

Scripture

Psalm 8

¹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,

⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,

⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Luke 11:1-13

The Lord's Prayer

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

Perseverance in Prayer

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has

already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

Sermon:

This morning I want to speak to you this morning about prayer. This is week three of the crazy things that Christians do series.

Right up front I want to acknowledge that Christians are not the only ones who pray. Throughout the world billions of people pray to a multitude of gods; there are people praying right now, but there is something unique about Christian prayer that sets it apart from the others. There is something different about the way and the why of prayer for us.

When we are young, prayer is easy. Children pray without effort, and without fear; they don’t feel awkward or uncomfortable when they pray. And why should they? Prayer is something that we are naturally predisposed to do. Like our maker, we are social beings, community beings. We reach out for connections and as we’re going to discover, prayer is a path to deep connections indeed.

But something happens within us as we age. Our natural inclination for connection gets corrupted. Just as when Adam and Eve tasted of the fruit in the garden and became self-aware, so too as we grow we become self-aware and leave our childhood innocence behind.

The cost of this self-awareness is fear, distrust, and insecurity. Adam and Eve hid from God. They covered up with fig leaves. They blamed other people for their troubles. Ultimately they could no longer stay in the garden of abundance and had to make their way in a harsh world of toil and tears.

We take a similar journey. As children we live a life of ease and abundance. We don’t worry about our material sustenance – food just appears when needed. We take for granted that easy back and forth with God and with each other. Prayer is no big deal to children, it’s just being together.

God and his humans used to just walk in the garden beside each other, not even needing words. Adam and Eve didn’t pray in Eden – there wasn’t a special word for talking to God, it was just talking, just being, just abiding.

Then we grow up and find ourselves thrust out of the idyllic garden and in the uncharted and forbidding wilderness of adulthood. Fear, distrust, and insecurity abound. We cover up, we close off, we protect ourselves from harsh people and a harsh environment. And as we close off, we forget how to pray.

No longer do the words come easily, no longer does our love flow freely. Our prayer language becomes stilted, awkward, formulaic.

I've heard it said that most people have a greater fear of public speaking than of death. I'd like to take that one step further and say that for many people the idea of public prayer is even more intimidating.

I wouldn't know how to do it, people think. I don't have the words; I could never do that.

If this is you, take heart, you're in good company. Jesus' disciples thought the same way. One night, after Jesus had been praying one of his disciples turned to him and said 'Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.'

It would seem that like many of us, the disciples were looking for the formula of prayer. They were hoping for just the right words to say. Jesus did give them some words, words that we repeat every time we gather in his name, but I'll let you in on a secret.

Those words aren't magic, and they are not the only words. After giving the disciples what we now call the Lord's prayer, Jesus went on to speak of persistence in prayer; that the disciples ought to continue to pray, just as Jesus himself did. Do you think he meant that they ought to repeat those same words over and over again as some kind of mantra? Or was Jesus speaking of persistent prayer as a continuous conversation with God?

For those of us who get uptight looking for just the right words to pray I have good news. God is not particular about hearing certain words. Did you know that in all his time in prayer, Jesus never once prayed in English? He never said thy or thou, or 'I pray these things in Jesus' name.'

If we think we need special words in our prayer for prayer to be effective then we have vastly under-rated God, we have reduced him to a machine that reacts and dispenses based upon the inputs that we provide. Prayer is not an incantation, it is not magic, it is not some kind of *quid pro quo*.

At its most basic, prayer is about relationship. When Jesus responded to his disciples question about prayer he said 'When you pray, say Abba, Father.'

Here's a magic word for you – Dad. God has a name; in fact, God has many names. But Jesus didn't instruct his disciples to call God by any proper name, he invited them to address God as dad. That's a relational word.

If we address God as YHWH, that indicates who God is. When we address God as dad, that also indicates who we are. Jesus has invited us to address God in such a way that his name includes us. There is an invitation to intimacy in Jesus' teaching.

This intimacy is exactly the point of Christian prayer. It is an invitation to be vulnerable, to strip off the fig leaves, to stop hiding ourselves, and to be open again, the way we were when we were children.

This is why we find prayer difficult. It's not because we don't know the right words to say, it's because we do know the right words but don't want to say them, because to speak openly about our loves and fears and worries leaves us feeling open and exposed.

I always think of prayer as being naked before God, and the scary thing about being naked in front of God is not what God will think – he knows it all already. It's that I might be faced with my unadorned self. Once that truth is revealed, there is no going back. I can't unsee that – it will permanently be a part of me.

There is something that causes us to avert our eyes from unpleasant things – we don't want to meet the eyes of the suffering, because then we might have to do something about it. We're the same way about ourselves. On some level we think that if we avoid certain truths we can pretend they don't exist, because to acknowledge them would make them real.

Praying to a God who knows me more than I know myself leads me towards a greater honesty about who I am. A map is of no help unless you know where you are; in the same way facing the reality of who I am now is the only way of my growing in the future. It is the difference between wandering in the wilderness, and setting a course. Prayer is not pie-in-the-sky fairy tale stuff; prayer is about bravely looking reality in the eye. Prayer is not for the faint of heart.

This becomes even more so when we are praying together. It's hard to be vulnerable alone, much harder to be defenseless in front of others. That much openness is more than a little uncomfortable.

I think that is why we seek the safety of familiar formulaic language when we pray. We can hide behind the big words and fancy expressions, we don't need to reveal too much of ourselves when we retreat into stiff and proper King James language.

But when we do so, we miss so much. We talked about prayer a little at Session earlier this week, and I shared with them the power that I have found in prayer. When I visit with people I usually close with prayer. I have found that even if the visit was unremarkable – just sharing a coffee and some conversation – that during prayer something remarkable frequently happens.

Peace, calm, tears, release, love, encouragement – these are the things that I see happening when I pray with people. It's not because I have any magic words, and not because of anything

that I do. These things happen because when we allow ourselves to become vulnerable, we allow the Spirit of God to work.

We ease off on our defensiveness, let the walls down just a little, and God rushes in. Suddenly miracles abound, hearts are lifted, and lives are transformed. This is the power of prayer.

Our self-awareness leads us to greater insecurity, fear, and defensiveness. As we grow we become more divided and delusional. Prayer is our path back to reality, and indeed is our path back to the garden.

The place that prayer leads us is that place of complete openness; where we cease striving and instead learn to abide. We allow ourselves to be naked in front of God, each other, and ourselves. No barriers, no walls, no pretending - perfect communion, perfect community.

Prayer is not an onerous burden, it is a gift, something that we are privileged to share with one another, a pathway to God.

Let's be vulnerable together.

Close your eyes, if you are comfortable, hold the hand of the person next to you.

Abba.
Father.

We sometimes find prayer intimidating or awkward. We wonder if we are doing it right, we wonder if you are listening, we wonder if we perhaps look foolish.

We also wonder if we are good enough for you to hear us. Do our words have any value to you?

You know us, deep down, on a level that we don't even know ourselves. Do we dare approach you?

Jesus knows. Jesus foresaw his death, he foresaw Peter denying him three times, he knew the weakness of Judah, and the weaknesses of the other disciples. But – knowing all of this, he still taught them all to pray, addressing you as Father. He still invited that intimacy, that unconditional acceptance, regardless of the state of their hearts.

God, If you can love us through our weakness, failure and even intentional sin, then we can have the confidence to come to you now.

We come to share our joys, and our sorrows. We share our hope for the future, and our regret for what's past. In prayer we ask for things, we express our gratitude for things given.

Paul wrote 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.' We release our worries to you God, we release our fears, we drop our fig leaves, knowing that your love for us will not diminish. We don't have to pretend or keep up appearances with you. You are the healer.

Touch those broken areas in our lives, bring what is hidden out into the light, help us to stop hiding and have the confidence to be what we were made to be – co-creators and custodians of this world of plenty.

Teach us to love wastefully, not to judge, but to encourage and support each other.

We thank you for all your gifts, including this gift of prayer that brings us together into one body.

We pray this to you, our Father, with the Son, in the power of your Spirit.
Amen.