

## **Way We Pray**

Theology Thoughts: Part 5 “Way We Pray”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – October 22, 2023

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Readings:** James 5:13-18; Matthew 6:1-15; Luke 18:9-14

**Reflection:** Psalm 3

**Greeting:** Make your ways known to me, Lord; Teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth. Because you are the God who saves me. I put my hope in you all day long! Praise the Lord!

**Prayer:** God, help us to always reach out to you in prayer. May we grow in your love and your grace as we take the time to listen. Help us to gain insight when we bring ourselves before you in prayer. May you help us to slow down so that we may love our neighbor and may show our love for you. Grant us wisdom that we may learn the lesson you have for us today. Let us walk in your truth that we may share that truth with the world. We thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness. By your Spirit help us to help one another. We pray that you will continue to help us grow in mercy and grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 3

*O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.” But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Rise up, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.*

*Deliverance belongs to the Lord; may your blessing be on your people! (Psalm 3 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 3, and we of God answering when we call out. That God is always listening and that he does indeed here when we reach out in prayer. That the Lord is always available as our rock and our salvation. Who is it that you have lifted up in prayer in the last week? How did you act on your prayers? Who is it that you can lift up in prayer this week? Who is it that you can pray for in private? Who might you reach out to so that you can pray with them? How can you grow in love this week through prayer? How can we share God’s love with a broken world? How may we join together to share the comfort and care of Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord, we turn to you because of your steadfast love. We know that even when we struggle you are with us. May your Holy Spirit guide us in truth and light. Help us to share the peace and love of Christ each and every day. As we come before you this day, we bring to you the joys and concerns of our lives that we have shared aloud together. We also turn to you in prayer with the unspoken worries and celebrations of our hearts. Help us that we walk in your ways and seek the path of righteousness. May you be with us to strengthen us in our gladness and our sorrow. We pray that you will help us to grow in love through our laughter and our tears. As we learn more about you, Lord, may we grow closer to you. May your steadfast love and faithfulness guide us all the days of our lives, 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 comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from James chapter 5, verses 13 through 18.

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest. (James 5:13-18 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading for today comes from Matthew chapter 6, verses 1 through 15.

*“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. “Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. “For if you forgive others their*

*trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:1-15 NRSV\*)*

Our last reading for today comes from Luke chapter 18, verses 9 through 14.

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14 NRSV\*)*

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

As we continue to explore how we form our theology, we turn this week to prayer. I wanted to look at the way that we pray and how we treat prayer. Because I think that we can easily lose focus of what prayer is supposed to be. It's very easy to have prayer become something that we do without thinking. This is both a good and a bad thing. It is good that we've turned to prayer instinctively. It is good that it becomes part of our routine. But it can be bad if we become so routine that we don't really think about our prayers. The scripture readings that I chose for this week are just a sampling of what we have to help us understand prayer. James helps to give us a starting point with just how important prayer is. We see prayer as a relationship here. Because we see that those who are suffering should pray. That when people are sick others should come and pray over them. That we should pray for each other. What really sunk in for me is the way that prayer is used as part of a community here. Because we get plenty of times where it is not just that we pray but that we pray for each other and with each other. I think that there's something about this that we can miss. Prayer is something that creates community when we are praying for each other because it means that we have to think about each other. We might wonder about this at first, but prayer makes us think differently about others. When we are praying for someone, we have to make a conscious effort to think about what that person needs and why we are praying. Are we just wishing for well-being? Are they seeking forgiveness? Are they in need of healing? Do they need guidance? Are they struggling? We have to think about them and know what it is they need to pray for them. This brings those needs to the forefront of our mind for prayer, but also gives us a chance to think about what we could be doing for our neighbor. It helps us to think about the ways we can act.

And this can help us avoid letting our prayers become selfish. Because if we are thinking of others and what we can do for others, and we let that begin with prayer, then it starts a conversation with God about what can be done. We can pray for the parts that we have no control over and then pray for the strength to act on the parts that we do. When we let those things work in tandem, we are able to move forward with God. We are not just waiting for something to happen, looking for a sign, but we act because we started with prayer. Our

readings also give us an idea of what not to do. They also look at this idea of selfishness in prayer. We hear that prayer isn't for show. I think this is one that a lot of people struggle with, because in many instances prayer has become a performative art. I say this in all seriousness because when we let our prayers become a performance piece they are all about us and they are not about God. They are all about what we want to be recognized as and they are not out of love for God and love for neighbor. And as I've said before, those are the things that I construct my theology around. My faith centers around the way we love God and love our neighbor. If I go somewhere and I pray in a public place so others see me and hear me, I'm not praying because of the way I love God. I'm praying for the way that I love myself. And this happens all too often these days. Because there's a difference in the way that we pray when we are having a genuine, humble prayer that is seeking guidance and assistance. These problems can easily trip us up because we often feel that we want others to know we are praying. We think that praying before others is showing faith in God in action. The problem with that is that people won't see big showy public prayers as demonstrating faith. It quickly looks like seeking attention for yourself. Because to demonstrate a faith in God in action, we need to show how we love God and neighbor not in how we pray but in what we do. We show it when we act for God's justice. We show it when we speak up for those who have no voice. When we help our neighbor, we show that love and demonstrate our faith. Our prayer should be the vehicle that gets us there, but not the destination.

Jesus notes that the hypocrites want to stand up in the streets and be seen because the only thing they care about is being seen praying. They think other people knowing they are praying is all that matters. I take this to heart because people don't need to see our prayers as much as they need to see the result of our prayers. Jesus says to go pray in secret. Let it be between you and God when you pray and let your actions reflect what you have gained from your relationship with God. Jesus also says not to heap up empty phrases, thinking the more words we use the better our prayer is. We get a version of the Lord's Prayer as an example of how to pray. That our prayers should be that God's will be done not our own. That God sustain us from this day to the next. That we seek to be forgiven and pray for the strength to forgive. That we offer the forgiveness we seek to others. And there's a certain amount of humility that is expected in prayer. Because it's not about you and how good you are because you pray, even though we can often convince ourselves that that's how it is. Our other Gospel reading contains a parable about prayer. Two people go and pray. The first is of the Pharisees, the traditional religious leaders of the time. The second is a tax collector, somebody looked down upon by others. The traditional religious leader thanks God that he is not like other people, especially that tax collector. And he boasts to God about all the things he's done that make him so great. The person that he doesn't want to be like, the tax collector, asks for mercy. That's all. Jesus tells us that the tax collector and not the Pharisee will return home justified. And we get one of Christ's reversal of fortune statements here. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Because prayer shouldn't be about building

ourselves up and boasting about the things that we do. Prayer should be about seeking God and the way that we can love God and love our neighbor even more.

For me, this is a central part of how to understand prayer. Because when we pray together here it's that we are joining together to lift each other up. Because we have agreed to be in this place together in prayer, in praise, and in worship. I highlight this because we can get ourselves all twisted up about what it means to not be showy in prayer. This often is because we don't allow for nuance in how we understand the Bible. In this case, I often get asked about how I pray when leading a service. Isn't that standing up and praying so that others can see me? Wouldn't that be a contradiction of what Jesus is teaching? Like most things, context helps us to find an answer. Am I praying at you? Or am I praying with you? That is a very important question that we have to be able to answer about our prayers. It is easy to end up praying at somebody instead of praying with somebody. When you pray at somebody, you're doing it because of yourself. You want to show off that you feel you are better than that person so you pray at them. It is an act of judgement in which we end up condemning ourselves, because it means that we have lost sight of God. It is saying that we only think about ourselves when we should be thinking about the love of Christ. The difference is that praying at someone is simply lifting up a prayer because you want them to know how you've judged them. Praying with somebody is offering yourself in service to them. When I am here, I am praying with you because we are here for a shared purpose and we are here as a community in Christ. We join together to celebrate Christ's love, and part of that is prayer. Now, you can invite people to pray with you. You can ask somebody if it's okay to pray for them. You can pray for somebody when you sit down alone and it's just you and God. And if your prayer is a genuine concern for that person, it will be reflected in the way that you pray. So, when I get those questions about if it is OK for me to pray standing up before all of you, I can respond that I'm not simply doing this for me. I'm not up here praying because I want my voice to be heard and that I want to be seen. When I am up here, I am praying because you trust me to lead you. I am here as a servant of Christ sharing my knowledge with you. I lead us in prayer together so that we can experience Christ together. Because we join together here as a community. We share our concerns and our joys with each other. We share our lives with each other. When I pray, I am not hoping that I will be heard over everyone else. I pray that your heart will be joined to mine and that I am a voice among all our voices. When we pray together, it is so that we may experience the love of Christ here together in this place.

For me, that's what prayer should be when we pray together. It's easy to lose sight of that simplicity. We can lose sight of it if we feel that there are special words to be used in prayer. I have had people tell me that there are special prayers you have to use, and the words have to be exactly the right words. But I remember that God knows the words before we speak them. God knows the words of our hearts even if they don't come out of our mouths the way we imagined. But we say the words because it helps us to focus on God. It helps us to think about what it is we can do. And prayer helps us to focus our efforts and our energies and help

us to do all that we can. That God's will may be done. That God's justice may be seen on this earth. That God's love can be felt by all people. Because we know the way that Christ taught us to pray. Not to pray at people but pray with people and for people. Not to be showy, just to be seen, but to pray genuinely from the heart. Never to think that we are better than anyone because of our prayers but that we remember how far we still have to go and how much we need Christ in our lives. And we pray for others because it is a way that we pour out our love for them. I encourage all of you to think about the way that you pray. Are there ways that you could reach deeper in your prayer? Are there ways that you could be more intentional about the way that you pray? Are there ways to change things up so that you think more about the prayers that you have? I pray that we may all learn to be more humble, learn to be more caring, and learn to be more loving like our Risen Savior in the way we pray. 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 – Theology Thoughts**

Our current series is going to be a collection of theology thoughts from Pastor Cameron. Each week we will explore different aspects of how we live our faith. We will be looking at faith, prayer, works, forgiveness, scripture, and more. The more we learn about God, the more we grow in faith and love.

Next Week: Older and Wiser – Our next message is a special message from Pastor Cameron for his birthday and looks at learning as we get older.

## **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 McGuiness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	

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