

Sermon Title: *The Long Arc of Prayer*

Matthew 6:5-15

⁵ ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to God who is in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ ‘When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.⁸Do not be like them, your God knows what you need before you ask it. ⁹‘Pray then in this way:

Our Father/Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, our God will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will our God forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 7:7-13

⁷ ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will our God in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹² ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. ¹³ ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

“Let your soul speak for itself” says Samuel Miller, the Dean of Harvard Divinity School. “Some souls hold conversation with God in music, and some in the sowing of seed, and others in the smell of sawed wood, and still others in the affectionate understanding of their friends. All souls are not alike. Utter your own prayer, in the language of your own joy.” Let your soul speak for itself.

Jesus taught us to pray. He offered us examples of parables on prayer – to be persistent. He told us that if we knock, the door will be opened. And yet, he did not explain the metaphysical nature of what happens in prayer – he did not explain who was changed, us or God, or how our prayers are heard, or the interconnection of all life. Such an explanation would have really helped me.

During seminary was the first time I saw a Spiritual Director – it was subsidized through the seminary, so it only cost me \$40 a semester – a low enough price that I was willing to give it a chance. That first year of Spiritual Direction was pretty excruciating for me as my Spiritual Director and I were not on the same page. I would share with him about my struggles with prayer: my struggles to believe in prayer, my lack of desire to pray, my lack of certainty that God was active, or listening, or that any of it mattered. And so I would share these things, and he would ask me about my relationship with my mom. And I would share a bit more, and he would

ask me about my relationship with my dad. I would share more, and he would ask about any childhood trauma. He could not figure out my dysfunction. And I went along, until one session when I finally lost my cool and said, “I know you are trying to find this cause of my prayer dysfunction, but what if it just isn’t true – what if the truth is prayer just doesn’t work like you think it works. You can try to fix me, but maybe it just isn’t possible.”

The idea of prayer, of God answering and working in a way that I could touch and feel in a tangible way, it was unreasonable to me. I wanted someone to explain to me how it worked – explain in a scientific manner how this might work or function in our universe. Of course, that was not possible, to explain how our words go out into the world – to God, to one another – to know what they do when they leave our mouths or our brains. And yet, I needed it to at least be reasonable to me.

Catholic Monk Herbert McCabe (who I like to quote from up here) says, *our faith has to be reasonable* – this does not mean that it has to all make perfect sense, it does not mean we have to understand all that is happening, or to be explain how each piece works – and yet, faith needs to be reasonable to us, it needs to be able to fit within our understood world. And so, within the mystery that is prayer, here are a few aspects that helped me to begin to consider that some form of prayer was, perhaps reasonable.

In 1993 a group of people got together in Washington D.C. to see if their large group meditation practice could impact crime levels. So this group of almost 4,000 people from 80 countries came together over an 8-week period that summer. The findings later showed that the rate of violent crime decreased by 23 percent during that eight weeks; between their experimental period of

June 7 to July 30 there were almost one-fourth fewer incidents of violent crime in the city, which, at that time, had the highest rates of violent crime in our country. I am not a statistician, but someone who is said that the odds of this result occurring by chance are less than 2 in 1 billion.¹

I cannot tell you how this works, how prayer and meditation might decrease a cities crime, but in the mystery of God, something is at work there that is measurable and reasonable.

Studies have also shown that meditation/mindful prayer can ease chronic pain, anxiety, stress, improve heart health, boost mood and immunity, and resolve pregnancy problems. Through neuroscientists working with Buddhists monks (who have been practicing meditation for tens of thousands of hours), it has been found that the adult brain can be transformed through such practices. “Neuroscience has shown that when we learn how to juggle or play a musical instrument, the brain undergoes changes through a process called neuroplasticity....A similar process appears to happen when we meditate. ...Meditation can rewire brain circuits to produce valuable effects on the brain and the entire body.”²

Again, I cannot explain why this happens – if this is God doing something, or if these meditators are just getting in touch with how God has created us to be – but this is measurable and seems reasonable to me.

¹ Info on this experiment can be found at http://www.worldpeacegroup.org/washington_crime_prevention_full_article.html and <http://www.globalloveproject.com/power-of-group-meditation/>.

² From “Mind of the Meditator” in Scientific America, November 2014.

And during two different semesters of seminary I had to pray as an assignment. We were to pray at least five times a week and we had to keep a log of what type of prayer we practiced: if we journaled, or meditated (Christians call ‘Centering Prayer’), or the Examen Prayer (which Deb talked about last week, a examination of our day), or used a prayer book. And in one of these classes I was assigned to do a three-hour prayer retreat. This assignment terrified me, I would have gladly written a twenty-page research paper in place of spending three-hours in quite prayer. And it took me quite awhile to embrace these assignments. And I would not have prayed without the accountability of that prayer log which I had to turn in at the end of the semester. It helped me to pray the words of others – to use prayer books. And eventually, I did begin to notice a slight shift in myself, as I prayed for my siblings who were new parents at the time, I began to notice an increased awareness in myself about how I could support them and be a more attentive uncle; as I prayed for my Grandparents, I began to notice a desire to increase the frequency of my visits with them. And as I prayed so that I could mark off the checkboxes in my semester prayer log, I found myself softening just a bit – I found myself opening, just a bit.

Again, I cannot tell you the metaphysics or Divine paths of connection that were happening – I can say that I felt a noticeable change, a measurable change in myself, and this seemed quite reasonable to me.

And somehow, knowing these things – these measureable things – having even experienced some slight changes within myself, it would seem reasonable to think that I have

continued with some form of prayer practice five times a week. I wish I could say that this was the case, but by in large, without the accountability of that log – my prayer practices are inconsistent at best.

Richard Rohr talks about three main pieces or movements that most of us encounter in our life of faith: *order, disorder, and reorder*. Order: a time when things largely fit or make sense in our life of faith. Disorder, a time of disruption to these given and established patterns and categories (questions, or new learnings, or experiencing suffering). And reorder: when new categories or ways of thinking or practices emerge and help you settle into a new worldview. And I think that probably many of us go through various cycles of this throughout our lives, spiraling through life: order, disorder, reorder...and then more disorder, and a new reordering of things (and so on and so on). And, at the same time, not everyone will experience all three aspects, some will never leave order, while others will never move from disorder to reorder. I am sure that we all know people in our lives who seem to still be living in their initial sense of ‘order’ – the faith given to them in their youth has continued to make sense to them, it has continued to work for them throughout their life. And I am sure that we also know people who do not seem to have found a sense of reorder for their life of faith.

I bring this up because, in thinking about prayer and spiritual practices, I think that many of us do not go in search of new forms or modes of prayer when things are working great for us – most likely, we have gone in search only during our times of our disorder. At least, that has been the case for me, it was in my times of great disorder, in my times of searching and self-loathing

over my inability to pray that I went seeking new understanding of prayer; it was great disorder that caused me to search with some desperation for other forms of communing with God that might work for me – that might seem reasonable to me. It was in my disorder that I sought new forms of order.

Marlene Kropf, who was a professor of mine who some of you met last year, she says that there are two main ways we grow and mature in our life of faith: 1) Suffering 2) Reflection. We do not have control over when suffering comes into our life, nor does suffering mean we will mature in our life of faith – as suffering or pain can also lead some to become increasingly bitter and closed-off. Reflection is what we do have some control over, and it is forms of prayer that can help us facilitate such reflection: prayer forms that help us pay attention, that help us to quiet ourselves, to share openly with one another and with God, to go over our experiences of the day or our actions of the day and notice if there was anything we should be noticing. A spiritual practice like fasting for instance, it requires both fasting and reflection on the fast. To notice how I feel when I spend one day not eating, to think about what I am missing during those times of hunger. Or to reflect on what is happening in me when I spend one day not using technology? Do I notice a longing? Is it making me more content? Less? Is it making me a better husband? Is it making me angry or irritable? Or, is nothing really seem too different?

One of the difficulties, especially if you are like me, is that these results are not instantaneous. Most forms of prayer, they shape us over time – they impact us over months and years and decades. The monk's whose brains were studied, these were monks who had been practicing for decades. In the mystery of God, our various forms of prayer are like a Savings

Account – we make deposits as we can, not sure exactly how they will be used or spent in our lifetime. That metaphor is a bit misleading in that we have some control over when to use and not use a Savings Accounts – where we do not have such control in prayer. They are acts of trust – acts of trust that they shape us and mold us over time – acts that slowly form us as people of God.

In that vein, I want to alert you to this little notebook that you might have picked-up when you came in – and if you didn't, grab one on your way out. As a communal practice of prayer together as a church, Worship Committee thought we would invite everyone to some reflection. To use this little notebook as a Gratitude Journal – to, at some point each day write down three things you are grateful for. Or, to write down three places where you saw God at work in the world (or you at least think you might have seen God at work). For the rest of this series on prayer, give this a try. Just three things everyday. And then, after some time, reflect a bit on this experience. Do you notice any changes in yourself? In your level of gratefulness? Or do you notice that you are starting to see God more in the everyday and ordinary things of life? Are you seeing God show-up more, simply through your acts of observation? Or, maybe you are not noticing anything too different. If, after trying it for a few weeks and noticing nothing different, that is okay – remember to pray as you can, not as you can't. Remember that “All souls are not alike. Utter your own prayer, in the language of your own joy...Let your soul speak for itself.”

If you do notice something, it will likely not be in the first week, in the mystery of God this takes time. It seems that the prayer that Jesus gave us to pray is mostly about trying to align

ourselves with God's kingdom, that is it about offering forgiveness and humbling ourselves.

These, of course, are not things that happen overnight. Aligning ourselves with the ways of God is the work of a lifetime – of order, disorder, and reorder.

And so, may we be a people at prayer, praying in the language of our own joy, that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world. Amen.