

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday after Epiphany
Year C

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Text: Luke 11:1-4

Title: “A United Methodist Path: The path of biblical prayer”

I’m wondering this morning how many of you have been part of another Christian tradition at some time in your life. Will you raise your hands if you have been part of a community other than Methodist or United Methodist? Which traditions have you been a part of? (Let them answer.) How many of you have been connected with the Methodist Christian tradition all your lives, that is you haven’t worshiped anywhere else but in a Methodist church?

A lot has changed over the years in the way people experience and participate in Christian community. The lines aren’t as clear as they once were, are they? Which is why when we join a congregation called United Methodist having some understanding of our uniqueness among the various Christian traditions is important. And I confess that for most of my time as a pastor, the understanding of the Methodist tradition that I’ve shared with people wanting to join the church has not been very long or deep because it’s been done in one afternoon in new member orientations. The Vital Church Initiative prescriptions that were developed and approved by this congregation challenged me to do better as we have been called upon to develop a path that anyone can follow to grow in our spiritual walk with Christ.

VCI challenged us to provide a path for people to walk. So if you are brand new to the Christian faith, we have a place for you to grow. Or if you find yourself in a place in your life in which you have participated sporadically in worship and other congregational ministries but haven’t deepened your experience of God through personal spiritual habits or small group life, we have a place for you to grow. Or if you are a seasoned, mature Christ follower who has spent a lifetime loving God and neighbor, we have a place for you to grow, too. The idea is that the spiritual life is a journey of continued growth, that there are always steps we can take to grow in our walk with God and neighbor. Always. The spiritual life is not a once and your done affair. It just doesn’t work that way in the Methodist tradition.

All of that said, in working with Pastor Jaye on a discipleship path, I came across material called “A Disciple’s Path” written by James Harnish, a retired pastor from Florida and twin-brother to John Harnish who is a retired pastor from the Detroit Conference. James wrote the material with help from people in his congregation as they, too, were looking for something to help people coming to their congregation understand why be United Methodist? What is unique about being United Methodist? If someone asked you on an elevator why you are United Methodist and not something else, what would you say?

These questions are what this worship series over the next few weeks are about. They

will also focus on each of the vows we take when we decide to become United Methodist. A few weeks ago you might remember we received members who made the vow to participate in the life of the church through prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness: five ways to be a faithful member of the church.

This morning we take a look at prayer. Next week Pastor Reisinger will be preaching on the vow of presence. Regarding prayer, a friend of ours sent me this photo by way of Facebook the other day. It expresses how some of us feel about prayer, especially praying in front of others. Somehow we are afraid we won't do it properly, won't use the right words or say the right things. Sometimes we are even afraid to talk about it or at least are uneasy about prayer. When is the last time you had a conversation with someone about prayer? Even in church there is an odd reluctance to talk about prayer maybe because many of us think we should pray more than we do but either don't know how or have been intimidated by self-proclaimed experts who will show you or tell you exactly how it's done, or there may be some other reason..

For others the issue of prayer may be the idea of duty. That is we are supposed to do it. It's our duty, and sometimes we dig our heels in the ground when we are told we ought to or should do more of something out of obligation.

For still others, difficulty with prayer may have to do with the image of God we carry around in our heads: God as a terrifying or judgmental being with whom we may not be very interested in carrying on a conversation. Some of these images may be related to people from early in our lives, authority figures who somehow image God as a judge or are only interested in us when we are behaving badly, someone who is constantly watching us and waiting for us to make a mistake so we can be corrected. Some early authority figures may use God more as a tool for threatening children than for loving them and those early memories can still have an impact.

For whatever reason, many of us have difficulty sometimes with the vow to pray as members of the church. So what does it mean to say "yes" to the vow to pray as a United Methodist Christian?

Let's take a look at some of Jesus' teachings. Jesus taught that the first and greatest commandment was that we "love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength." He taught that the second commandment is like the first: "Love your neighbor as yourself." John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, lived his life trying to fulfill these greatest commandments of Jesus. A priest in the Church of England, he and his brother Charles began meeting with some friends from Oxford University because they wanted to help each other live holy lives. They met as a small group regularly to study the Christian scriptures, pray together and have religious conversation. But it didn't end there. Wesley held Jesus' teaching to love God and neighbor as the core of what it means to be Christian, which meant taking the love for God out into the streets in order to love neighbor. Their study of scripture and shared prayer time led them to begin visiting the prisons and serving the poor. They also began showing up for Holy Communion at Christ Church so frequently that others began calling them "The Holy Club". Because they met together so regularly and engaged in public acts of worship and service consistently, they were also taunted with the name "Methodists" because they were so methodical in the ways in which they lived out their call to love God and neighbor as Jesus so clearly taught.

Because Jesus greatest commandments were central to the way Wesley lived his life as a

Christ follower, he defined “true religion” as “a heart right toward God and man.” And that true religion “does not consist . . . in any outward thing whatever, in anything exterior to the heart.” A person might be orthodox in beliefs and correct in his or her behavior but still be “a stranger . . . to the religion of the heart.” (p. 27). As James Harnish writes in *A Disciple’s Path*, “In the Methodist tradition, the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart. The pathway of discipleship involves a change in belief and action that results in the transformation of our hearts.”

There’s a story I heard years ago about a tee totaling congregation of Methodists that prayed for years that the Lord would do something about the bar across the street that created havoc in the neighborhood. One night lightning struck the bar and it burned down. The bar owners sued the church with the claim that the congregation’s prayers were responsible for the loss of the property. The congregation contested the lawsuit. After the judge heard from both sides, he said to both parties, “I’m not sure how I’ll rule on this case, but one thing is clear: the bar-owner believes in prayer, and the church people don’t.”

Prayer is not about using God as a supernatural vending machine to get what we want. There’s a scene in the movie, “Bruce Almighty”, in which Jim Carrey’s character, Bruce--who is given the opportunity to play God for a while--reads all the emailed prayers God receives. There are so many he can’t respond to them all individually, so he just says “Yes” to all of them and the world turns to chaos in the aftermath.

Prayer, again, is about the heart, a way to relate to God, recognizing that God seeks a relationship with us out of God’s profound love for us and for our neighbors. So how do we do this?

The disciples noticed Jesus’ habit of going off to be alone to be with God. Read the Gospel accounts and you will find that over and over again, Jesus’ takes time because he needs time to be alone with God. He heads off to a lonely place it is said or he heads up a mountain. They notice, and so they ask him to teach them to pray because they apparently don’t know how. Even the disciples had growing to do on their path to following him. And so we have the Lord’s prayer which most Christian churches use every Sunday in traditional services.

If you are wondering yourself how to pray, there is an acronym that may help. Maybe you have heard of ACTS.

Adoration
Confession
Thanksgiving
Supplication

ADORATION

To begin with adoration is to begin not with us or what we want but with who God is. Jesus began the Lord’s prayer with “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” From the beginning Jesus acknowledges that God is beyond our power and to be held sacred and holy, someone special who deserves honor and respect. A childhood table grace expresses adoration well, “God is good. God is great. Let us thank God for our food. Amen.” Adoration begins the relationship with positive affirmation, which when offered with authenticity in any relationship is an expression of love for that person.

CONFESSION

Jesus also included confession in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses." It's a clear acknowledgment that we are not perfect people.

I like how Harnish puts it in A Disciple's Path:

Confession is the way we face the hard truth about who we are and where we are in our discipleship. Confession is the way we name the stuff that clutters our souls and gets in the way of a vibrant relationship with God. It's the way we acknowledge that we are not as perfect as we pretend, not as good as we would like, and not as loving as our dog or cat may think we are. ...Confession is the recognition of our constant need of God's forgiveness and grace (p. 30).

THANKSGIVING

Benjamin Ingham, one of the early Methodists with John and Charles Wesley, on Easter Day in 1734 wrote some personal resolutions in his diary in which he wanted to "...make an entire surrender of himself to God" (p.31). He finished this commitment by praying and offering praise to God and giving thanks "...for all of God's grace in his life to the glory of the Trinity." (ibid.)

Have you ever found yourself down and decided to look at the other side by remembering all you have to be thankful for? I have a friend who started a "Thanksgiving journal" and instead of asking God for something each day, she decided to thank God for at least three things every day. It changed how she related to God and to her neighbors around her. It created in her a thankful heart as she learned to offer God her gratitude for all the positive people and things in her life. Try it sometime.

SUPPLICATION

Another word for supplication is intercession. It's a way of bringing to God the concerns we have, the things we agonize over, situations and people about whom we are concerned and then inviting God to be at work in them which may mean we will be called to act.

One experience with prayer I will never forget involved a hunting experience. I'd been out all day and hadn't seen a deer. As often happens when I'm hunting, I talk with God. I remember thinking, "Okay God, I'd like to at least just see a deer. Can you at least let me just see one?" It was near dark, and I was sitting in a ground blind on public land. About 20 minutes after I had that prayer thought, about 30 yards out I spotted several deer. I started to laugh quietly at the thought that God answered my prayer. Then I added to my request, "Okay God, now could you put horns on one of them?" After I thought about it for a second I began to backtrack, thinking how little of me to ask such things when people are dying from war and AIDS—it was headline news then—and hunger, people I knew had real life issues and I'm asking to see a buck in the woods. How silly! What a waste of God's time! But then a thought, clear as a bell ran through my mind and it went like this: "If you won't trust me with the small stuff, how will you trust me with the big stuff?"

The way I heard that was not that God is the magic vending machine in the sky who will give me whatever I want but that God wants the kind of relationship with me and with you that involves the kind of trust that we can tell God anything and God will be present to it. No, sometimes our requests aren't granted in the way we might wish: I never did get a deer that year.

The point is that the relationship with God is the thing. It's the heart of the matter which is the way Wesley began the Methodist movement of which we are a part. That relationship doesn't just remain between us and God but as Wesley revealed in the way he lived his life and led us to live ours it moves to those outside our Holy Club of Methodists to prisons and the poor. It leads us to serve and love our neighbors.

If you have taken the vow to offer your prayers, consider a recommitment or growing in the way in which you keep that vow, not because you have to or you ought to or because someone is telling you that you should, but because you desire the kind of trusting relationship with God that you want to, you yearn for it. As St Teresa of Avila wrote: *Prayer is nothing more than a conversation with God, who loves me.*

And when we approach God in such a way, we cannot help but spill out that trust and love with those around us, we cannot help but participate in Jesus' prayer that God's "kingdom come and earth as it is in heaven."