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Sermon

September 5, 2021

Prayer –

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 – "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Pray with me please! God of love and hope, may the words of my mouth and the stirrings in each of our hearts be pleasing to you! Amen

Last week we re-examined the Lord's Prayer – it's meaning to us and it's call to action. There is so much to prayer, it just can't be discussed in one week so here's sermon number two about prayer. Last week I said that prayer is a mystery. Prayer is many things to each of us at different times. I think sometimes prayer is healing, often comforting; it enables us to send our 'prayers' and our love to others, it opens our hearts to new thoughts and feelings, it totally destresses me! And mostly, it strengthens my connection, my relationship with God to name a few. How do you have a relationship without communication – talking, writing, listening, singing?

Marcus Borg, modern theologian says that prayer is a central Christian practice. It can be both an individual and a community practice. He says that "prayer is primarily about paying attention to God." I understand that to mean

that we don't always have to be talking when we pray, sometimes we just listen and pay attention.

Borg says that there are three major types of Christian prayer: Verbal, meditation and contemplation. Christian meditation is a deepening of our relationship with God – like Lectio Divina, meditating on a biblical text for a word or phrase and reflecting on just that word or phrase. Contemplative Christian prayer is simply seeking to be in God's presence. Thomas Merton, well known leader in the Contemplative Prayer movement in the United States tells a story of a nun coming to him and apologizing. "Brother Thomas" she said, "I am so sorry – I am so bad at contemplative prayer. I tried for 30 minutes and during that short amount of time I must have turned away from God 100 times." Brother Thomas replied, "why sister, God must be so pleased with you – you turned to God over 100 times." Just resting in God's presence and not having your mind wander is very challenging. Turning back to God is the practice.

Borg says there are several kinds of verbal prayer. In verbal prayer we can address God with words, whether out loud or silently. Traditionally, there are five categories of verbal prayer: praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition. Intercession and petition probably coming in at # 1 of the most prayers said.

In praise, we give Glory to God, recognize that God alone is God. In prayers of thanksgiving, we give thanks to God; in confession we share things that we should or shouldn't have done, wrong-doings and ask God to forgive us --- hopefully not repeating the same thing again. Intercession prayer is when we intercede, when we pray on behalf of someone else. Prayers of petition is when we ask God to help us, change us – do something for us or others. Prayers of intercession and petition often merge to one.

When we *pray*, our prayer is an event in our relationship with God. It may not be a decisive event, but each time we spend time in the presence of God – we draw nearer to our creator, sustainer, and savior.

Prayer is putting our deepest feelings, thoughts, worries, joys, celebration into words; and even when we don't have the words, God hears those as well. Our prayers need not be perfect literary pieces of work – they need to be honest and heart-felt.

Prayer doesn't have to be on our knees, or in church – prayer can be as you walk down the sidewalk, watch a plane take off, when you pull over to let an ambulance go by or when someone cuts you off and is driving like a crazy person. Maybe your prayer this afternoon is having the radio off as you drive home from church; instead, you notice all that God created around you. The clouds in the

sky, flowers and trees, the lake and the people. Each time remembering and thanking God for life and all of creation. All times are the right times for prayer.

Here's something else to think about. Prayer as a gift....not an achievement. People always give me a "don't choose me" look when I ask if anyone wants to pray at the beginning or ending of a meeting. We think that everyone else can do it better than us. Prayer is a gift from God and our gift to God.

In the scripture that Rhu read and signed for us this morning, Paul encourages us to "pray without ceasing". Most people's immediate response is – that's not possible. We have to eat and work – we can't pray every second. I would put forth that what Paul was saying is that prayer is not just individual act but it's a way of living. Prayer is not limited to words, or sitting silently. It's also being aware that God is always with us – that we are a part of God. I sometimes think of God actually being LOVE – and that I am always inside that love – almost like a fish in the water and God's love is within us too, always. When we can believe, truly believe and trust in God's forgiving, merciful and grace-filled love – then prayer becomes our way of living.

I want to read for you now, from Margaret Silf's book the Gift of Prayer. I think these words say so much to us! I have had them printed in your bulletins to contemplate. She says"

To ask whether prayer 'works'
is to think of prayer as some kind of machine,
or solution to fix a problem.

Anyone who has ever prayed
for a particular outcome
will know how it feels when God doesn't 'answer' the prayer.

When this happens,
we may need to ask ourselves, again,
who God is for us.

If our dominant (though unconscious) image of God
is a kind of Santa Claus,
we may well be disappointed if God doesn't give us
what we asked for.

If God is a 'parent', there to tell us what to do,
or to provide us with absolute security,
we may feel bewildered when no obvious guidance
is forthcoming,

or when we feel very insecure and vulnerable.

But if, in prayer, we are truly seeking relationship
with the God who is Mystery,
yet dwells in our own hearts,
and moves and acts in everything we do and are,
then prayer will always deepen that relationship.

We may not see or feel any immediate change,
but authentic prayer always makes a difference.

it changes our attitudes,
and transforms our vision, of ourselves,
our relationships and our world.

Others may sense the change in us,
even when we cannot see it in our selves.

We will know the power of prayer by its fruits,
though these fruits may be a long while in ripening.

Hard hearts may soften,
old resentments yield to new compassion,
breakdown lead to breakthrough.

Prayer that works
is prayer that makes a difference, contemplation that turns into action,
on behalf of peace and justice
in a troubled and unjust world system.

Prayer is energy,
the energy of love and transformative power.

It is given to us to use for the good of all creation.

In prayer God gives us the fuel of life,
and asks us to live it.

Something to think about!

One last thing for those who say you don't know how to pray – here is a simple easy to remember 5 finger prayer. One: your thumb is the nearest to you – so pray for those closest to you. Two: pointer finger – pray for those who teach, instruct or heal. Three: the tallest finger – reminds us of our leaders – pray for our political leaders, our business leaders our bosses, any leader in your life. Four: ring finger – may surprise you that this is your weakest finger – so pray for those who are weak, in trouble or pain. And lastly is our little finger – Your pinkie finger this is when you pray for yourself – because after praying for the other 4 fingers your needs will be put into proper perspective.

Prayer – my prayer for each of us is that prayer becomes a way of life – creating a closer and closer relationship with God. Amen