

Sermon 01-18/19-2020

“What if I can’t pray?” – Rev. Markus Wegenast

Philippians 4:6f

⁶Do not worry about anything, **but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.** ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 6:7-13

⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“**Pray then in this way:**

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ **Give us this day our daily bread.** ^[c]

¹² And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial, ^[d]

but rescue us from the evil one. ^[e]

1)

What do you think is America’s most popular Bible Verse? ...

It is Philippians 4:6 (see above). Does that surprise you?

Considering that anxiety and worries about the future are one of the most prevalent contemporary struggles of people in Western culture, it does not surprise me. Everybody wants inner peace. Everybody wants to get rid of worries and anxieties.

There are so many: the other day I went to an event with Pastor Liz where we learned that while the majority of people in the Fox Cities like it here, there are 30% that feel they struggle living here, 9% even say they suffer. We heard a testimony about the experience of racism earlier today - there are many people who feel that our Fox cities are far from having overcome racial discrimination. There are plenty of reasons to be anxious.

“Do not worry about anything” – o, how I want that to be the motto of my life. I am not the least bit surprised that it is America’s most popular Bible verse.

But do we catch the whole verse, the second half included?

“Do not worry about anything, **but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**”

Isn’t it like God saying: “My child, I know that there is so much to worry about? I don’t want you to worry – but I need you to tell me about it!”

It's not that God is clueless if we don't tell him about our struggles. But for some reason God wants to hear from us – he's a God of relationship.

You can find the same in human relationships. Have you ever heard it said: "I don't have to tell my wife that I love her? After 30 years of marriage she should know." Well, it doesn't work like that in human relationships and it doesn't work like that in our relationship with God.

God wants to hear about our **love** for him, and God wants us to make our **requests** known to him – even though he already knows them!

Friends, do you see the irony? We feel anxious, we struggle with hope, we deal with polarization, we are worried about a fierce presidential election that's coming up, there are tensions in the UMC, racism and so much more rob our peace... – we want peace, but we don't do the one thing our God tells us in order to get it: pray!

2)

I don't want to come across judgmental, but I have to say I completely agree with what we've sung earlier in the famous hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus:"

*O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

This hymn was written in 1855. Isn't it interesting that people struggled to pray even then? There's no need to be judgmental or outraged about it, I rather want to ask a constructive question, ready? **What can you do, when you can't pray?!**

For some of us this may not be an issue, if that's the case for you: please rejoice about it and pray for those who struggle.

For those of us who do struggle to pray, I want you to hear this:

Do not worry about it! Do not worry about it to the extent that it keeps you from working on a solution.

I know a woman who struggles to pray. She is a strong believer but praying doesn't come naturally to her. But she loves to write. So she started to write down her prayers and prays that way.

When she first told me about this, it was me who did the worrying! I "worried" this woman's relationship with God was in danger. But I'm realizing that she does a very biblical thing: "I will not worry about my struggle to pray, hope is not lost – I'll find a different way to pray!" And so she prays by writing.

If you struggle to pray. What might work for you? How can you communicate and listen to God?

- Silence? Singing? Dancing? Playing an instrument?

Please don't misunderstand me – I'm not trying to come up with substitutes for prayer let alone excuses not to pray. On the contrary: I want to invite you to think about ways that help you to communicate with your God?

Some of you may wonder if there are any guidelines for calling something a prayer. You may actually wonder regardless of whether you can pray or not. And the answer is: You bet there are guidelines, they are right in front of us.

Please take a look again at Philippians 4:6

“Do not worry about anything,...

- 1) “...but in **everything**...” You can pray about anything and everything. Nothing is too trivial or too hot button-y for your God!
- 2) “...by prayer and supplication **with thanksgiving**...” – Is giving thanks to God a big part of your personal prayer life? If you struggle praying – how could giving thanks be incorporated in the ways you communicate with God?
- 3) “...let your requests **be made known** to God.” – That's just it. Prayer, no matter how you pray, has to be a form of communication. I think that's the difference between thinking about praying – thinking about the things you want to communicate – and actually doing it.

“I *thought* about how much my wife means to me, it filled my heart.”
But how did you communicate it? You can do it through spoken words, if you struggle with that you may write, or you may give a gift, or you may sing a song... but somehow it has to be made known!

And then? Then...

“...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Is that too simple?

3)

Look at what **Jesus** had to say about prayer. When he taught us how to pray, he pretty much gave the same instructions that we find in America's most popular Bible verse. Check it out, what does Jesus say?

“Don't babble, don't heap up empty phrases,” he says

- **“prey then in this way...”**

His very first instruction is that prayer is something that has to be “done!” – it's not something to be thoughts about, it's got to be done somehow! And this is how:

- Our Father in heaven, **hallowed be your name.**

That is praying with thanksgiving! Jesus' instruction on prayer too has thanksgiving in it.

The next line (V10) continues to keep the focus on God but then there's a shift:

- **Give us this day our daily bread.**

Bread was (and still is?) one of the most basic needs. It's the Jesus way of saying: "You can pray about anything and everything," even something as basic as your daily bread.

4)

Pray about anything, pray with thanksgiving, but pray! *Pretty* straight forward. What are your biggest sabotage points when it comes to praying like that?

I came across a web page that listed the 7 most frequent reasons why people don't pray. Want to hear them? Maybe you find yourself in some of them (*have someone else read*):

- 1) You don't know how
- 2) You're too busy
- 3) You're easily distracted
- 4) You're too embarrassed to pray
- 5) You don't see answers
- 6) You're self-sufficient
- 7) You're experiencing doubt

These are all legit challenges for one's personal prayer life. But you know what: Don't worry about it – don't worry about anything, instead **in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**⁷ And the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

If you feel you can't pray, be creative and full of hope that even then you can pray.

I don't know how easy praying came for Martin Luther King, but what I do know is that he prayed a lot and that it enabled him to do things he couldn't have done otherwise.

May you find courage to pray like Jesus taught us, may you be encouraged to know that God adores your prayers – especially, especially if you feel that you can't pray.

Amen.