

July 24, 2016

"Our Daily Bread"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Lord, teach us to pray.

Over the next two months our children's focus will be "Fruit of the Spirit" from Galatians 5:22, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These characteristics are signs that the Spirit's presence is within us, and form the basis of our life in relationship with God and our prayer life.

Sometimes people tell me they don't know how to pray or what to pray. Sometimes people have little to no experience of prayer in their lives. When I was at General Conference in Portland in May I heard about a new church community in the former East Germany. They are reaching out to young adults in really creative ways. But they discovered that although many had a deep desire for prayer or something like it, they literally had never done it, had no idea. They had not grown up in a church like our kids have.

So, to teach how to pray, this new church created a Gummy Bear prayer card for these brand new Christians. You know those little chewy candies in a variety of colors that look like little bears? They labeled each color after a gift of the Spirit, inviting people into a relationship with God and a new life of prayer: They put out packets of Gummy Bear candies, invited people to take one or several and begin to pray as they were led.

Kindness (yellow) Human nature is not always kind. Remember a time when you received an unexpected kindness or offered kindness to a stranger. Offer someone a smile today.

Patience (green) The only way to learn patience is to grow from trying circumstances. Set aside anxiety. Become aware of God's presence inviting you to grow.

Joy (orange) The world is filled with beauty, yet we are often too busy to notice. Take a moment to enjoy life and give thanks.

Love (red) God loved us before we loved God. Ask God to help you receive and grow in love, as God loves us all.

Peace (white) Close your eyes and imagine the Holy Spirit descending upon your life and bringing peace.

Lord, teach us to pray.

Gummy bears may or may not be your thing, but I hope you get the point. Some of us may have been at this prayer thing a lot longer than others. Some learned to pray as children. Others may have never learned or never become comfortable praying. No matter where we find ourselves, we all have a lot to learn about the life of prayer.

I think my favorite easy fit model for how to pray comes from a book I shared with you a few years ago, Anne Lamott's *HELP THANKS WOW: Three Essential Survival Prayers*.

If you're ever stuck and don't know how to pray, just remember this version of what we more traditionally call prayers of supplication, gratitude, and awe. Lamott suggests prayers for HELP, THANKS and WOW.

HELP...for myself, my family, my friends....for our community, nation and world.

And when our burdens are lifted, received into God's all-embracing Spirit, we are overcome with gratitude and we say THANKS. We give thanks. And our hearts turn from sorrow and despair to new life and hope. Thanks.

The WOW part really frames it all--the awe and gratitude we feel for creation, for those who love and befriend us, for the amazing grace that holds us and lifts us up and allows us to glimpse a future not of our own making.

"Wow is the praise prayer," Lamott says. "The prayer where we're finally speechless... When I don't know what else to do I go outside, and I see the sky and the trees and a bird flies by, the just sheer beauty of creation...or when you first see the new baby, and you say, 'Wow...'. Wow is the prayer of wonder."

Well, Robert has certainly given us cause for a mighty THANKS and WOW prayer this morning, hasn't he? A new baby. Bringing great joy to his family and reminding us of Carl Sandburg's line... "a baby is God's opinion that life should go on!" And don't we need that affirmation in the midst of this otherwise burdensome and difficult summer?

A baby! Thanks! Wow!

Lord, teach us to pray.

Most days, perhaps like many of you, I pray the HELP prayer a lot. Help me get through this, that, or the other thing. Help me know how to handle such and so. Help me know the right thing to do. And each day on my morning walk I pray for help for you—all those on our prayer list, others who have shared concerns or challenges with me. Some mornings, each step is a cry for help, until I realize that poor God might be getting a bit weary of all that supplication. And so, I tell myself to just be quiet. And listen. That happened the other day and I realized that in my calling out, I'd been missing all together a great choir of birds throughout the tree tops, singing to greet the rising sun. Bird prayers of wow and thanks. Prayers like unto that of the words of Scripture: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

Lord, teach us to pray.

Sometimes our prayers need to be way bigger than just ourselves. I saw just this past week that a fellow United Methodist pastor would be giving the Invocation at the Republican National Convention. My heavens, I thought, how would one pray in such a setting as that? Our United Methodist News Service carried the story. I was reassured by his photo—he looked kind and loving. His eyes had a bit of a seasoned sparkle.

Turns out that the Rev. Steve Bailey is the North Coast district superintendent for the Ohio East Conference, the district that includes Cleveland and surrounding areas. He previously pastored a church south of Cleveland for 16 years and has served as a police chaplain.

I was impressed by how Rev. Bailey said he approached this responsibility. He said: “When you write a prayer, that’s a very intimate thing. It has occupied my mind for some time.” I appreciate public prayers that are thoughtful, that have been marinated in reflection if you will, and that reveal an intimate relationship with God. Rev. Bailey went on to note that this prayer “is intended for a worldwide audience. It speaks of how all faith traditions recognize God as our creator. It lifts up a request for God to transform us and make us a greater, more courageous people.”

His three-minute time limit would be enough, he said, and clarified that the prayer was “not really intended to be an endorsement or repudiation of any political party” but a prayer for God’s people “at this time in our lives.”

His invocation, he said, would identify serious issues, including racism and sexual trafficking; advise against “belittling people who don’t agree with us;” make the connection between power and responsibility and ask God to help everyone have “grace, courage, compassion and hope.” I offered a prayer of THANKS for the wisdom of Rev. Bailey and for his United Methodist witness to personal and social holiness. And I said a WOW prayer for our God who could raise up just such a servant for a time when grace, courage, compassion and hope are so needed in our world and in our lives.

Lord, teach us to pray.

Obviously few of us will ever be tapped to pray in public before thousands of people and a national TV audience. But we do pray every day as our spirit tries to hold the many layers and levels of our lives together. We live our lives on many levels at once—the very personal, immediate level of our own family, friends, health. The community level of work, colleagues, congregation. We are impacted as well by events in our nation and in this world, and we try and hold all of it in prayer. I don’t know about you, but quite frankly, sometimes I feel my spirit ping-ponging around all these levels, having a hard time holding it all together in some coherent whole. Especially in challenging, perplexing, often fearful and violent times as these, my prayers become a cacophony of HELP, THANKS, HELP, WOW, HELP. HELP, HELP, HELP.

Sometimes it helps to share our prayer needs with others—a close friend, a pastor, our Intercessory Prayer Group, by making a Prayer Request on our webpage, or through our Prayer Quilt ministry. I hope you will always feel welcome to fill out a prayer card, or request a prayer quilt, or stop by our Chapel on Sunday or during the week for a time of prayer. Sometimes when we feel we can’t pray ourselves, we need simply join the congregation, come to worship, and let the prayers we hear and say and sing together in this sacred time carry us through mute seasons in our own hearts.

And sometimes we just need to be quiet. We need to sit in silence and empty our thoughts. We need to let go of all the things that get in the way of an actual relationship with God. We need to silence our chatter, and listen, listen, listen... to “listen with the ear of our heart” as St. Benedict said. And in the silence, God’s love will draw forth our prayer.

In those times, I’m drawn back to the whispered words of the Psalmist: “Be still and know that I am God.” I find great centering comfort in praying it in the manner suggested by Bishop Tutu’s daughter, Rev. Mpho Tutu, praying this Scripture verse by dropping one word at the end of each line as we pray:

Be still and know that I am God
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know that
Be still and know
Be still and
Be still
Be
Be

Lord, teach us to pray.

God’s Word invites us to pray unceasingly. Let us pray prayers of Help, Thanks, and Wow. Let us pray rainbow prayers for kindness, patience, joy, love, and peace. Let us pray when we do not know how to pray. Let us pray when we have lost the words to say. Let us pray when we are tempted to put our own desires first and need to be reminded of God’s will for us and for this world. Let us pray when we have grown distant from God. Let us pray when things aren’t right in this world. And let us pray when our hearts are bursting with joy and gratitude.

And if we listen as we pray, God’s Spirit will be constantly teaching us how to pray, that over the course of our life and into the life to come, our prayer will become more faithful, more holy, and more life-giving for us and for us all.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN

Notes:
Anne Lamott’s Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers. Riverhead, 2012.

Linda Bloom. “Offering a prayer in Cleveland.” July 20, 2016 | NEW YORK (UMNS).

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