

‘Prayer’  
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper  
January 14, 2018  
based on Matthew 6:5-15

Our worship today and for the next four weeks will be a follow up to last Sunday’s focus on baptism.

When we join a church in The United Methodist tradition, one of the questions asked is:

“As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?”

Each week we will focus on each of these aspects of faithful participation. We begin with prayer.

Prayer .... is like breathing. I’m convinced most of us pray even when we don’t consciously get down on our knees, bow our heads and hold our hands. When we lift a thought of concern; or contemplate on making a difficult decision; or celebrate a blessing ... when we attribute those mindful reflections to God ... we are praying.

You could say, Apostle Paul’s admonition to pray without ceasing is breathing ... focused on God.

We all breathe ... but when we engage in pious, conscious prayer ... that is spiritual aerobic exercise.

We all need both kinds of prayer in our lives of faith. Breathing and aerobic.

If you think of the analogy often used for the church ... as the body of Christ, then think of prayer as the heartbeat.

... and every time we exercise our breathing, and engage in aerobic prayer, we strengthen our hearts.

What about the content of our prayers? In our approach to God ... or more accurately ... our openness to God ... how are we to pray?

The disciples were curious too asking Jesus to “teach us to pray.” The prayer Jesus taught them was the basis for the Lord’s prayer.

When we consider great pray-ers today... we think of people who teach us how to pray as we ought.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one’s weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”

It seems Mother Theresa agreed. She said, “Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at God’s disposition, and listening to God’s voice in the depth of our hearts.”

I’ve struggled all week about Gandhi and Mother Theresa’s thoughts that “Prayer is not asking” because I think of asking prayers as ‘petitions’.

I would not want to disagree with Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa ... that feels a bit heretical ... but I do consider petitions to be a form of asking.

The bulk of my prayers give thanks and asking for comfort, peace, and blessing on others.

But perhaps the kind of asking Gandhi and Mother Theresa were talking about were more self-serving asks than the kind of prayers where we lift up those in need asking God to protect and bless them.

It goes back to the heartbeat ... our prayers must reflect a heartfelt desire to be in communion with God; not with the intention of getting something in return for prayer.

Jesus' heart-felt prayer does ask ... but they are 'asks' full of heart:

**give us,  
forgive us,  
lead us,  
and deliver us.**

The biggest difference I see in self-serving "ask" prayers and the Lord's Prayer is: the Lord's Prayer brings one peace and spirituality; both of which fuels the heartbeat.

Marianne Williamson wrote a book called, *Illuminata*. She talks about a renaissance of spirituality evolving in our world today. She perceives a renaissance of 'peaceful being'.

Marianne contends to become a 'peaceful being' is to perceive God as a "peaceful ground of being. God is the energy of nonviolence. To ask God to help us is to ask God to turn us into profoundly peaceful people."

She goes on to say, "With every prayer and every thought of love, we release the light that will cast out darkness. One light alone seems small and weak, but no one's light is ever alone, for all our lights are part of God."

I've seen fruit of the renaissance of spirituality in the life of this church. When I talk to people about why they worship at Covenant their responses consistently report a sense of deep spirituality; a communion with God; and a sense of connectedness with others.

If peace and spirituality fuel the heartbeat then I consider prayer to be the way by which the body (the spiritual body) stays alive. Prayer that beats life-giving blood through our veins is the life-giving blood of faith.

Until such time that we enter eternally into divine space ... prayer is the only way we have, right now, to be in communion with God.

Prayer is very personal. We can turn prayers into public oratories, (and sometimes times with good reason) ... but personal prayer is intimate ... and very special.

Intimate prayer is as simple ... and as familiar as breathing. Not only that, intimate prayer can be breathtaking!

In the process of inhaling and exhaling our prayers become life-giving.

... and sometimes, in the most holy of moments, our prayers can take our breath away.

As much as I adore and rely on intimate, breathing prayer, I am comforted by public prayer.

Public prayer is breathtaking too.

I would imagine if most of us are asked to pray publically we shrink from it in fear and trepidation. Public prayer can be uncomfortable ... even terrifying.

But I can tell you ... the times I have prayed spontaneously in difficult situations all I can say is they were not my words. I was too nervous and unsure of what to say, but God knew the words and I let God speak.

If you pray out loud in heartfelt and tender ways, it won't matter if you end a

sentence in a preposition or if you use a double-negative ... public prayer, in its truest and authentic form, are words and phrases emitted from the heart.

The Apostle Paul must have also know praying could be difficult at times. Years ago I was in crisis and the last thing I wanted to do (or could do) was pray for the person who was embroiled in the crisis with me.

So I did the only thing I could do. I asked others to pray, because I could not.

Since then I discovered the words in Romans when Paul wrote, “We do not always know how to pray as we ought ... and so we trust the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

I have relied on those sighs many, many times in my life.

If we ever wonder why, in the vast wisdom of The United Methodist Church, we would consider ‘prayer’ as the first way we pledge our faithful participation to the church ... then consider how your own spirit has been loved and supported by prayer.

When we offer prayer ... and when we make ourselves open and vulnerable to those who pray for us ... we become a family.

Tied together by the intimate strands of spiritual fabric that holds our lives together.

We are knit into being church. We are united in prayer with Jesus who taught his disciples to pray, asking God to:

give us,  
forgive us,  
lead us,  
and deliver us.

Centering our breathing in prayer helps us focus on the tenderness and beauty of prayer. Breathing prayers can be petitions ... or affirmations. There is no rule about the content of a breathing prayer.

Get comfortable; if you’re at home put down your electronic devices; find a quiet place or a place without distraction is good.

When you slowly breathe in, say: “Lord, Jesus Christ”  
hold your breath and say, “Son of God”  
then slowly release your breathe saying, “Have mercy on me.”

Another is this:

The Lord is my Shepherd  
(hold)  
I shall not want.

Be in a spirit of prayer as we sing together our reflecting hymn ‘Sweet Hour of Prayer’ #496.