

Sunday, February 25, 2024 *"The Discipline of Discipleship"* PRAYING | Psalm 84, Matthew 6:9-13 | Megan Berry

We're continuing our sermon series on Spiritual Disciplines or Spiritual Practices. Last week Charlie reminded us that even though it might feel counterintuitive to use the language of disciplines because it can feel negative or studious, there's some truth in thinking through our calling as disciples to require some sort of discipline.

Whether we want to use the word practices or disciplines, the concept is the same: good, intentional practices take good, intentional discipline. When I was a music student, I often heard the phrase "practice makes perfect" as my encouragement and cue that yes, practice is important and I needed to practice WAY more than I currently was. While there's truth to that, I prefer the phrase I heard in seminary more, "practice makes permanent" because 1. We're never perfect and 2. If you practice poorly more often than you practice well or practice with intentionality, you ingrain those poor habits into your muscle memory and when stressed that's what comes out. My music professor always knew which parts of my pieces I wasn't giving good attention to because well he's just magic like that but more importantly, those were the sections that when stressed, I would make the silliest mistakes during because I probably made those silly mistakes while practicing but didn't think twice about it and take the time to unlearn and relearn the correct muscle memory for them.

And our work as disciples is pretty similar to that of being a musician or an athlete or someone else who spends time in intentional practice for building that muscle memory or permanence. These spiritual practices help train us to react more like Jesus in our world and less like... well some of the not so good parts of our world.

This week we're focusing on the discipline of prayer. Prayer is an exciting although somewhat challenging practice to focus on because it's so integrated into some of the other disciplines we'll touch on throughout this series or have already touched on last week.

There's a book that's been on my wish list for a couple years now called the "Spiritual Disciplines Handbook" by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun that walks through about 66 different spiritual disciplines, and of those 66 approximately 22 of them are different forms of prayer. That's approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the book that covers different forms of prayer. And one could probably argue that the other 44 use aspects of prayer in one way or another, that's how all-encompassing prayer can be and is.

One of the things I love about prayer is the simple reminder that prayer is just talking with God, it can be these long beautiful poetic words of thanks and praise or weeping with the world, but it can also be as simple as an exclamation of "God WHY!" or "hey, thanks God, I see what you did here."

During my time as a camp counselor, I often found myself with kids who were scared to pray "what if I say the wrong words or forget something" or being met with cries of "I FORGOT THE WORDS TO THIS PRAYER" and while it didn't fix all the tears, the reassurance that we can talk to God however and whenever we want, it's okay if we forget the "magic words" went a long way for some of these kids and for me too honestly.

One of my fears of becoming a pastor was the expectation that I would be asked to pray A LOT. I was definitely one of the kids that would cry at the possibility of being asked to pray on the spot, sometimes I'm still that kid to be honest. For me growing up, praying was something we did in church where the pastor would pray these beautiful, elaborate, gorgeous prayers and as someone who is not very poetic, this felt inaccessible as something I could do on my own.

So, if you're someone who carries this fear too, just remember, prayer is simply talking with God and that talking can take so many forms and one of those forms is 1000% the non-poetic ramblings of our thoughts and thanks and needs, the half thoughts and missed lines of once memorized corporate prayers. It's all prayer and it's beautiful and God is happy to hear it.

In fact, one of my new favorite reminders of this is the quote in your bulletin from the book "New Directions for Holy Questions." It says "Prayer is communication with God. We can pray with or without words. We are in prayer when we notice what God is doing around us in the world, each and every day."

Prayer is communication and this communication can happen in so many different ways. We have our more "standard" types of prayer: prayer at mealtimes, praying at bedtime, praying together in worship.

We also have ways where we can pray with our entire body. Yoga, while good for us in many ways, can also be a type of prayer. You can also use full body movements as part of your prayers. If you came to our Lenten Supper & Worship on Wednesday, you got a little taste of this type of prayer with our benediction.

We go out in peace (peace symbol) To love God (lift arms up towards sky) Our neighbors (arms out to the side) And ourselves (point to yourself) Amen (prayer hands)

By using our bodies with our prayers, with enough practice (or discipline) when we use these movements outside of our prayers, they may remind us of our prayers and being in relationship with God and one another.

One of my new ways of praying right now is breath prayers. This is where you take a two-sentence phrase or saying and you pray one as you breathe in and the other as you breathe out. In these breath prayers, the words are important, but it's even more important to focus on your breath. As someone with anxiety, this has helped me connect to myself and God and calm myself when the worries and thoughts of the world become a little too much or clutter my brain space too much.

Two breath prayers I've been cycling between lately come from a newer book called "Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human" by Cole Arthur Riley. They both come from her section on lament and grief.

The first one is more general for when life is just a littttttle too much in that moment. INHALE: I don't have to hold every pain at once. EXHALE: I can feel and not be consumed.

The second one touches much more on the grief journey many of us are on. INHALE: I won't rush my grief. EXHALE: These tears are sacred. You can just repeat these a few times until your mind has calmed and you feel a little more settled in the moment.

We also have the ways scripture has taught us to pray. In the midst of Jesus's sermon on the mount, we hear these words from him.

- <sup>9</sup> "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy.
  <sup>10</sup> May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
  <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread.
  <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
  <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial,
  - but rescue us from the evil one."

Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer in scripture for us to memorize and use but also as one way for the disciples to model their own prayer life after. If we break down the Lord's Prayer into chunks, we see two distinct things that Jesus identifies in this prayer.

First, Jesus names and proclaims who God is and calls us to name and proclaim who God is in our prayers as a way of honoring God and our relationship to the Sacred.

Second, Jesus invites us to name and pray for our human needs: peace & justice in God's kin-dom; our daily needs of food & safety; forgiveness; and help resisting temptations.

So, if you're someone who likes structure and something to follow in your prayer life, you could use the Lord's Prayer for some structure to your personal prayers. First, name and praise who God is and then name what needs you have that day.

The Lord's Prayer isn't our only prayer reference in our scriptures, in fact we have a whole book of the Bible that is entirely prayers, the book of Psalms! The book of Psalms covers almost every emotion and feeling imaginable and puts those feelings into words of praise, thanksgiving, lament, even anger towards God and the world. If you're ever unsure if God can handle ALL your emotions and feelings, just take a quick

peek through the book of Psalms, the authors used some pretty strong language and God welcomed it with open arms. Like look at Psalm 13..

 "<sup>1</sup> How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
 <sup>2</sup> How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?"

That's just the first two verses. God can handle any and every emotion you might be feeling.

Earlier in our service, Bergen/Christian read Psalm 84 for us. A very different vibe from Psalm 13. This Psalm is a prayer of longing, adoration, and praise to God. It's a reminder that the Psalmist often finds comfort in the presence of God and how wonderful that presence is that even the sparrows find a home there. Our prayers can be a reminder of God's comforting presence for us and for others.

So, with all these different ways we can pray, this week, I want to lovingly challenge you to explore a new way to pray. If you're someone who prays the Lord's Prayer every night before bed, maybe google a different version of the Lord's Prayer and try that for a week and see what sticks out to you or try making your own version: first naming and praising who God is and then naming your needs for that day.

If you're someone who, like me, struggles with prayer, maybe try memorizing a simple breath prayer.

INHALE: I am a beloved child of God. EXHALE: I will share that love with others.

Or incorporate talking with God into an activity you already do. Sometimes when I'm knitting, I'll think about my mom or grandma and reflect on all the ways I'm grateful for what they taught me, this can be a form of prayer too.

Maybe you want to read through the Psalms and meditate on those words of prayer.

However, you choose to pray this week, just remember, you can't do it wrong, there is no messing this up because prayer is simply communication with God. "We can pray

with or without words. We can be in prayer when we notice what God is doing around us in the world each and every single day."

Amen.