

“WORDS OF WISDOM: VI – SAY YOUR PRAYERS”

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Luke 11:1-13

Today’s sermon in this “Words of Wisdom” series seems particularly appropriate for a day on which we’ll be baptizing three babies – it’s all about prayer. One of the things we learn very early in life from our parents and grandparents is this – “say your prayers.” And we start out with some very simple, yet profound ones – like “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food” before our meals, and “Now I lay me down to sleep” before we go to bed at night. Like I said – very simple, yet very profound.

We learn from early on to pray, to talk with God, and listen to God. It seems like the most natural thing in the world, yet amazingly, the older we get, the more difficult we seem to make it. Am I right? I think so. All I can tell you is that people all the time ask me how to pray, or tell me they don’t think they’re doing it right, or they’re not doing it as much as they should. And I can tell you how to bring a meeting to dead silence – ask somebody to pray out loud! Not a lot of people are dying to do it.

It’s sad, because, like I said, when we were kids it was easy, it came naturally. Kids instinctively get that prayer is just talking to God, and listening to Him too. It’s not a big deal to them.

Don’t believe me? Listen to a few of these children’s prayers:

“Dear God, please send a new baby for Mommy. The new baby you sent last week cries too much.”

“Dear God, who did you make smarter? Boys or girls? My sister and I want to know.”

“Dear God: This is my prayer. Could you please give my brother some brains? So far he doesn’t have any.”

“Dear Lord: Thank you for the nice day today. You even fooled the TV weatherman.”

“Dear God: Please help me in school. I need help in spelling, adding, history, geography and writing. I don’t need help in anything else.”

“Dear Lord: Tomorrow is my birthday. Could you please put a rainbow in the sky?”

Oh, how sweet and oh, how practical and personal are the prayers of children. It’s not a big deal. They don’t anguish over the perfect thing to say and the perfect way to say it. It just comes out.

One more: A man took his small son to town with him one day to run errands, and when they finished they went into the local coffee shop to have some lunch. They sat down at two stools at the counter and when the food came, the man whispered to the little boy, “Son, we’ll just have a silent prayer.” So they bowed their heads and began to pray. The father got through praying first and he looked over at his son with his head bowed and hands folded, and waited. And waited. And waited. When the little boy finally looked up, his dad asked him, “What in the world were you praying about all that time?” The little boy replied, “How should I know? It was a silent prayer.” (sermonillustrations.com, *Our Daily Bread*)

You see, it’s so simple and plain to children – you just pray, you just speak to God and tell Him what you want to tell Him. There’s no right or wrong way to do it. But, like I said, we mess them up the older we get. We stress over what we should say, when we should say it, how we should say it. We think there’s a right way and wrong way to pray.

I read something amusing about that this week. It seems there was once a monk who was bothered by mice around him when he prayed. So he got a cat and kept it in his prayer room so that the mice would be scared away. But he never explained to his disciples why he had the cat. One day, the monk walked down the halls of the monastery and noticed that each of his disciples had a cat in their prayer room – they thought, after seeing what he had done, that the secret to powerful praying was having a cat in the room! (On-line, “I Wonder Why My Prayers Go Unanswered,” The Rev. Charles Reeb, 9/18/05)

Now, I know that seems silly, but that’s what I mean about how, as we get older we get away from the pure innocent prayers of little children, and start to stress over the mechanics of prayer, and whether we’re doing it right.

Well, friends, we’re not alone, because the disciples in this morning’s Gospel lessons – and by that I mean, the real disciples – Jesus’ disciples – were struggling with it as well. They had been watching Jesus praying, and when He finished, they went to Him, and said, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

I can almost imagine Jesus saying to them, “Look fellows, it’s not rocket science. Just talk to God, and listen to God. Communicate with Him and let Him communicate with you.”

What He actually did was remind them in just a few brief sentences that prayer is all about our relationship with God, and strengthening it by talking to Him and listening to Him. Prayer is all about relationship – why, the very first word that Jesus tells us to use is relational – “Our Father.”

He says to say that first so that we always remember that God is our divine parent – the One who gave us life, the One who gives us life, the One who promises us eternal life. God is the source of all of our blessings, the One who loves us even more than our earthly families. At the end of the Gospel lesson, he says to think about it this way – “What parent, if your child asked you for a fish, would give them a snake; or if they asked you for an egg, a scorpion instead?” “No,” Jesus says, “God loves you with a boundless love, the love of a parent for a child, sacrificial, long-suffering, affectionate, ever-present love.”

That’s how God loves us, so Jesus says, when you pray, let that be the first thing you say, “Our Father, my Father” – to acknowledge and thank Him for His deep love for you, a love that has no end.

You know, over the course of this summer, I’ve been asking you to send me photos of “wondrous” things you have seen, and not a few of those pictures are of parents and children, or grandparents and grandchildren – and they truly are wondrous – beautiful portraits of the deep and transcendent love between each of them. If that’s how beautiful human love is, how much more beautiful, how much deeper is God’s love for us. That is why, Jesus says, when you pray, start by acknowledging God’s love for you and you for Him, God’s place in your life.

That sets the stage for the rest of your prayer, because by acknowledging His love for you, you are also saying that you trust that He loves you enough to hear your prayers – whatever they are. So Jesus says, pour out your heart to Him – tell Him what’s on your heart and on your mind. In this model prayer, if you will – the Lord’s Prayer – Jesus talks about the need for daily bread, forgiveness, protection. It’s a totally honest prayer, saying, in essence, “Lord, give me what I need to live; Lord, I am a sinner, and I also need to forgive those who have hurt me; Lord, there are things that tempt me, keep me from them.”

You see, Jesus is saying, be honest with God, open up your heart, tell Him the way it is in your life, what you need help with, what you’re struggling with. Be honest, trusting that God loves you no matter what, and will guide you where you need to go.

All of us know that any good relationship is based upon honesty. When you hide things from someone you love, it’s never good, and when you hide things from God, it only serves to put up a barrier between you and Him. A good relationship is

marked by honesty and the trust that, even through struggles and sin, there is a love deep enough to endure – such is the love between us and God.

Finally, underneath it all – all of your prayers, all of your words – should be trust in God's will for your life and all of life. "Pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done,'" Jesus says. Then trust that God will make a way, will give you just what you need just when you need it. And that even if you don't understand it sometimes, yet you will trust that God is in control and in the words of John Wesley, "all will yet be well." It's tough to do, Jesus knows, but the more you learn to pray and yield your will to God's, the easier it will become, and the more strength you will draw from knowing He holds you, and all of life, in the palm of His hands, and it will be okay, no matter what.

So love, honesty, trust, and submission to the will of God – that's prayer, Jesus says. Don't make it harder than it is. Pour out your love to God, open your heart and honestly talk to Him, trust that He loves you enough to hear your honest thoughts and prayers, and then yield to His will and way.

Those children that I talked about at the beginning of the sermon went to God expecting that He would answer their prayers. Do you?

They talked to God just as naturally as if He was a friend standing next to them. Do you?

My friends, if prayer is a burden for you – if you struggle about whether you're praying right, or praying enough, or even if you're struggling because you wonder if prayer even matters – I want to say to you, stop stressing and just talk to God, and then listen to Him. Don't put so much pressure on yourself to fit some formula – just talk to God, and then listen to Him.

When you wake up, before you even get out of bed, talk to God. What should you say? Well, see if this one might work for you - "Dear Lord, so far I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help."

But seriously, even if it's just "Thank you Lord, for waking me up and giving me a new day of life," that would be enough.

Then pray throughout the day – before meals, when you get behind the wheel of your car, when you read the paper or watch the news (Lord knows there's a lot we need to pray about), when you start your day at work, or when you take a break and go for a walk. When you see something beautiful, whisper a prayer of thanksgiving,

when you hear a siren, whisper a prayer for those in need. You get the idea, right? Don't make prayer difficult – just start talking and then in silence hear what God has to say.

I want to finish with a personal word about prayer that happened just this week. On Wednesday some of our church staff went on a day-long retreat to Lewes DE. We were led on the retreat by some friends of mine – a retired clergyman and his wife – and not surprisingly, we started the day with devotions. Part of the devotion included walking a labyrinth – a series of stones set in grass in a circular pattern – and you walk on the path toward the center which has a cross, and then walk back out of around the circle again after you have reached the middle. You are meant to be praying as you walk the labyrinth, and praying in silence. Glenn, the man leading us, said to pray and listen as we walked, and so we began walking in silence.

It was a pretty amazing thing for me. At first, I was distracted by the sounds of all of the activities of Lewes going on around us – this church is right smack in the middle of downtown Lewes – so there was a delivery truck idling right there next to where we were, and tourists walking down the sidewalk right next to the labyrinth, and so on. So at first, that was all I could hear, but soon enough, I found myself quieted down, and as I was praying, I discovered that what I thought I was praying about was not what God wanted me to pray about, because my prayers changed as I walked in silence and totally open to God's Spirit moving all around.

After a while, I sat down on a bench next to the labyrinth and continued to pray, and I realized that if we would only commit ourselves to taking time to pray, and give ourselves over to God's will, He will take away the distractions and quiet our spirits and speak to us in wondrous ways.

So I hope that all of us will “say our prayers,” for there is no better way to be connected to God, to remember His boundless love for us, to be cleansed of our sins, and to go forward in His will. May it be so.

Amen.