

Everyday Sunday
Part 2: Prayers From the Heart
Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander
Countryside Community Church
August 12, 2018

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-14a and Luke 22:39-46

I. Way Points

Monty Python Clip from the Meaning of Life – “O God You are so Big...”

We are stepping a little further into our discussion about taking the connection and joy we seek with God on Sunday morning into each day of our week. As we intentionally seek God’s activity in the world, we can find multiple ways to participate with what God is up to all around us. The first week of this series we talked about “Guidance Prayers” that we can do first thing every morning. Talking with God and rehearsing our schedules for the day allows us to invite God into our lives, include God in the decisions we make, and ask God how we engage with others throughout the day in a way that recognizes that they too are God’s children who are loved beyond their wildest imaginations. By taking time to intentionally include God in your plans for the day, you are acknowledging God’s presence with you. And, by taking equal amounts of time listening to God in your prayers, you are allowing God to lead you into the fullest life possible for you.

Last week, we heard from our Youth about how they intentionally entered into service with, and for, others in order to experience God most fully through their relationships with each other and with those they had yet to meet. Listening to their stories, I was moved by how many mentioned how listening to another person’s story, and allowing themselves to enter that story to help in some way, connected them to God in a way they could not have experienced otherwise. We all know how natural it feels to be there for a friend or a family member when they need an extra bit of help with something. But these youth trips each summer are designed to move students beyond that natural and comfortable relationship, and intentionally put themselves in the service of someone they don’t even know. This type of intentionality takes personal courage and a trust that, no matter where you go, or who you meet, God is there with you, and goes before to show you the way. I want to say a personal thank you to all those sponsors and youth leaders who help make these intentional experiences possible for our youth every summer, and to those youth who made the choice to intentionally participate in trusting God’s presence.

This week we will expand our discussion of prayer practices to include those prayers that are not scripted or memorized from our traditions, but rather are spontaneous prayers that fit no

particular form or standard. These prayers are spoken from the heart, and are just whole-hearted conversations with you and God, wherever you are, and whenever the Spirit is moving you.

Today's scripture has the text for a prayer that many of us learned when we were children. I remember teaching the "Lord's Prayer" to my children as the prayer we spoke every night before bed. We would start with the Lord's Prayer and then go straight into "God bless..." mentioning those people who were closest to us and praying for their health and well-being. This is its own type of "memorized" or "standard" prayer that many of us are familiar with, and is quite helpful to us when we want to talk to God and we don't know where to begin or what to say. I mean, this is GOD we are talking to, right? Isn't there a type of protocol or something to speaking with the Almighty and Everlasting Being? Oftentimes we are so intimidated by the prospect of talking to God because there is always the outside chance that God is actually listening! So, in that case, what you say seems to be of utmost importance.

Because it seems important, Jesus helps out the disciples, and us, with words that allow us to reach out and talk to God even when we don't know what to say. In a sense, Jesus gave us "way points" to help us navigate our way through our ongoing conversations with God. In the Lord's Prayer, the first way point speaks to who God is and how we are related to God: Our Father. We already have a relationship with God as we were created by God, therefore, we actually have "standing" to address God. There is no need to fear this conversation, even when it's about something you may not be proud of. Parents love their children, even when they don't always behave in the manner that inspires pride. The second way point is to name that which we are seeking: Your Kingdom, Your Will. This is us saying "I don't know which path to follow Lord, I'm counting on you to guide me." The next step into the conversation is to ask help in remembering that God's presence is always with us, providing things that sustain us: "Give us our daily bread," and then remembering that God has forgiven us so that we have no need to hold grudges against others, as they too are loved and forgiven creations of God. Another way point is recognizing that God's presence with us allows us not to fear dark times, for it is not God that puts us to trial, but rather God is our Advocate before the "Evil One" who is constantly trying our love and compassion for all of creation.

With our way points to help lead our way into conversation with God, we have the confidence to step into the flow of the current that is our relationship with God. But once we step into the current, we begin to feel the flow, or the rhythm of the conversation more strongly, and are empowered to step out even further into the flow. Trusting in God, we can begin to relax a little, and might even find ourselves able to float a bit. Here, we can begin to speak to God from our very heart. Whole-hearted prayers come from the center of who we are, allowing us to speak with passion and earnestness, as well as drawing us closer in, to be even more intentional about our listening. Because we are speaking from our hearts, we are

listening with them as well, seeking God's voice from a place of yearning and desire. I think we have all experienced this kind of prayer at one point or another in our lives. Yearning for God is part of what brings us here on Sunday mornings so recognizing that yearning throughout the week opens us to be whole-hearted in our conversations every day.

II. In God's Flow

Just like in the prayers my children and I participated in when they were young, we often begin our conversations with God by stepping through the way points Jesus provided for us until we start to gain our footing. As we gain confidence, we can continue from the Lord's Prayer into a more informal conversation with God, talking about things that are in our hearts: Our passions, dreams, fears, frustrations, joys and wonders. And, in doing so, we are more likely to remember to give God time to respond, as we spend time listening.

In a very practical application of this type of heartfelt prayer let's take an event that has happened close to home this last week that is most likely on several of our hearts this morning. For me, my heart is very heavy from the news of the I.C.E. raid in O'Neill, Nebraska, last Wednesday.

For those of you who have not heard of the raids, workers at the tomato greenhouse, potato processing facility, and a cattle feedlot were detained Wednesday morning by agents from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.). These folks, suspected of being in the country illegally, were loaded onto buses and held in a tent in a parking lot in Grand Island, Nebraska. There was no consideration given to the children of these folks who were either at their homes or in school. The Superintendent of O'Neill Public Schools opened the elementary school to provide guidance counselors for the children. Only 12 or so kids showed up, but she suspects that there might be 50 to 100 kids in her district that may have been separated from a relative or immediate family member because of the raids. At least three children were separated from both their parents, she said. One was in third grade, another in fifth. One was a baby.

This event hits close to home so we are more likely to hear stories from community members, as well as from government spokespeople, news agencies, or civil rights agencies. We will probably hear more about how these families have been a part of the community in O'Neill, whether they were documented workers or not. We will likely hear more detailed stories of children left unattended and abandoned because they have been separated from their families, without having a plan for their care while their parents are being investigated. The community itself had to step up and take these children in and be responsible for them. The Catholic Church in O'Neill put out a statement on Facebook calling this experience "harrowing and heartbreaking," and called for the community to come together to protest this behavior.

No one wants to hear of workers being trafficked for profit, and many of these families have been reunited since Wednesday pending investigations, which is all good, but in no way does this excuse the total disregard of the children who were left behind.

What are we supposed to do in this situation? How do we act out of our trust in God's love for creation and God's promise to be with us and guide us in these times? What would our prayers sound like in addressing the issue of immigration in America and our treatment of each other while we are figuring it all out?

These kinds of prayers have no formula, they must come from your heart, unrehearsed and carried through a cloud of pain, fear, and empathy. These prayers tend to sound more like the prayer Jesus utters from the cross on Good Friday, rather than the one taught to the disciples early in his ministry: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" We need to ask "Where are You in all of this God?" "What am I supposed to do with all of this anger, fear and resentment?" "How can I be of help?" "How can we be those You have called to protect the orphans and the widows?" The flow of the current is so strong now, that it threatens to overrun us and drown out our ability to speak at all. Here is where we cry out against the injustice and the inhumanity and take that first step against the raging current and step into God's flow, the one that promises to be there in our darkest hours and not let the darkness overcome us.

This is where, in our heartfelt prayers, we come together with others speaking from the heart and act in the love God shares with us. We care for one another and support one another, we feed the hungry, we house the homeless, we nurture those whose lives have been ripped apart.

The "O'Neill Cares Coalition" is planning an immigration reform round table on August 28 at 7:00 p.m. at the O'Neill Community Center. A total of six families are currently living at the church. They are in need of donations of food, clothing and household items for the families. These are both things that we as a community can do to help.

Micah 6:6-8 tells us what it looks like when you enter God's flow:

With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

We enter God's flow when God invites us to wholeheartedly step into the Love of God that leads us to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. God is already speaking here. As we listen with the yearning of our hearts, our paths are made clear. Today we meet with our friends and neighbors at the Tri-Faith Picnic held at Temple Israel. How would we all react if I.C.E. were to raid this picnic, separate our Muslim or Jewish immigrant families from one another, and leave abandoned children behind in their wake? ***The ministry of the Gospel we do in our participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative is the strongest resistance work we can do on the issue of racism and immigration.*** We ARE acting justly. We ARE showing mercy to our neighbors. And we ARE walking humbly and following our God as we eat lunch and speak with people who are as equally threatened by immigration restrictions as those folks in O'Neill.

Join in the resistance of hate by showing God's love through conversation with our neighbors this afternoon, and pray this week from your heart, as you continue to yearn for God's guiding voice in your life. My Spiritual Practice Invitation for you this week is to set a few reminders on your phone, or in your planning calendar, for each day this week to take five minute breaks to breathe deeply in and out, and be conscience of God's presence with you in your day. Then just start a conversation with God in prayer. You can start with the Lord's Prayer and then step into prayers from your heart, or just speak your heart's desires, and then sit and listen for a while. Notice the yearning inside you. Let this be your guide for the rest of the day.

May it be so. Amen.