

Being in Prayer

Faith & Wisdom: Part 3 “Being in Prayer”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – July 16, 2023

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Proverbs 15:26-33; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 18:1-8

Reflection: Psalm 4

Greeting: Call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding. Seek it like silver, like finding a hidden treasure. Then you will discover the knowledge of God. The Lord gives wisdom and protects the paths of justice.

Prayer: We call upon you Lord, knowing that you are more ready to bestow your blessings upon us than we are to seek them, and give out of your love and righteousness that which we have not earned. We turn to you, knowing that all wisdom begins with you. May you guide us to your knowledge and strengthen us in your truth. May we receive your mercy, eager that we may share your mercy and love with the world. By your Spirit, guide us and lead us this day that we may share in your word and walk in your ways, and may we be enlightened in word and deed through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 4

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Selah Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord. There are many who say, “O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!” You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety. (Psalm 4 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 4 and we hear of seeking God in prayer. That we should trust in the Lord because that is where our peace is found. Do you trust God is listening when you reach out in prayer? When you pray are you also listening? Who is it that you lift up in your prayers? How do you follow up on your prayers with action? In what ways have you put your faith into action this week? How can we share the wisdom and knowledge of faith that God has shared with you?

Prayer: Lord, it is your everlasting light that we seek in the darkness. May you bolster our faith so that we may seek your wisdom and truth. May your love strengthen us as we join together before you in prayer on this day. We thank you for your care, inviting us to seek your knowledge and to know your word. Together we bring our spoken and unspoken joys and concerns to lay before you, knowing that you are attentive to our every need. May you lift us up that we may know your blessings in our laughter and our tears. May your steadfast love guide us through our joys and our sorrows. And by your Spirit may you guide us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Proverbs chapter 15, verse 26 through 33.

The Lord detests evil plans, but gracious words are pure. Those who acquire things unjustly gain trouble for their house, but those who hate bribes will live. The righteous heart reflects before answering, but the wicked mouth blurts out evil. The Lord is far from the wicked, but he listens to the prayers of the righteous. Bright eyes give joy to the heart; good news strengthens the bones. The ear that listens to life-giving correction dwells among the wise. Those who refuse discipline despise themselves, but those who listen to correction gain understanding. The fear of the Lord is wise instruction, and humility comes before respect. (Proverbs 15:26-33 CEB+)

Our next reading comes from Philippians chapter 1, verse 3 through 11.

I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I'm thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it's always a prayer full of joy. I'm glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed it until now. I'm sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus. I have good reason to think this way about all of you because I keep you in my heart. You are all my partners in God's grace, both during my time in prison and in the defense and support of the gospel. God is my witness that I feel affection for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God. (Philippians 1:3-11 CEB+)

Our last reading comes from Luke chapter 18, verse 1 through 8.

Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don't fear God or respect people, but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her

coming here and embarrassing me.” The Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won’t God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?” (Luke 18:1-8 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today This week we reached the middle of our faith and wisdom series. Today’s message is all about being in prayer and we explore the wisdom needed to make sure that our prayers reflect what our faith is and the wisdom we find in Christ. So, we once again begin with Proverbs. We hear that the Lord listens to the prayers of his people. But we also hear about the things that will draw us away from God. That God doesn’t want us planning evil or practicing dishonesty. That we shouldn’t be gaining from unjust methods. That we cannot claim to be following God if we cannot show love of God and neighbor. Because when we put greedy and dishonest practices ahead of God, we separate ourselves from the Lord. We also hear from Proverbs that we must be willing to humble ourselves and admit we could be wrong. That we need to have a willingness to be corrected. That is part of wisdom, because we cannot learn and be corrected if we cannot be open to the possibility that we will make mistakes. This is one of the ways that we can fail to use the wisdom that we have been given. Instead of letting Christ speak truth to us to inform us how to live, we attempt to speak for Christ. Sometimes we try to tell Jesus what it is he should be doing. I say this because sometimes our prayers stray from having that humility. We fail to embrace wisdom and be open to correction. Instead, we attempt to dictate to God what God’s priority should be. We form our prayers with what we think God should be doing thinking we know best. And quite frankly, we don’t know best. I’ve addressed this before, but it is always worth saying again.

But this raises a question. What should our prayers be if we aren’t telling God what to do? Well, Paul gives us an example in his letter to the Philippians. Paul has prayers of thanksgiving over the people there, his partners in ministry. He is thankful for all the people that are sharing his mission in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. He remains in prayer because he takes encouragement from those doing God’s work and its strength strengthens him. And we see that this prayer isn’t about himself. His prayer is for others and his prayer is that they gain wisdom and insight so that they can grow in love. Paul is effectively lifting others up in prayer, praying that they can use wisdom and understanding to be able to further their mission in Christ by growing in love. Paul wants them to be able to know what really matters and that is his prayer. Not that they get hung up on trivial things. Not that they get distracted from what the gospel is really about and instead cling to small issues. Paul worries they will seek division instead of seeking the unity we find through the love of Christ. The prayer is a constant conversation with God. A conversation in which Paul is lifting others up continuously. Asking for others to be strengthened, asking for others to continue doing the work they do. And it’s a selfless kind of prayer. Because Paul wants what’s best for those people, he is constantly giving thanks and lifting up others in his prayers.

This reflects what Jesus tells us about prayer from today's reading from Luke. He tells us to be persistent in prayer. To demonstrate what he means, he talks about a woman who keeps coming before a judge to seek justice for her case. This judge doesn't care about God and doesn't care about people. The only thing he seems to care about is himself. But her persistence wears him down. The point Jesus is making is that if her persistence in coming before the judge can result in justice, how much more will your prayers before God be heard! If her petition could bend the ear of someone who didn't care about God or others, someone who simply ignores love of God and neighbor, then shouldn't we expect even more from God? But this does raise some questions. One is that we have to think about what it means to be persistent in our prayers. One way we can look at this is that we let our prayers be a continual process that follows us throughout the day. That we are constantly lifting others in our prayers and constantly looking for guidance by the Holy Spirit. That we pray without ceasing by letting our prayers be an ongoing conversation. That instead of letting our prayers be a litany of our demands, a constant stream of our wish list for God, that we instead remember that when we're taught to pray it is that we pray for God's will to be done. That we pray for others because it is another way that we show our love of neighbor and love of God. And that we act on those prayers to further God's kingdom here on earth.

But we can get some funny ideas about prayer that can cause us to lose sight of what really matters. We are encouraged to seek out what really matters in our faith and to let that be the center of our prayers. But sometimes our prayers can become selfish instead. Maybe it is that we pray for someone else's mind to be changed so that their opinion matches our own. That is different than praying that someone's heart and life is changed because of the presence of Christ. Because one is putting things into Christ's hands and the other is wanting people to agree with us. It isn't love when we pray that somebody be turned to our views instead of simply praying that the love of Christ be a part of their life. Because we can confuse our opinion with God's truth. When we are lifting others in prayer, we lift them up to receive God's mercy and grace. We pray that God's will be done, not our will. We turn things over to Christ because we know that Jesus will know better than we do what someone needs. Because when we simply pray that people should think and act like us, we are holding up ourselves as the example instead of Christ. And that will always push us further from Christ. We can also confuse ourselves about being in constant prayer when we think that our prayers must be something showy. That we have to be seen praying for it to count. I've seen it with street corner preachers as they loudly pray for all the people they have judged, not realizing that their prayers are hollow because they are focused on themselves instead of anything to do with God. They haven't thought about what is important to God. They haven't thought about how to best love their neighbor. They've only thought about how they can best be heard. They have forgotten to use wisdom when entering into prayer and have left behind any knowledge of God. Instead of trying to gain wisdom through prayer and discernment, they have turned prayer into a vehicle for showing off what they believe. And we betray our own faith by centering our prayers on ourselves and losing sight of God's kingdom.

And sometimes we forget what prayer is about and how we should pray. I've heard people say that there are places you aren't allowed to pray. I have yet to find a single place where I am not allowed to pray. Nowhere have I experienced that. But people will still make the claim. The problem is that they are complaining not because they aren't allowed to pray, but that they aren't allowed to force others to listen to their prayers. They complain because they can't force others to take part in their prayers. But what kind of prayer is it if my only purpose is that others hear my prayers? Am I praying to the crowds? I have yet to find a place where I cannot lift others up in prayer to Christ. I have yet to find a place where I cannot turn to Christ in my heart and seek guidance. I have yet to find a place where I cannot pray for healing and for hope and for love. But there are plenty of times where I can't make others listen to my prayers. However, my prayers are to God and not to the people around me. If my concern is that others hear that I am praying for them, then it would seem my words are just for show and aren't meant for God at all. It sounds like I am simply praying to myself. What wisdom is there in that? What purpose do those words hold? It takes wisdom to think about how we pray and why we pray. And we can use that wisdom and knowledge to guide our prayer life. My prayers are centered on a constant conversation with God. But it also means I have to treat it like a conversation. Not just a one-way stream of words coming from me, but that I have to both speak and listen. To be honest, I try to have at least twice as much time listening as I do speaking. Because listening is an important part of prayer and an important part of seeking the wisdom that comes from faith. I always think that I need more time listening because of how little I know of what I need and how much I have yet to learn. But I can't hear when I'm speaking. I cannot hear if I am writing out my litany of requests for God and never willing to listen to what it is God may be placing on my heart. Because being in prayer is a conversation. And it shouldn't be a conversation where we merely talk about ourselves. Instead, it should be a conversation about how we can help others come to Christ, how we strengthen each other in love, and how we can best further God's kingdom here on earth. It is a conversation where we are willing to admit we can be wrong so that we grow in faith. If we think we already know everything, what can Christ teach us? If we claim to already have all the answers, how can we accept help from Christ? We should instead be ready to know that being in prayer is about a relationship. That we further our relationship with God while being in prayer, and we grow in our love of neighbor and God when we humble ourselves in prayer. That we seek God's truth above our own opinions, and we seek a path forward paved by God's love. And that we grow in wisdom and faith when we admit we could be wrong, and instead set our hearts on Christ. So let our prayers give thanks for all God has done, is doing, and will do, and let us always be in prayer. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – The Spirit Moves

Our current series looks at how we exercise our faith with wisdom. Each week we will look at Proverbs and explore an aspect of our faith.

July 2nd – Free to Care – Proverbs 3:21-35; Philippians 2:1-11; Luke 6:27-36

July 9th – To Believe – Proverbs 9:7-12; James 2:8-17; Matthew 9:18-31

July 16th – Being in Prayer – Proverbs 15:26-33; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 18:1-8

July 23rd – God & Neighbor – Proverbs 12:17-26; Galatians 5:13-18, 22-26; Luke 10:25-37

July 30th – Pursuit of Wisdom – Proverbs 4:1-9; James 3:13-18; Mark 12:28-34

Prayer List

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuinness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts
Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Kara Newton

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