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Salina Mennonite Church
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Scripture: Matthew 6:7-15

Let's Pray

Last week we began a worship series with the theme of practicing faith. The focus is on some of the spiritual practices, or spiritual disciplines, that draw each of us closer to God. Spiritual practices focus our vision so the rest of life can come into perspective.

Our topic today is prayer, tuning in to God. God is always present and active in our lives and in the world. Our practices of prayer are like tuning into a frequency that creates an awareness of God's presence all around us.¹

Sounds kind of easy, but it isn't. All too often, trying to tune into God is like trying to listen to the radio and only getting static, or trying to stream a video when the bandwidth is too low and all you see on the screen is a circle going round and round. Prayer takes many forms and is practiced in a myriad of ways, and I imagine none of us, including me, feels we're experts at it. We have far more questions than answers about prayer.

So this week, I sought help from a variety of sources. I looked for Bible verses about prayer. I read a couple of children's books. I reread the March issue of *The Mennonite* which focused on the mystery and power of prayer. And I sent out an email asking the congregation for help. I'm grateful for the ten people who replied. I'll use the five questions I asked to organize my remarks about prayer.

What is prayer?

The consensus is that prayer is communication and communion with God. Many of us begin by saying that prayer is talking to God. It's expressing thoughts and feelings to God and also to ourselves. It's asking questions and making statements. But prayer isn't always about words. It's also about being with God, reaching out to God, and noticing God. Prayer is listening to hear the Voice that tells us the truth about ourselves and others.

Prayer is honesty with ourselves and with God. Honesty includes acknowledging the feelings we don't like. Prayer is a call to wake up and pay attention. It is lament that leads to action. It's an activity that keeps us aligned with God's presence in the world. It's an act of love. Prayer is hanging out with God, bringing everything we have to God, and tuning in for the rhythm of God's song.

What are some kinds of prayer?

There are endless forms of prayer: wordy and wordless, still and active, repetitive and creative, intentional and spontaneous, silent and aloud, individual and group, formal and informal, musical and visual. There are endless expressions in prayer: joy, hope, peace, despair, confession, help, thanks, praise, sadness, loneliness. There are endless requests made in prayer:

¹ This sermon draws from Week 2 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia p. 42. Other sources consulted are *The Mennonite*, March 2020, Vol.23, No. 3; Douglas Wood, *Grandad's Prayers of the Earth*, Candlewick, 2009; and James Mayrose, *Dear God...*, Kindle Edition, Saturday Media, LLC, 2013.

for healing, safety, food, shelter, guidance, forgiveness, comfort, peace – for ourselves and for other people.

Prayers are offered in multiple registers of language. In rote prayers like the Lord's Prayer and table graces, the words are always the same. These prayers connect us across divides of time and space, of denomination and class. Written prayers are prepared in advance with special attention to word choice. These prayers make it possible for nervous people to pray in public. They also assist us with personal, verbal prayers. Conversational prayers are informal, spontaneous prayers offered in the moment in whatever language is comfortable.

Each of these ways of communicating with God can be meaningful or meaningless, depending on the intention and attitude of the person who is praying. Prayers can become a function of our pride, anxiety or power. We can try to say things just right so that God will be impressed with our theology and sincerity. We can attempt to use prayer to coerce God into moving in the directions we're longing for. Motivation and intention matter more than words. This doesn't mean we have to wait until we're perfect until we can pray. God desires our honesty more than our religiosity.

How do you pray best?

Many people pray best when they're by themselves enjoying nature, running or walking, singing, playing or listening to music, gardening, traveling, or spending time at home. Some people pray in the moment while working, exercising, sitting, visiting, or hearing a siren. We also pray well with our families and friends or with our church families in large and small groups.

Some of us have trouble finding a way to pray or wonder if it's problematic that our prayers always sound the same. One person reported mentioning each of their family members by name in prayer every morning and night. Saying some of their names brings pain. Some of their names bring joy. This person usually mentions the names in the same order each time and feels like maybe those prayers don't "count" because of the lack of time put into them.

My response is to repeat what I said earlier. Motivation and intention matter more than length of prayer, word order, form choice, method, and location. God desires our presence, effort, honesty, and attention. The words will always be right if they're real and true and come from the heart.

What scriptures about prayer are helpful to you?

As one would expect, the Lord's Prayer is helpful to many people. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, but it wasn't to lock us into the one right set of words to use. It was to remind them of why we pray, what it means when we pray, and what happens when we pray.

Here are some of the other scriptures people find helpful. Of course, there are many others we could mention as well.

- I Peter 5:7: *Cast all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you.*
- Philippians 4:6-7: *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*
- Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

- Colossians 3:17: *And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*
- Matthew 7:7: *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

What else do you want to say about prayer?

Our concluding remarks encompass much of what was said earlier, but I think some things bear repeating. Here's a sampling of what people wrote.

- Prayer that is selfish rather than thankful lacks meaning. I feel the closest to God when I am thankful and share that praise and thanks with Him in prayer.
- I have a lot of questions about prayers of petition. What happens to our faith when God does not seem to answer in the way we want? And yet, it's very easy to thank God when things go well.
- It is comforting to know that there is someone you can always talk to. When I am down and depressed, I can ask for help. When I am grateful, I can give thanks to a higher power. When I am happy, I can invite someone to share the joy with me. .
- Nothing we pray is a surprise to God. In fact, our loving God already knows the cry of our hearts; God also knows what is best in each circumstance. Sometimes the power of prayer is not in bringing healings and events the world might call miraculous but about God's ability to change us. When we spend time in prayer, we open ourselves to change—not only effecting change in the world but for ourselves to be changed.²
- There is no “right way” to pray. I like the definition that there are only two prayers: “thank you, thank you, thank you” and “help me, help me, help me.” I also like to add “forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.”

Guides for Prayer

I'll build on that last remark by sharing several guides you might use for prayer. The first is the ACTS method of prayer.

- A – Adoration: Give God praise and honor.
- C – Confession: Honestly deal with the sin in your life.
- T – Thanksgiving: Tell God what you're grateful for in your life and in the world.
- S – Supplication: Pray for the needs of others and yourself.

The ACTS method could also be summarized as “Wow,” “Oops,” “Thanks,” and “Please.”

Closely related to this is the PRAY method: Praise, Repent, Ask, Yield. All of these actions are found in the Lord's Prayer.

- P – Praise: We praise at the beginning and end of the prayer. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.*
- R – Repent: Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us
- A – Ask: Give us this day our daily bread. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
- Y – Yield: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

² *The Mennonite*, March 2020, Vol.23, No. 3, p. 34.

I'll end with a hand washing liturgy developed by Mary Anne Isaak, pastor of River East Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The actions in this prayer are based on the proper techniques of hand washing, especially in the era of COVID-19. Practice the actions as we pray.

(Rub palms together)

Blessed are you, God our Creator,
You hold the whole world in your hands.

(Twist finger tips on palm of opposite hand. For both hands)

Blessed are you, Christ our Redeemer,
Through your life, death and resurrection, you lead us into life.

(Rub back of hand with opposite palm. For both hands)

Blessed are you, Holy Spirit our Comforter,
You intercede for us when our own words fail.

(Rub inside of finger tips of one hand with inside of finger tips of other hand.)

You pray that we might be one just as you are one.

(Hold hands up, palms out, fingers separated)

Even as we are physically distant from one another,

(Rub interlocking fingers)

We remain connected to each other as your body in the world.

(Turn hand around one thumb.)

Turn me toward you to receive your love which is poured out in my heart through the Holy Spirit who has been given to me.

(Turn hand around other thumb)

Turn me toward you to love you with all my heart, with all my being,
With all my mind and with all my strength.

(Rub hand around wrist)

Turn me outward toward the world to love my neighbor as myself,
To love my enemies and to do good to those who hate me.

(Rub hand around other wrist.)

Turn us outward to love and serve the least, the lost and the left behind
That we might truly be your Jesus community for the world.

(Stretch out hands, palms up)

Jesus says, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

AMEN