

Means of Grace: Devotion

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – August 25 2024

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Psalm 119:25-32; Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 6:5-8,16-18

Reflection: Psalm 66

Greeting: We know that the Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and showing us truth. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace and mercy upon mercy. Just as the law was given through Moses, so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ. Praise the Lord! (John 1)

Prayer: Lord, we seek your grace as we join together in worship. Grant us wisdom that we may better follow your ways and help each other to do your will. Grant us understanding so that we may better love you and better love our neighbor as ourselves. May you help us to better devote ourselves to seeking your truth in all that we are and all that we do. By your Holy Spirit, guide us that we may continually serve each other in your name. Heavenly father, grant us peace of mind and assurance in our hearts. And let us celebrate the life, death, and resurrection found in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Help us to see all that is good when we put our trust in your steadfast love and faithfulness. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 66

Shout joyfully to God, all the earth! Sing praises to the glory of God's name! Make glorious his praise! Say to God: "How awesome are your works! Because of your great strength, your enemies cringe before you. All the earth worships you, sings praises to you, sings praises to your name!" Come close and listen, all you who honor God; I will tell you what God has done for me: My mouth cried out to him with praise on my tongue. If I had cherished evil in my heart, my Lord would not have listened. But God definitely listened. He heard the sound of my prayer. Bless God! He didn't reject my prayer; he didn't withhold his faithful love from me. (Psalm 66:1-4,16-20 CEB+)

We read the words of Psalm 66, and we hear of seeking God in prayer. That we should celebrate that God is there for us and listens to us. That we always have the option to reach out. Do you turn to God in prayer with the joys that you have in your life? Do you turn to God for help when you are in trouble? Who can you lift up in prayer this week? Who can you join in prayer to strengthen in God's grace? How will you seek God's peace and love in your life this week? How will you share that love and peace with those around you? How does God's grace change the way that you live your life in Christ?

Prayer: God, we thank you for always listening when we pray. We thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness that are ever before us. Help us to remember you in our studies, our prayers, and in all that we do to be closer to you, Lord. We come to you now with the causes that we have to rejoice. We lift up our prayers of thanksgiving together as a congregation. We also lift up the worries that weigh on our hearts. We turn to you with the joys and concerns that we have lifted up with one voice. We also turn to you with the silent struggles and celebrations that we hold in our hearts. Though they go unspoken, we know that you hear our prayers, Lord. We ask now that you be with us in our laughter and our tears, in our dancing and our mourning. Be with us so that we may know your presence and your peace. Help us to celebrate that by faith you are with us always, in this life to the next, and forevermore. 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 is from Psalm 119, verse 25 through 32.

My life is stuck in the dirt. Now make me live again according to your promise! I confessed my ways and you answered me. Now teach me your statutes! Help me understand what your precepts are about so I can contemplate your wondrous works! My spirit sags because of grief. Now raise me up according to your promise! Remove all false ways from me; show mercy to me by means of your instruction. I've chosen the way of faithfulness; I'm set on your rules. I'm holding tight to your laws, Lord. Please don't let me be put to shame. I run the same path as your commandments because you give my heart insight. (Psalm 119:25-32 CEB+)

Our next reading is from Philippians chapter 4, verse 4 through 9.

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:4-9 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Matthew chapter 6, verses 5 through 8 and 16-18.

[Jesus said] "When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you. "When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask.

*“And when you fast, don’t put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Then you won’t look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
(Matthew 6:5-8, 16-18 CEB+)*

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

This week marks a new four-week series looking at the means of grace. You might remember a few weeks ago we talked about the means of grace as part of our Methodist Roots series. Over these next few weeks, we will look at the ways we respond to God’s grace with acts of piety and acts of mercy as both an individual and a community. Works of piety are the things we do for ourselves as an individual and a community, while acts of mercy can be seen as what we do for others as both an individual and a community. If you remember last week, we discussed the way we interact as both individuals and a community, and we further that understanding with the means of grace. Over four weeks we will look at a different aspect of the means of grace. For our first message, we begin with our works of piety, and we begin with individual practices. That means we start with devotion. The intention of our devotion with this series is to think about the things we do for our personal spiritual growth. We look at how we accept God’s grace and continue to move forward in that grace through the practices in our personal spiritual life. This includes many things that we do for our personal devotion. It encompasses our personal prayers, our studies, and our spiritual disciplines, such as fasting.

I chose our scriptures for today to reflect the different spiritual practices that we use in our personal devotion. These are things we do that help us to experience God’s grace. I want to note that I switched to the Common English Bible for this series. This translation has more conversational modern language, and I felt it would help us better connect to the means of grace. It also helps to use language we might not be used to in order to help us have fresh eyes when reading Scripture. We begin with Psalm 119 where we hear about seeking God in our life to help us. That we want to understand and contemplate all that God has done. That we want to be refined in that faithfulness so that we can be better people. And we have that last line, “I run the same path as your commandments because you give my heart insight.” The psalm is about seeking instruction from God, seeking God’s help. That is something we do when we study Scripture. But we can study without using cross-references and looking up scholarship every time. I enjoy that kind of study, but we also study devotionally, where we connect with Scripture on a personal level. This includes the way we reflect and pray as we read. You don’t have to do deep in-depth studies for this, because the important part is just making that connection with God.

We hear that same type of focus in Philippians. That we should be glad in the Lord. Instead of being anxious, we should turn to God in prayer because the peace of God can overwhelm us and flood us with a sense of calm. This helps us to refocus not just our feelings but our lives. We hear about seeking God in all things. That we bring our troubles to God in

prayer. That we hand them over because God gives us the strength that we need to keep going. The strength to be able to continue to do all that we do. And it helps us to refocus our efforts. It gives us the calm we need so that we can study and grow together. We also hear in Philippians that we should look for what is excellent and admirable and focus on those things. That we don't have to focus on the negative. Not on the worries, but on the things that we can admire. All that is true. All that is holy. All that is just. All that is pure. All that is lovely. And all that is worthy of praise. Focus on that. Because that is where you find God. That is where Christ will be. And that is where the Holy Spirit is trying to get us to. Because I think about how often we are drawn to the opposite of those. How often we are drawn to the things that are false. Things that are selfish. Things that are cruel. Things full of hate. And we see those things and we see the way that people are so easily drawn to them. Because of fear. But we are told that we don't need fear because we have Christ. We don't need anxiety because we have Christ with us to strengthen us.

And that is one of the things that we get from our prayer life. When we are in prayer, it helps us to focus our intentions. It is an ongoing conversation with God. That our spiritual practices help to define the lives that we will live. We hear about that in our gospel reading from Matthew. Because we are told about how we should and shouldn't practice our spiritual life. Jesus tells us that we need to pray in a way that respects God reflects what we want in a relationship with God. That we shouldn't be like the hypocrites, the people who stand up and want to be heard. Because they don't pray to be heard by God. They pray to be heard by everyone around them. And that is who they are devoted to. That is the reward they seek and that is the reward they get. But when we focus on God, God is our reward. God's goodness and mercy, God's grace is what we seek when we pray. And Jesus says that we should go and close the door so that we are by ourselves. That we should have time alone with God and have that one-on-one conversation. I say conversation because I always consider prayer to be a conversation where we speak, and we listen. Because I always want there to be room for God to speak to me. And one of the ways we can make room is by following the instructions Jesus gives about prayer. He tells us we shouldn't just pile up words. That we don't need to have more and more words thinking that it is the quantity that makes us heard. God knows what we need. It is the intention of asking that matters. The words are not always there. I'm not the best with spontaneous prayers. I can't tell you the number of times my prayer has simply been, "God, you know what I need, because I'm not sure I do."

Jesus goes on to talk about our other spiritual practices as well, like fasting. Now there are many ways to fast, and it is a wonderful spiritual discipline. Though the Bible often talks about it as fasting from food, there are other ways we can fast as a spiritual discipline as part of the means of grace with the way that we live out God's grace. Jesus tells us that when we fast, we shouldn't distort ourselves to show off to everyone that we're fasting. Don't look a hot mess for God. Wash your face. Brush your hair. Clean yourself up. Because fasting isn't for the people around you. Fasting is for you to bring you closer to God. And that can be fasting of any

sort. Because not everybody can do a fast. Whether it's medical reasons or that it just makes you miserable. If it's not an effective spiritual practice to fast from food, we find other ways to fast. It could be that you have a set hour every day where you fast from all electronics. It could be you have a day where you set them aside. It could be that every week you have one day where you fast from soda because it makes you stop and be intentional about your choices. Maybe you fast from television because too often you sit in front of the TV and lose track of time. And so, you pick one day out of the week where the television stays off and you find other things to do. Because fasting can be from anything in your life that you can let go of to spend that time relating to Christ. Because anytime you give something up and you make time for God that's a bit of fasting.

All of the ways we practice devotion in our spiritual life, whether it is study or fasting or prayer, we let ourselves be drawn in to connect with God. And it doesn't always mean that we have to learn something from it. Sometimes we think there needs to always be a revelation for something to matter. Because sometimes it's just finding a way further that connection with God. We don't have to learn something new every time we pick up the Bible, but it helps if our hearts connect to the Lord every time we pick up the Bible. I may not get a life changing answer every time I pray but every time I pray I'm there with Christ. My life may not change dramatically every time I fast but every time I do Christ is there with me. And it's those things that bring me back to thinking about God's grace that help me develop as an individual. I pray that you will be able to find the same connection as you develop your own spiritual life. That these acts of devotion help you to connect to God and strengthen your faith. That we all experience God's grace in ways that help us to continue to grow in Christ. I pray that we may all find ways to connect with our Heavenly Father to remember the grace that is there for us. That we may follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our personal growth journey. And that our acts of devotion will help us remember the love that we find in Christ that makes our joy complete. 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 – Means of Grace

This series is all about how we experience and share God's grace. "Means of Grace" is a four-week series that forks through the way that we understand how God works in our lives as United Methodists. We will look at both individual and communal ways that we live out the love of Christ in our daily lives through works of piety and works of mercy.

8/25: Devotion

9/1: Worship

9/8: Compassion

9/15: Justice

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752 Walnut

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Neoga, IL 62447

(217)895-2809

Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St

PO Box 267

Toledo, IL 62468

Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

2799 Etna Rd

Mattoon, IL 61938

Worship 9:30am

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