



Sermon, September 20, 2020
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Junction City United Methodist Church

“The Way of Prayer”



Scripture: (Psalm 139) NRSV (alt)

- O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

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- ¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
- ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
- ¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.
- ¹⁹ O that you would destroy any wickedness within, O God,
and that bloodthirstiness would depart from me—
- ²⁰ those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
- ²¹ Do I not choose against those who choose against you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those things that are against your way?
- ²² I reject those ways with perfect rejection;
I live my life in contrast to them.
- ²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
- ²⁴ See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Prayer

One of the most common of human spiritual practices is prayer. Prayer is found across the world in a variety of forms, and employs a wide variety of techniques and methods of articulation. At its heart, prayer is the formal or deliberate stating of an intention for oneself or for another person or groups of persons, or even for a situation. That is, a person desires that a certain thing will happen, or a particular state of being or set of circumstances be achieved, and they formulate that intention into words. This is the essence of prayer. In traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, the prayers are directed to God, who serves as the one who listens to and receives such stated intentions or prayers. It is a well-nigh universal human practice. What is unique in Christian prayer is how

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this practice is grounded in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and how it is often directed to him in a conversational manner, as if face-to-face.

Richard Foster in his book *Prayer*, identifies at least 21 kinds of prayer in the Christian tradition alone. Foster groups these types of prayer into three basic directions: **inward**, **upward** and **outward**. Prayer engages the person praying in a process of personal transformation, which occurs within. But there is also the human need for intimacy, and especially intimacy with God. In the Christian tradition, God is a God of deep personal relationship, who goes in search of fellowship with human beings, even becoming like them in order to have an up close and personal relationship. Thus, there is an upward movement to prayer. But prayer also moves the person praying out into the world. Even though prayer is usually private (Jesus urged his followers to pray in secret), the fact that prayer involves the naming of our intentions for one another and for the world, it has a strong social dimension to it as well.

The power of prayer arises from the fact that it is first and foremost an activity of the will of God. In his instructions on prayer to his disciples, Jesus gives them an example of how to pray. He said

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one'" (Matthew 6:9-13).

Significantly, Jesus begins the prayer by grounding it in the nature of God and God's will. Prayer is a holy act, because God is holy. And because God is holy, prayer needs to be grounded in God's will for the world. That is, our intentions, as voiced in our prayer, must be rooted firmly in God's intentions. Christian teaching over the centuries has emphasized that Jesus came to reveal the will of God to humankind. Keeping that in mind, we can understand that by teaching his followers how to pray, Jesus was also teaching them that it is the will of God *that*

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we pray. The very act of praying manifests the will of God in a very concrete and specific way. The following is my definition of prayer, which expresses this notion: “Prayer is that part of the will of God that needs the vehicle of human expression in order to be manifested in the material world.” Prayer helps manifest the will of God in the world. How:

First, by changing our internal chatter. We have at any one point in time probably a dozen or more internal conversations going on in our heads. It is this internal chatter that influences most how we get along in the world.

Prayer changes the internal conversation, the interior “tapes” we play each day. To have an inner conversation with Jesus – to think on him and in him – is to change the inner conversation, and to begin to conform our mind after His mind. Our opening song this morning “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus...” Prayer changes the chatter.

The second way prayer manifests the will of God in the world builds upon this first way by conforming our mind to the mind of Christ. Paul in Philippians talks about this powerful aspect of the Way of Jesus: “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2:1-5).

The mind of Christ gets us out of our myopic focus upon our own concerns and dramas and shifts our focus upon the needs of others.

The third way, finally, is that aligning our will with the will of God magnifies the power of God in the world. This especially is what happens on the spiritual level. Our wills and intentions are like little amplifiers that

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increase the "signal strength" of God's love and mercy and comfort and guidance in the world.

Prayer is a way of attuning our wills to the greater Will that pervades the universe. The God who called all things into being and who upholds and sustains all things desires to be known by us, and prayer is that mechanism of knowing and being made known. Prayer is the cornerstone of the spiritual life. As in all avenues of the human knowing of other persons, it is based in communication, conversation and dialog. It is also based in an honest opening of one's heart and inner life to the other, in this case, to God. The Psalmist expresses it eloquently in the Psalm read earlier in this service:

O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways....
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
....For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

Prayer is, in essence, an act of radical intimacy with God. God is radically intimate with us in that we are entrusted with the task of acting as conduits for God's work of blessing the world in acts of compassion, mercy, justice and love. We are radically intimate with God by opening ourselves to God's guidance and to the shaping of our lives and characters by the Holy Spirit. There is no other way to be spiritually formed by God.

I'd like to share with you a form of inward prayer that is also simultaneously upward, and prepares us to listen deeply in order to make our outward prayer. It is a good place to begin for all our prayers.






Centering Prayer: Centering in God

Centering Prayer is an ancient practice of corralling our scattered and restless thoughts, allowing them to rest for a bit, and then allowing the heart and mind to rest in the loving presence of God.

Stillness does not come easily to us.

It takes practice. Practice. Practice.

Fortunately, that is all it takes. No gimmicks. No special attachments. You don't even need to download an app. You just need yourself, and a space apart. Here are the very simple steps to follow:

-  Sit upright in a centered and balanced posture
-  Use a short phrase from the scripture reading that is provided for each day, e.g., “Speak, Lord, your servant listens.”
-  With each in-breath, silently say the first half of the phrase, and the second half on the out-breath.
-  Repeat this for several minutes, slowly, gently.
-  Sit in silence at the end, simply listening.

