3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

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*Numbers 14:11-23*

*And the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.’  
 But Moses said to the Lord, ‘Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, “It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.” And now, therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,   
 “The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.”   
 Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.’  
 Then the Lord said, ‘I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord— none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it.*

*Luke 18:1-8*

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” ’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’*

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“Pastor Stephen, how do I pray - like really?” This was one of the first answers I got when I asked y’all to tell me what y’all wanted me to preach on this month. And this was one answer of several that all had to do with looking for guidance in strengthening our individual prayers lives.

For many of us, I would suspect, we find communal prayer to be a little more straight-forward because, well, we’re all reading - or singing - from the same script, so to speak. And there’s great wisdom and powerful connection to be shared when we do that every week during our worship. But sometimes when we walk out those doors we struggle to practice a transformative prayer life when it’s just “me and God.” What are some of those barriers that often make that the case? Speaking from my own experience, these are some that I’ve encountered and I think you have as well:

* **Time** - we are a busy people with various, sometimes competing responsibilities and our prayer life can get put on the back burner unintentionally.
* **Noise** - we live in a world with a lot of noise. As wonderful as it is that we have technology and social media to keep us connected with one another, without appropriate boundaries and “unplugging” ourselves on occasion, we can find ourselves overwhelmed and overstimulated to the point where pausing for prayer is tough.
* **Intimidation** - we don’t know where to start. There so much brokenness and need in the world, it can feel like our prayers are so very little in comparison.
* **Doubt** - We wonder if any of it matters. Bad things happen to good people. Natural disasters kill innocent lives. The voices of hatred and rage and division seems to take up all the oxygen in the room and cynicism is a very big temptation for all of us. Why even bother praying? What good does it actually do?

I stand before you this day as someone who has struggled to maintain a healthy, robust individual prayer life. My prayer life, like many of you, I trust, has its ebbs and flows. I hear the story of Moses standing before God and imploring God to change God’s mind and I’m in awe of the audacity of that prayer. I long to have Moses’ courage to stand before God and demand one more chance, either myself or for those I love, even when it is undeserved. I long to have the persistence of the widow in today’s Gospel passage, to trust in the fact that if this woman got justice from a cranky, unjust judge then how much more so will God attend to my heart-felt prayers.

And yet, I struggle. Time, noise, intimidation, doubt, they all cause me to lose heart. But, in my better moments, I rest in the fact that the persistence of prayer, in whatever forms of it we practice, changes us as much as it changes God (as today’s first passage suggests is possible). Prayer is changing me these days in the following ways:

* The prayer I pray when I’m stuck in traffic and one of you who is hurting comes to my mind reminds me that prayer can happen anywhere and anytime.
* The prayer I pray when I’m writing my sermons, asking God to give me the right words, reminds me that I can’t do this by myself and that I need help; from God, from my family and friends, and from you, the Church.
* The prayer I pray when I’m swimming laps at the pool reminds me that prayer takes practice and training, intentionality and patience.
* The prayer I pray when I’m watering my plants reminds me that all is not lost and that God’s creative work in creation is not finished.
* The prayer I pray with Hazel Grace and Winnie before putting them to bed - the “Happy Hearts Prayer” they learned at our church preschool - fills me with gratitude for the gift of our children and of the village that’s helping us raise them.

All of these prayers, in their own small but powerful ways, are changing me. Sometimes my prayers are gentle and ordered. Other times they’re rough around the edges and bear a striking resemblance to the clutter and chaos of the toy room our two toddlers destroy on a regular basis. I think the central truth of prayer is that it can be done in a seemingly endless amount of ways. This truth is, of course, both the gift *and* challenge of prayer. One person may be gifted in a particular form of prayer and another person quite adept at a different form. Don’t get caught up in the comparison game. Instead, focus on the ways you feel the Holy Spirit is encouraging you to keep the communication line open between you and God.

Now, I have done my best to make sure that this sermon series includes practical suggestions that I hope will bless you in your lives. Some of the spiritual practices I’ve lifted up are therapy, physical exercise, practicing sabbath, volunteering, and surrounding ourselves with people who will remind us that we’re enough. And so, today I offer these suggestions for a robust prayer life; with the disclaimer that I am no “expert” in prayer; but these are what’s working for me these days.

1. **Where we pray matters**. Obviously, we can pray anywhere. But *everywhere* isn’t always conducive to placing ourselves in a prayerful posture where we’re relatively free of distraction to focus on what we need to talk to God about. Yes, that prayer while changing a diaper on a crying baby or waiting in line at the grocery store can be valid prayers. But don’t forget to carve out holy space - physical holy space - in your life where you can go to pray. This can be the church, which is open for prayer throughout the week if you need it. It can be a garden, or an arts and crafts station, or a kitchen, or a walking labyrinth. For me, it’s the upper deck to our house that I’ve been filling with plants the past few months. On a related note: I harvested my first ever tomato earlier this week and gave it to my therapist as a token of my gratitude for her work with me these past six months. That gesture, to me, was in and of itself an act of prayer. A prayer of gratitude for her and a prayer of gratitude to God for giving me a tool to help care for myself.
2. **“Thou Shall Not Steal” doesn’t apply to prayer.** Now, obviously, taking credit for someone else’s work is always wrong. But there are so many great prayer resources out there that are meant to deepen the vocabulary of our prayer lives. Our denomination has what we call the Book of Common Worship that was recently revised less than 10 years ago. The French community of Taize is a wonderful prayer resource as well as anything that comes from the Iona Community in Scotland. If you’re interested in a less Western-centric source of prayer I would recommend my colleague Claudio Carvalhaes’ book *Liturgies from Below* which is a collection of prayers from the Asia-Pacific Islands, the Americas, Africa, and Europe.
3. **Hymnals aren’t just for corporate worship.** If you don’t have a copy of our hymnal, Glory to God, I highly recommend purchasing a copy of it for your home, along with a variety of other hymnals. A concrete thing you can do every week is to take a copy of the bulletin home with you and read or sing to yourself the hymns we sang that Sunday throughout the week. Let their words become yours. Use the text to inspire your prayers. Pray them with yourself. Pray them with your family. One of my favorite prayers was when I was holding Hazel Grace and Winnie shortly after they were born, singing I Sing the Mighty Power of God as I marveled at the wonder of creation and the responsibilities of parenthood.
4. **Explore the texts we engaged in worship each week**. Our weekly worship should be the beginning of a conversation, not the end. Again, take your bulletins home with you and read the scriptures throughout the week. Hold those scriptures in your heart as you go to God in prayer. What questions do you have? Lift those up to God. Invite yourself to relate to the struggles, trials, and triumphs of the characters in the text. For example, after reading the story of Moses standing in the brink between God and God’s people, allow that story to steer you to places in your life where you need God’s intervention. Or, after reading the story of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, allow that story to widen your awareness of the places in our neighborhood where people’s demands for justice are going unheard.
5. **Be honest**. The best prayer is not the most organized one. The best prayer is not the most poetic, or cohesive, or comprehensive one. The best prayer is the most honest. Are you angry? Then take that to God. Trust me, God can take it. Are you fearful and anxious? Let it all out. Are you grieving? Then take that hurt to God. As we will sing here shortly, no matter what it is, take it to the Lord in prayer. Some of the most cathartic prayers I’ve ever prayed are prayers that I cannot utter from this pulpit because of their vulgarity. I’m convinced that God prefers our anger over our indifference.
6. **Don’t just pray with your voice**. Our whole bodies can be part of a healthy prayer life. As I mentioned earlier, we’ll have an opportunity for a kind of prayer together this Wednesday at 3:00 P.M. when Catherine Eagles leads a chair yoga session for any who are interested. Sometimes we forget that prayer isn’t just something we do with words. The warm embrace between friends is a kind of prayer. Holding the hand of someone in pain is a kind of prayer. Using our bodies in ways that treat ourselves and our neighbors with kindness is a very holy form of prayer. Creating art, writing hymns, singing songs of praise, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, taking a walk on a beautiful summer day, tending a garden, laughing with a toddler, all of these things are forms of embodied prayer.

Friends, I hope this list helps you as you grow with me as disciples in prayer. Ultimately, whatever forms of prayer you find work for you, remember this: “effective” prayer is prayer that transforms. Transforms yourself and your relationship with God and neighbor. >>

I’ll close this day with one of my favorite quotes from Pope Francis: “You pray for the hungry, then you feed them. That is how prayer works.”

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**