

The Vows of Church Membership: 1. Prayer

II Chronicles 7.14-15, Matthew 6.5-15
Mason United Methodist Church
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There's a thief on the loose. Every one of us will be robbed before the day is over. That thief is not a person – it is something, anything, that steals our *time*. Even as I sat to write these words I was concurrently taking time to receive phone calls, attend to urgent administrative issues, or stop what I was doing to respond to email or answer a knock on my office door from persons who needed time to talk to a pastor. These events didn't *steal* my time. They were important. My time was *stolen* by the myriad of thoughts racing through my mind and trying to decide how to deal with the many issues clamoring for attention in my brain. I had to jolt myself back into reality.

There are enough time stealers to be faced every day. I read recently where the average person will waste many hours in the span of a normal life. Opening junk mail: 8 months. Sitting at stoplights: 6 months. Searching for misplaced objects: 1 year (the bulk of which occurs after the age of fifty). Trying to return phone calls to people who never seem to be in: 2 years. Standing in line: 5 years. Listening to the rest of this sermon: one hour [just kidding].

So what could I have done to streamline my time and focus on the issues at hand? How about *prayer*? That very subject is the thrust of this first of five sermons on The Vows of Church Membership. The focus of these sermons comes from the covenant made when a person joins the United Methodist Church. The covenant question is found on page 48 of our hymnal and

reads: “Will you...uphold [the church] by your *prayers*, your *presence*, your *gifts*, your *service*, and [as of the 2008 General Conference] your *witness*?” The focus for these five weeks will be on *The Vows of Church Membership: Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service and Witness*.

In one of our Christian Believer classes we read the following in our study manual [p232]. When one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he told them, “When you pray, say,” and proceeded to give them a short prayer (Luke 11.1-4) [and taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6]. Clearly, it wasn’t meant to be an incantation, though sometimes believers have reduced it to that. As a pattern, it offers intimacy (addressing God as “Father” [or *Abba*, tantamount to the very personal term, *Daddy*]), reverence (“hallowed be your name”), a prayer for God’s purposes to be done (“Your kingdom come”), an appeal for the common necessities of life (“Give us each day our daily bread”), an acknowledgement of sin with an appeal for forgiveness (“And forgive us our sins”), and a plea to be saved from trial and temptation. In a sense this pattern makes a prayer seem simple, and in a sense it is. Perhaps Jesus meant to give only a primer of prayer, expecting those who learned the lesson well to go further on their own.

Prayer is something more than what a person does when there is imminent trouble. It is an intimate relationship. Hope MacDonald says in her book Discovering How to Pray [p14] that prayer is a conversation between two friends who love and understand each other. It is through prayer that we see God’s love and power at work in our lives and in the lives of the people for whom we are praying. As a result, prayer makes us come alive spiritually.

We find a new hunger and thirst to spend time with [God] and stay close to [God]. Prayer is the key that opens the door to a whole new world – a world lived in the active, conscious presence of the living God.

One of Norway's leading Christian teachers and devotional writers from the last century, Dr. Ole Hallesby [Prayer, p12], says, "Prayer is the breath of the soul, the organ by which we receive Christ into our parched and withered hearts. [Jesus] says, "If any [person] open the door, I will come in to [them]" [Revelation 3.20]. Notice carefully every word here. It is not our prayer which draws Jesus into our hearts. Nor is it our prayer which moves Jesus to come in to us. All He needs is access. He enters of His own accord, because He desires to come in. And He enters in wherever He is not denied admittance. As air enters in quietly when we breathe, and does its normal work in our lungs, so Jesus enters quietly into our hearts and does His blessed work there. He calls it "to sup with us." In Biblical language the common meal is [symbolic] of intimate and joyous fellowship. This affords a new glimpse into the nature of prayer, showing us that God has designed prayer as a means of intimate and joyous fellowship between God and [people]. Notice how graciously prayer has been designed. To pray is nothing more involved than to let Jesus into our needs. To pray is to give Jesus permission to employ His powers in the alleviation of our distress. To pray is to let Jesus glorify His name in the midst of our needs. The results of prayer are, therefore, not dependent upon the powers of the one who prays. [The person's] intent will, [their] fervent emotions, or [their] clear comprehension of what [they] are praying for are not the reasons why [their] prayers will be heard and answered...To pray is nothing more involved than

to open the door, giving Jesus access to our needs and permitting Him to exercise His own power in dealing with them.

So, what about the membership and stewardship vow of *prayer*? Stewardship is defined in the dictionary as *management*. A steward is a *manager*. To exercise the stewardship of prayer means that we manage our time so that it happens on a regular basis. Prayer is our lifeline to God. It is conversation with God. Even more important, it involves *listening* to God's Spirit. Too often people are hesitant to pray because they don't know what to *say*. In God's economy of creation he gave us two ears and one mouth; but too often we employ them in reverse proportion – talking twice as much as we listen. Prayer management, the *stewardship* of prayer, is simple. Make the time. And just do it.

So when we make a vow of supporting our church in *prayer* we are also making a decision to involve ourselves in the daily practice of praying.

Take the time...and just *do* it. As strong as was Jesus' sense of mission and his compassion for the needs of the multitudes, he chose at intervals to leave the people and their needs in order to commune with God. [CB SM232] He prayed. Prayer meant survival to Jesus. Prayer means survival for us. We cannot function rightly without it. Jesus knew this, and his example teaches us. Through the stewardship vow of prayer we participate in bringing the will of God to pass. Jesus also taught persistence in prayer when he taught his followers "...to pray always and not to lose heart." [Luke 18.1]

Susanna Wesley (1670-1742), the mother of our Methodist founders John and Charles, wrote this prayer that was recorded in our Christian Believer study manual. “Enable me, O God, to collect and compose my thoughts before an immediate approach to Thee in prayer. May I be careful to have my mind in order when I take upon myself the honor to speak to the sovereign Lord of the universe, remembering that upon the temper of my soul depends, in very great measure, my success. Thou art infinitely too great to be trifled with; too wise to be imposed on by a mock devotion and dost abhor a sacrifice without a heart. Help me to entertain an habitual sense of Thy perfections, as an admirable help against cold and formal performances. Save me from engaging in rash and precipitate prayers and turn from abrupt breaking away to follow business or pleasure, as though I had never prayed. Amen.”

Sometimes it helps to have a guide to assist in praying. There is a piece of paper and something with which to write somewhere close to you. If you wish to write these letters down, I will give you words to put with the letters as a guide to prayer. P-C-T-I-P: ***P**raye**r** **c**hange**s** **t**hings **i**n **p**eople.*

The first letter stands for *Praise*. We begin our prayers by focusing on God, not ourselves. We praise God for who God is, not for what God has done for us lest we interject ourselves into the picture. Prayer is best begun by praising God.

The second letter stands for *Confession*. We confess to God anything that is standing between us and a right relationship with God.

The third letter stands for *Thanksgiving*. We use this time to thank God for blessings bestowed.

The fourth letter stands for *Intercession*. Here is where we pray for the needs of other people.

The fifth and final letter stands for *Petition*. It is at this point, at the end of the list, where we lift our own needs in prayer to God.

Periodically we publish a private guise to worship – a bulletin-sized three page guide to personal worship that includes printed scriptures, prayers, hymns and suggestions for prayer. There are some of these guides to personal worship available to you in the foyer for use during the Lenten season. Please feel free to take one with you, or one to present or mail to another person who might benefit from it. On the back of these folders is a list of suggested items for prayer. You will notice that the listed items follow along with the five rubrics of prayer mentioned before: praise, confession, thanksgiving, intercession and petition.

Notice that Jesus words to the disciples recorded in Luke 11 were, “*When* you pray, say...” He didn’t say, “*If* you pray...”

Let us pray.

[Alternate closing, but used at Mason Church in a prior sermon...]

Brennan Manning, a former Catholic priest, speaker, and one of my favorite authors, writes that once a woman asked him to come and pray with her father who was dying of cancer. When Brennan arrived he found the man lying in his bed propped up with two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. Brennan assumed the old fellow had been told he was coming to visit, and the conversation began.

“I guess you were expecting me,” Brennan said pointing to the chair.

“No,” said the man. “Who are you?”

Brennan continued, “I am the associate pastor from the parish. When I saw the empty chair I figured you knew that I was going to show up.”

“Oh yeah, the chair,” said the man. “Would you mind shutting the door?”

The puzzled Brennan closed the door.

“I’ve never told anyone this,” he said, “not even my daughter. All of my life I’ve never known how to pray. At Sunday Mass I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always seemed to go right over my head. I abandoned my attempt at prayer until one day about four years ago when my best friend said to me, ‘Joe, prayer is simply a matter of talking with Jesus. It’s a conversation. Here’s what I suggest. Sit down in a chair and pull an empty chair up in front of you. In faith see Jesus on that chair. Now it’s not going

to be spooky because Jesus promises that he is going to be with us always. Speak to Jesus as if you're speaking to me right now in the same way, and you listen back to what Jesus is going to say. It will be all right.' So, Padre, I tried it, and I liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter ever saw me talking to an empty chair, she would send me to the funny farm."

Brennan was deeply moved by the story, and the experience of this man encouraged him to keep on in the journey of prayer, and then he anointed this man's head with oil for his coming death and burial. He returned to his rectory. Two nights later the man's daughter called to tell Brennan that on that very afternoon her daddy had died.

Brennan asked, "Did he seem to die in peace?"

"Yes," she said. "There was something strange; in fact, beyond strange – kind of weird. Apparently as daddy died, he leaned over and placed his head on the empty chair beside his bed."

Amen.