

“SCHOOL DAYS! SCHOOL DAYS!
II – NOTEBOOKS”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
September 16, 2018

Philippians 4:4-7

Matthew 6:5-13

As we begin today, I want to tell you something about myself that some of you may not know. I have a thing for pens and paper. No, really, I do! I collect pens like other people collect dolls or mugs or whatever. Whenever I go away on a trip, I buy a pen from that place – so my drawers here at church and at home are filled with pens from places around the world. And so everytime I pick up a pen to use it, it evokes a wonderful memory of someplace I visited. Some people know about this penchant of mine, and have started bringing me pens from their journeys. Why, I got one just this week from Linda Carey’s recent trip to Prague – and it’s a great pen. I love the way it writes, and actually used it in the research for this sermon!

But I also love paper, and remember even back to when I was in school the feel and the smell of a new notebook. Blank pages, pristine white, just waiting to be written upon! Still to this day, I love picking up a new notebook to start using it. The pages invite me to do creative things.

Some of the best notebooks I’ve picked up lately are journals. I just picked up a few new prayer journals on my recent trip to New York. They loomed large in my mind as I read again the scripture passages for today’s sermon, because both of them call us to grow spiritually, and, in particular, invite us to pray.

Jesus’ words were spoken as part of his Sermon on the Mount, and you heard what he said. He said prayer is between you and God, it’s not something that’s meant to be showy or to impress anyone else, it’s meant to draw you ever closer to God. “And here’s how to pray,” he said and then he gave us what we call “The Lord’s Prayer,” plain and simple, just profoundly complete in its fullness.

Jesus spoke to everyone, but Paul, in the passage from his Letter to the Philippians was speaking to some in particular. As one commentator put it, “Some of those who had not only begun well, but have journeyed (on the spiritual path) well, and struggled for the gospel now appear to be having second thoughts. Perhaps they are counting the cost of following Jesus and are hesitating, and even now contemplating turning back.” (On-line, Edward Pillar, “Preaching This Week”)

So Paul writes to encourage them, and he lays out what they should be doing, and the benefits they can draw from a life filled with prayer and devotion – the ability to live with gentleness, a sense of joy for God’s blessings, the security of feeling the nearness of God, and the peace that only He can bring.

Paul knows those things well. His life is filled with them because of his deep devotion to prayer and time with God.

But you know what makes his words absolutely amazing? He’s writing them from prison! He is in prison, being held awaiting trial, because of his discipleship. His life is in real jeopardy, so on the face of it things like gentleness, joy, security and peace might be the furthest things from his mind. He very well could be instead talking of fear and foreboding, of anger and retribution.

But he’s not, because he knows, indeed, peace from God his Father, and he wants others to know the path to that too – the path of prayer. That’s why he wrote what he wrote, so let’s look a little more deeply into his words about prayer and devotion to the Philippians, which are words to us as well.

The first thing he says is that spending time in prayer will be a constant reminder of God’s presence with us. From our first thoughts, our first words as we pray, we’re acknowledging his presence in our lives – whether those words are “Our Father, who art in heaven,” or “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,” or “Almighty and merciful God” – as we say any of those things we are instantly reminded to God is there, right there, with us – ever and always.

Conversely, when we backslide in our devotional life and find ourselves going days without praying, God too easily is taken for granted, perhaps even forgotten.

A pastor tells about a wedding he was officiating where there was a precocious little four year-old boy serving as the ring bearer. He says that clearly this child wasn’t into the role. On the day of the wedding, he sauntered down the aisle, swinging the pillow on which were tied the wedding rings, and then when he got to the front, he promptly laid down and stretched out on the kneeling pads, until he got bored with that, and stood up and waved to his grandparents. Well, this went on and on until, the pastor said, it came time to say “The Lord’s Prayer,” and then that little guy was all business. He chimed in with a strong little voice to say every word of that prayer with the rest of the congregation.

And do you know what the pastor said about that? He said, “I felt good about that, and I felt good about that little guy. He couldn’t read or write yet, and he couldn’t get excited about weddings yet, but already he knew and loved the Lord’s Prayer. Someone was teaching him the holy habits that will serve him well in the

days ahead.” (James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “Losing Our Spiritual Balance,” p. 91)

Oh friends, I’m afraid that, too often, we’re like that little guy at the start of the wedding – we get distracted, or bored, or well, so focused on ourselves that we forget to pray. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever gone through something and then later realized that you hadn’t prayed in the midst of it? Or, better yet, have you ever realized that you’d gone a long time without giving God thanks for the blessings in your life – you simply received them and enjoyed them and forgot to say thanks?

Oh, when we do that we rob God of our devotion, but we also rob ourselves of the constant remembrance of God’s presence and blessings in our lives. That’s why Paul encourages us to always pray – always.

But it’s not just to remember God’s presence. Paul also reminds us that prayer and devotion is a pathway to peace and understanding. But you all know that, don’t you? How many times have you prayed for guidance on what decision to make or which way to go – and felt the nudge from an answer from God? We’re not on this journey alone, we don’t have to figure everything out for ourselves – God is there to guide us, and he does that through our time with him in prayer. There are few things as precious in life as the assurance and peace you find in an answer from God to your prayers.

Once there was a man who had to undergo emergency open-heart surgery, and after the surgery he had some complications which landed him in intensive care. As he laid there, he says that he was afraid to go to sleep, because he was afraid he would never wake up again. So he had lots and lots of hours to contemplate his life, to think about who he was and what he had done or failed to do.

He had accomplished a lot in his life – he had a family, a thriving career, a great income, a beautiful house – all the things that society deems the marks of a successful life – yet, as he laid in that bed, the man realized that the one thing he longed for, but had never found, was peace.

The next morning, after his night of self-examination and contemplation, the hospital chaplain stopped in to see him. He had never met the chaplain, and after introductions, the chaplain asked if he could read a few passages of scripture to him, to which he said yes. And then the chaplain began to read from John 14 words of Jesus – “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled.”

Later that man said, “The words struck me like a spiritual hammer. That chaplain did not know me. He did not know my story. He did not know what I had wrestled with all night long. But there was no way his visit could have been a mere coincidence. Without even knowing that he did so, he showed me how to find what I had needed and could not locate all my life. I suddenly got it – that if I could find Jesus, I could really get to know him, I would find peace. And that turned out to be the case for me.” (On-line, The Rev. Dr. Michael Brown, “Peace Amid the Bedlam,” Day One)

Did you hear his words? If I could find Jesus, I could really get to know him, I would find peace. That is so true, and one of the best ways to find Jesus is through prayer and devotion. He will lead you into perfect peace.

Which leads to another thing that Paul points out to his readers and to us – that through prayer and devotion we will know that we have a companion through life – always – and it is Jesus. He is always there, leading us wherever we go.

I went to a preaching seminar this week where the leader told us about an incredible trip he took recently to Ethiopia and while there he visited the Rock-Hewn Churches in Tigray. Have you heard about them? They are actual churches carved out of massive pieces of stone. They’ve been called the eighth wonder of the world.

Well, in one of those churches, you have to descend a long set of steps down to a dark hallway, and then walk the length of that passage way underground to get to another set of steps which takes you up to the sanctuary. The thing is that that long passageway takes four minutes to walk through – and it is pitch black down there. So you can only go with a guide.

So on that day this man and his tour group gathered with the guide before going down the steps and he told them this: “We will walk through single file. I’ll put you in order from shortest to tallest. You need to put your hands on the shoulders of the person in front of you and don’t let go. It will take us four minutes to get there,” and then he added, “but you don’t have anything to worry about, I’ve been there before, I know where I’m going, just follow me and I’ll get you to the light.”

My seminar leader happened to be the tallest person in his group so he was last in line, and he says, for four long minutes (which seemed like forty) he held on for dear life to the shoulders of the person in front of him, as they walked through that pitch black to get to the sanctuary. And he said the brightness called to them near the end, and the brightness of that sanctuary was like nothing he had ever experienced before in his life.

But he learned more than just the courage to take that trek, he also was reminded that, in life, if we simply hold tight to Jesus, he will take us where we need to go, because he's been there before us. He's been through darkness, he knows the way. He knows the way to the light of the Father – all we have to do is cling to him – and one of the best ways to do that is through prayer and devotion.

Now friends, I know none of this is anything you haven't heard before in church – and lots and lots of times, but sometimes I think we hear it so much that we ignore it, or we don't commit to it. I wouldn't do this, but what would happen if I asked you about your prayer life, your devotional life? Do you spend time in prayer daily, do you have a quiet time with the Lord – or are you one who looks back and realizes you've taken the Lord for granted, and not prayed outside of worship in a long time.

Hey, if that's the case, it's never too late to start. Say grace over your meals, pick up a nice new piece of paper and pen and write down things for which you're grateful, or start a prayer list. Use the prayer list in the bulletin or get on the prayer chain to be intentional about praying for others in the church and church family. Use "The Upper Room" which is in the rack right next to the elevator. Find a prayer partner, or join a class or group in the church where you can grow together in prayer. Or just start today, by looking around you and saying "Thank You" to God.

Friends, God loves you more than you can possibly know, and he wants to be in relationship with you. Talk to him, lift your prayers, tell him what's on your heart and in your mind, your joys, your sorrows, ask for his guidance, and as you do all of those things, you will indeed know the truth of the words of that old hymn – "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Take time to be holy, friends. Draw closer to Christ for he waits to draw closer to you. May it be so.

Amen.