

Bold, Nervy Prayer

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Psalm 17:1-5; Genesis 18:16-33
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
June 9, 2024

During this summer, we are going to engage in a sermon series on *prayer*. The way we'll do this is by a rather leisurely walk through a series of characters in the Bible, reflecting on their interactions with God in prayer, and seeing what we can learn from them for our own lives.

Many of us have questions about prayer. A number of folks will hesitate if asked to lead a group in prayer out loud, being nervous about praying in public. Sometimes, people wonder what is actually going on when we pray. If we are having a conversation with God, how do we know there's really anyone on the other end of the line? How can I tell if God is hearing me? Should I do all the talking? And if I'm supposed to listen, what exactly am I listening for? Are there some topics that are off-limits in prayer, some things that are not worthy of being prayed for? Can I pray for a parking spot at the mall? What about for my basketball or baseball team to win? How polite should we be in our prayers? Is there any language that is off-limits? Is prayer ever a way of avoiding taking action that is necessary? Can we use spirituality as a pious tool to keep us from doing something that might bring about difficulty? What if we pray for something that seems obviously good, like an end to poverty or an end to war in the world, and then it doesn't happen? What's going on there? What if prayer leads us to being disappointed with God, for not responding the way we would like? What if 2 opposing sides, 2 enemies, are both praying for a particular outcome? Is God supposed to pick favorites? Does God grant blessings in response to prayer? And if so, does God grant those blessings based on the number of people who are praying for it? If so, how do we square that with the biblical promise that Jesus will seek out a single lost sheep who is all alone? And if not, then what exactly are we hoping might happen when we ask other people to pray for something?

So many questions. Questions about prayer abound, and we should never be embarrassed when we have questions about them. The church is a community of seekers and pilgrims that can gently and patiently explore these things together. The church, at its heart, is a community of prayer. Prayer is the beating heart of the life of faith, and when we cut ourselves off from prayer, we will be cutting ourselves off from that heart. Prayer is how we abide with Jesus, how we as the branches stay rooted and connected to Jesus as the vine, so that his life flows in us. More than one person has said that the renewal of the church in our time will be the renewal of the prayer life of the church. That is the way.

Over 20 years ago, my wife Laura and I were taking classes at the Servant Leadership School in DC, one of the ministries of the Church of the Saviour there. I was taking a class with Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of that congregation, who with his wife Mary was, for many of us, a radiant model of the Christian life. Some of you may have known Gordon and Mary. When I was taking a class with him, Gordon was well into his 80s, and he was sitting around a table with our small class, a collection of folks (as I recall) in our 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. We hung on Gordon's every word, because we saw him as a kind of guru, someone who had figured it out, someone who was just dripping with wisdom. One day, we were discussing where in our lives we needed and wanted to grow. I can't remember what it was that I said on that day, but I recall vividly that when it came around to Gordon, this master of the Christian life, he said, "I need to learn how to pray. My prayer life is very shallow and immature." I remember staring at him with disbelief, thinking that if this icon of the Christian life had an immature prayer life, what did that mean for me?

Abiding in Christ, being connected to God in prayer, allowing God's life to flow through us in every interaction, these are not things at which we will say, "Yeah, I'm really good at that." All of us are meant to grow in the life of prayer. We will be growing in it *forever*. We will always need to grow in prayer. Prayer cultivates in us a humility that we desperately need. It is a humility that will keep us moving towards God. Further up, and further in, as CS Lewis might say.

One of the many blessings of our monthly Bible study with folks from Shiloh Baptist Church was a description of prayer from Shiloh's pastor, Dr. Rob Cheeks. Pastor Cheeks said that sometimes Christians practice what he calls "bungee-cord spirituality." With bungee-cord spirituality, we will begin the day, or begin a meeting, with a time of prayer, where we are connected to God. But then, we will go through the day – or go through the meeting – as though we are on our own. We will make decisions on our own, we go into interactions on our own, we do things as though we're on our own. It's as though we start things off and say, "God help me and bless me." And then we say, "OK, God. I'll see you later," And off we go into the far country. Then we come back to God at the end of the day, or the end of the meeting, and we say, "How'd that go, God?" But in between, we have been operating as though we're all on our own. You might call this "practical atheism."

Pastor Cheeks said, "There is another way." We can go through the day with God. We can consciously walk and move with God through the day. We do not need to leave God's presence in order to take care of business. We can learn to do our business in God's presence. Because we're in God's presence, whether we're conscious of it or not; but we don't avail ourselves of the benefits of God's presence.

The psalms generally, and Genesis 18, in particular, give us vivid examples of this kind of ongoing, interactive relationship with God. Genesis 18 gives us our ancestor Abraham, having an intimate, back-and-forth, conversational, dialogical relationship

with God. Abraham is a full partner in this relationship. In this text, God has heard about the oppressive evil that is being done in the city of Sodom - evil that Ezekiel 16 suggests has to do with the arrogant wealthy taking advantage of and mistreating the vulnerable poor. God is ready to unleash the forces of chaos upon the city, and in our text, Abraham intercedes for the city. "O Lord," he says, "What if there are 50 persons there who are trying to do what is right?" OK, God says, I won't do it, if there are 50. "What if there are 45?" Fine, God says. I won't do it for 45. What about 40? What about 30? Will you give me 20? Can I get 10? (You may want to take Abraham with you when you're buying a car.)

Now, this is just a story from the Bible. But what I want us to observe is the way that our ancestor Abraham, one of the models of faithfulness in the Bible – Abraham was not a perfect man, but he is given to us as someone for us to learn from – Abraham lives in a dialogical, conversational, back-and-forth relationship with God. This is not bungee-cord spirituality. This is a spirituality that moves through the day, in the ongoing, conscious awareness of living in the presence of God.

This dialogical, relational faith is not just for heroes of faith like Abraham or Moses, or Gordon and Mary Cosby. This relational faith is available, and intended, for you and for me.

Friends, God wants to shape you into the person God has created you to be. Offering yourself to God in prayer, spending time with God in prayer, developing an ongoing, conscious awareness of being with God is how we abide in God. We are always abiding in something. Sometimes, we abide in our smartphones, scrolling through our social media feed. Sometimes, we abide in our TV screens, trying to distract ourselves or fill the time. We are always abiding in something. We know when we are giving our time and our attention to things that are making us smaller, meaner, more fearful versions of ourselves. But we can abide in God, we can give our attention to God's presence with us. We can talk with God, sharing with God especially the things that are causing us difficulty, causing us anxiety, keeping us up at night. We can talk with God about those things, and then we can allow God to gaze upon us with God's love and God's mercy and God's healing, purifying grace. Over time, God will use our prayer to form us in the image of Jesus Christ, from the inside out.

It's going to be a fun summer, exploring our relationships with God, diving deep into the life of prayer, allowing God to take us where God wants us to go. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.