 Palestinians have died of starvation just this month, that there isn't enough food for hospital patients, and that doctors and nurses are struggling to care for their patients due to their own lack of nutrition. When we don't have words, let us open our Bibles and let the Psalms give us words and potentially tears.

This takes us back to last week's sermon with tears as liquid prayers. Our tears become liquid prayers when they are offered to God, because prayer is any expression of our desires offered to God. Thankfully, God can handle all expressions of our desires. Even though God knows our desires before we even recognize them, we need to express our desires to God because prayer draws us into deeper relationship with God. Expressing our desires to God, whether about ourselves or our world, deepens our relationship with our heavenly Father.

Today's passage begins and ends with God just like prayer and life itself. When we are born, we come from God into this world, and when we die, we are welcomed back into God's loving presence. When our passage begins with Jesus praying in a certain place and ends with a reminder that our heavenly Father gives abundantly to his children through the Holy Spirit.

When we pray, we begin by addressing God and end with offering our prayers in the name of Christ. All expressions of our desires offered to God, between addressing God and lifting our Amen, are about relationship building. Prayer is an expression of our asking, our searching, and our knocking, and Jesus said, "everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus is inviting us to pray boldly.

Friends, remember that all expressions of your desires offered to God are prayer, and that when you pray, you are deepening your relationship with your Heavenly Father.

May it be so. Amen.