

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Encouragement Along the Way: Prayer
The Rev. Joanne Blair
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Luke 6:12-16

Last week, Pastor John gave us the assignment of reading the book of Luke. For those of us who did, or those of us who are already familiar with the book, we may have thought today's scripture seemed like an odd placement for Jesus to be forming his team. By now, he has been teaching, preaching, healing, and even challenging the authorities. And he already has quite a collection of disciples. So, before we move into our topic for today (that of prayer), I think it behooves us to unpack this a little bit. Luke is making a distinction between disciples and apostles.

A disciple is someone who is a follower or student, of a teacher or master. And what distinguishes a disciple from a typical student, is that a disciple completely redirects their life to the doctrine of the master. An apostle, on the other hand, is one who is sent or commissioned by someone else to represent them... to be their witness.

Later in chapter 10, Jesus says to his apostles, "whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me." The 12 will be called to particular missions, and will need to stand up to particular challenges. But what is crucial in the calling of the 12, is our first verse: "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God." The twelve will play a crucial role in history, and so before Jesus chooses them, he withdraws to the mountain to pray.

Jesus' life is filled with prayer. And he prays before every pivotal decision he makes. Even though he is God the Son, he humbles himself before God the Father, staying in tune with the Father's will. Jesus didn't make his choice first and then ask God's blessing. Rather... he spent the night in prayer and then made his choice. Jesus is, indeed, the perfect model of prayer.

Jesus practiced prayer constantly and urged his followers to do the same. But what is prayer? Prayer is a conversation. It is an exchange of wishes or ideas. It is a conscious seeking to experience God's presence, love, direction, and grace.

Last week, John mentioned that the Bible is the most purchased book ... and the least read. Well, in our life of faith, prayer is the most talked about activity ... and the least practiced. Yet prayer is a conduit of communication between God and God's people. If Jesus felt the need to pray, surely we should.

Yet many of us are uncomfortable with prayer. We often say to each other: "I'll pray for you" or "You're in my prayers" ... and then send a quick 'arrow prayer' to God. Our intentions are good, and while all prayers do matter ... I repeat - all prayers do matter ... prayer is so much more than quick arrow prayers. Prayer builds relationship. Prayer can design the framework of our lives. And prayer can encourage us along the way.

Yet prayer can be challenging. In the busyness of our lives, it's hard to settle ourselves down enough to gather our thoughts and feelings ... let alone express them. And it's even harder to settle ourselves down and open ourselves up enough to listen to what God might be saying. Some of us already have a strong and consistent prayer life. Many of us don't.

Since today is “Everybody’s Worship” I thought it would be meaningful if we all committed to praying for 10 minutes each day this week … practicing the same prayer style. In Crosswalks (our Sunday School for K-5th grade), the children have been doing a unit on prayer using finger prayers. While there are many styles of finger prayers, this week I encourage all of us to follow the pattern the children are using. How special, to realize during the coming week that this entire community of faith is praying together … yet each with their own unique offerings.

The Finger Prayer

- I love you because… (praise/adoration)
- I’m sorry for… (confession)
- Please take care of… (intercession)
- Thank you for… (gratitude)
- Please help me… (supplication)
- Allow time for silence (we can’t hear if we’re talking)

Ten minutes can seem like a very long time. A few years ago, I realized that I felt sluggish most of the time, and I acknowledged that it was because I wasn’t moving my body enough. I made a very small commitment that I would walk on a treadmill for 15 minutes. Truth be told, it took me longer to get to the gym and put my things in the locker than it took me to walk for 15 minutes. But I kept doing it… and I limited myself to 15 minutes. Before I knew it, I just wasn’t ready to stop and needed to extend the time.

As the days and weeks went by… my walking time increased and increased, and it became a regular part of my life. I not only felt better … I was more connected to my body and my mind. Prayer connects us to God.

They say it takes 30 days to form a new habit. Any discipline needs to be practiced before it becomes a part of our natural routine. And so it is with prayer. What first seems like a forced, stilted activity soon becomes not only a part of our daily life … but something we miss when it’s not there. And if we pray often enough… through all the phases of our day… our conversation with God becomes natural and we better learn to listen and understand where, when, how, and through whom God has responded.

As we build a stronger relationship with God… as our communication skills with God become more practiced… as we learn to enter into conversation with God… then we will come to better understand God’s answers. For often, God answers in ways we never dreamed, expected, or asked for.

F. B. Meyer wrote in his book *The Secret of Guidance*, “The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.” What could be greater than being in genuine conversation with God? As much as we speak … we must learn to listen. God continues to call people of faith together through whom God can bless all the peoples of the earth.

The more we remain in conversation with God and allow that conversation to direct our lives … the more our lives can become a living prayer.

May it be so.