

Sermon Title: *Praying as we are*

Psalm 139:1-18

- <sup>1</sup> O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.  
<sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.  
<sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.  
<sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.  
<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
<sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
<sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
<sup>11</sup> If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night’,  
<sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
- <sup>13</sup> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works, that I know very well.  
<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
<sup>16</sup> Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.  
<sup>17</sup> How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!  
<sup>18</sup> I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Luke 5:15-16

- <sup>15</sup>But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.<sup>16</sup>But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Spirituality is not being told what to do, but being reminded of who we are. And it is only Christian Spirituality, says Marlene Kropf, when love is at the center.<sup>1</sup>

I have shared before about visiting the “National Chavez Center” a few years ago, this is the head-quarters of the United Farm Workers, the organization established by Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta to advocate for the fair wages and treatment of Farm Workers. And as part of that visit I had a chance to take a tour of the property with Paul Chavez, Cesar’s son – on that tour we saw Cesar’s house and office, left how it was after his death. And I scanned his office shelves, I noticed many books on prayer and meditation. And Paul told our group how his father would get up early every morning and climb the hill behind his house and spend time there in prayer and meditation. Every morning. All this work, undergirded by a daily trip to the hill for a time of silence, prayer, and meditation.

Last week, Jenna, Anne Hausrath, I and a few others from Idaho and Oregon had a chance to go to the US/Mexico border – to learn about migration and border issues – to meet people and hear first-hand about life on the border and the impacts of our policies and practices. And we will share more about that trip in a few weeks, but what I want to share here is about the couple who hosted us, Jack and Linda Knox. Jack and Linda, in their retirement have moved to the border – they have moved to Douglas, Arizona and live just a few blocks from the border wall. This is their life and their work, building relationships across the border – building

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<sup>1</sup> Not to say that other forms of spirituality do not have love at the center, but it can not be ‘Christian’ spirituality if it does not have love at the center.

relationships with migrants, with Americans and Mexicans, with Border Patrol guards, and with groups like ours that come to learn and see what is happening. And every morning Jack and Linda walk to the wall and pray. At first, they said, Border Patrol cars would roll-up on them as they were praying, to see what they were doing. But, eventually, they got accustomed to them praying there each morning. One morning, Jack said, an agent rolled down his window and asked them, “What are you praying for here each morning?”

“For all those impacted by this wall and our policies,” replied Jack. Which included that Border Patrol agent who had just asked that question.

And the scriptures tell us that Jesus, after being with large crowds of people, after long periods of teaching and healing and listening – he would regularly withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Our lives always follow patterns, but they are not always patterns set forth (or illuminated) by God or which follow God’s design. If we don’t intentionally seek God in our patterns, we will fall to the default patterns of our society: to the patterns of fear, to the patterns of dualism and polarization, to the patterns of consumerism and militarism, to the patterns of a false idea of security. Prayer and spiritual practices can help gently nudge us and sometimes powerfully dislodge us out of unwholesome or destructive patterns and realign us toward God’s grand design.<sup>2</sup> And so, of course prayer is many things and be defined in many ways – certainly one of those ways is that prayer a counter-script to the scripts of fear and exclusion and othering and wall-building; prayer is a seeking of realignment to the ways of God and God’s kingdom. Prayer

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<sup>2</sup> This concept of prayer realigning us with God’s patterns comes from Marlene Kropf, in her course “Christian Development and Spiritual Formation” at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

is the work of keeping our heart open in the midst of all that life brings, of seeking to not letting our hearts be hardened, of not closing ourselves off to the ways of God's Spirit on the move.

And so today we begin a four-week series on Prayer and Spiritual Practices, thinking about what prayer is, how it functions and does not function in our lives, and the different forms of prayer which have become known as 'spiritual practices.' Prayer is something we do here each Sunday, we pray for peace, we offer thanksgiving to God, we ask for our money & offerings to be used by God and for ourselves to be shaped in the act of giving them, and we pray for one another, in joy and in pain. And so we pray together regularly, but rarely talk about what is happening in these acts – of what we think is happening when we bow our heads together, or how we hope these actions are forming us as people of God. Over these next weeks, we will look explicitly at prayer and try to put some words to these acts of mystery.

I think that perhaps my most vital learning in terms of prayer and spiritual practices came in this simple phrase, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." That may seem quite obvious to you, "pray as you can, not as you can't." But for me, it was revolutionary. If you were around Hyde Park my first few years here, you might remember me sharing a bit about my struggles with prayer – my struggles to believe that God was still at work in the world. That these have been some of the great obstacles in my life of faith – that for years, when I would contemplate seminary, but each winter as I wondered if I should go, I would determine "if I cannot even pray, I probably shouldn't be going to seminary – if I am not sure if God is active in the world, I should not be going to seminary." Until finally, after running out of options, I conceded that perhaps, "since I

cannot pray and I am not sure if God is active in the world, I should go to seminary.” There, in that exploration, I would then decide if I could be a pastor.

And it was there that I learned to pray as I can. To take who I am – my personality and natural ways of relating to the world and others – and apply that to prayer, rather than trying to pray as my mother or grandmother, than my pastors or – well, basically all models of prayer I had seen up to that point. In the Protestant Christian Church, we mostly have one way of modeling prayer, “of closing our eyes (perhaps kneeling, perhaps folding our hands) and speaking words to God.” This is what prayer is – this is what we model, what we teach our children and each other. This is what I mostly model as pastor – whether it is here, or before a meal, or with the youth. But that is not prayer. It is one form of prayer. An important and valuable form. A form of prayer that works and connects many people to God and one another. My mom, for instance, this form of prayer works for her – it is vital to her life, to her health and connection to God. It works for my Grandpa, who tells me that when he wakes up in the middle of the night, he prays for each person in his Sunday School class, one person at a time, until he falls back asleep. It is better than counting sheep, he says. So this form of prayer works for many, but not for all of us.

We are different and diverse people. We relate to each other and to the world differently. We have different personality types. We are different numbers on the Enneagram. We think and reason and relate differently. So we are not just different personality types, but different spirituality types. God created us with great diversity, and in that diversity, it was not God’s intention that we should all relate the same way to God. And thus, we need many and diverse

forms of prayer to match the different people that we are. Thus, we must pray as you can, not as you can't.

I am sure that some of you came to this understanding quite naturally, you always knew that you felt closer to the Divine in some places more than others – you recognized singing as prayer, or hiking as prayer, or drawing or yoga as prayer. This learning did not come naturally to me, it had to be spelled out to me, many times.

<sup>3</sup>This exercise for me, learning my Spirituality type, it helped me understand prayer in a new way. It helped me to realize that I pray and relate to God in much different ways. If you have never done any work around personality type or enneagram numbers and how that relates to your spirituality & prayer life, I would highly recommend that you take this simple quiz. It thinks about people as having four basic Spiritual Types: Head/Intellectual type, a more mystical type, a more heart/feeling type, and a more kingdom/action-oriented type.

I learned that I should not think of prayer only as being quiet and speaking to God. For me, my spiritual types are mostly head (1) and kingdom (4). These are intellectual and action-oriented. This is one of the downsides of having one main pastoral voice, for those who have a more heart or mystical spirituality, you might not connect as much to my style or what I reflect each week here as I am not speaking in your first spiritual language.

For me, this learning has meant to not think of studying scripture as something different than prayer, but as a form of prayer. For me, it is a vital part of prayer – of communing with God, of opening myself to the Spirit of God as I study and read theology each week. This is

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<sup>3</sup> At this point I passed out a hand-out, “Determining Your Spirituality Type” based on the work of Corrine Ware.

prayer for me, if I am open to God in this action. And to think of my time at Corpus Christi House<sup>4</sup> as prayer, not as something different than a spiritual practice. But I have to posture myself in such a way that these are prayerful – that I am not just looking to scripture to confirm what I already think, or that I am not just going to Corpus to help others, but that I am going for mutual transformation.

My time at Corpus is prayer in that each morning I am there, I have an encounter which reminds me that I am not in control; each morning I am going to have an opportunity to be humbled (to have someone angry at me); each morning I am going to have a chance to see God in someone, if I am open to it; and each morning I am there I am going to have an opportunity to see God at work.

These are our starting points – our entry points. To begin by praying as who we are – to keep in mind, “how do we relate; how do we grow in other relationships; what is our intelligence.” And move forward from there.

In the back of the church, as you leave, there is another one-page sheet there which talks about our different intelligences and learning styles, and the different types of prayer that might most connect to us. For example, those of you with musical intelligence, you might pray in the form of singing, of song-writing, of listening meditatively to music. Those of you who have a linguistic intelligence, you might pray through writing poetry, through reading new and different theology, or through journaling. So, I encourage you to pick this up as you think about different ways of praying as you can.

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<sup>4</sup> Corpus Christi House is Boise’s homeless day shelter.

When we were in Iraq, I would often find myself feeling anxious or nervous. It was not like we were in danger, but that did not keep me from often feeling anxious or afraid. And when I would feel that anxiety rising, when I would notice it getting acute, I would sing to myself one of the songs we sang earlier, “Calm me Lord, as you calmed the storm, lead me Lord, keep me from harm.” Usually, I would just sing it quietly in my head, but if I was alone or with a bit of space, I would sing it very quietly to myself. I would sing it over and again, until I would slowly feel a bit of calm. Not that the anxiousness had disappeared, but it lessened and became manageable once again.

And I remembered, in preparing this sermon, back in my wrestling days when I would be warming-up at the side of a mat, waiting for my time to wrestle, I would get nervous and anxious. And there, as I was warming-up, I would sing ever so softly to myself. And that would calm me – it would prepare me. I did not think of this as prayer then, it just came naturally to me, it just seemed right and it helped. And so, I think this is me, praying as I can.

And so, may the Spirit of God illuminate us to pray as we can – to use the fullness of who God has created us to be to pray as we can – to pray in the ways that will help us flourish, that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Amen.