



VILLAGE
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

The Practice of Prayer

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 6:
5-15

Feb. 18, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

She was just desperate for a word. That was all. She just wanted to hear from him. He was her youngest of four and the only boy. A month earlier she and her husband had taken him to college. He had found a good school. His older sister had attended there. She admits she missed him more than she thought she would, but she did not want to be “that kind of mother.” The kind who hovered over their college child. Yet, the two of them had always had this special bond. He would proudly claim the title of “mama’s boy.”

And now he was at college, eight hours from home, doing exactly what he as supposed to be doing—starting the work of shaping his own identity apart from his mom and dad and sisters. She knew all that. So, she let a week go by without reaching out to him. Then she sent him an email. Brief. “Just checking in.” She received in reply... nothing. A week later she put together a care package. His favorite snacks. She baked the brownies he loved—the ones with chunks of chocolate and caramel swirled across the top. She counted the days estimating when he must have received the package. She received in reply... nothing.

Then she started texting. A gentle message in the morning. “Hope your day is great!” Nothing. Then she started asking questions. “So how is studying?” Nothing. She saw a pizza charge on the credit card. “Hey. How was the pizza?” Nothing. Finally, nearly two months after they had dropped him off, she texted: “Are you alive? Press one for yes. Press two for no.” Forty-eight hours later, she received a text message ping and a “1.” She told me she just wanted to hear from him. She just wanted a relationship with him.

In essence, that’s what prayer is. God just wants to hear from us. Prayer is a conversation with God.

It can take many forms. It can be silence. It can be sung. It can be your breath. It can be written. It can be spontaneous. It just needs to be a conversation with God. That’s it.

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is in the midst of his long sermon, the sermon on the mount. The sermon goes on for three chapters and he says, “And whenever you pray...”. He says “when,” not “if.” When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others. They have received their reward. Instead, when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father.

So imagine this. In the synagogue, people are gathered and one person gets up to pray and prays loudly and powerfully and people are in awe. Or they are on the street corner praying to show off their piety. Jesus calls them hypocrites. Dr. Anna Case Winters, who taught me theology in seminary, reminds us that the word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek and the literal translation is “street actor.” Hupokritai. They are performing for the people. They’re not praying to God. They’re not seeking a deeper relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit. They are acting for the audience. That’s why they are hypocrites. Here is the bottom line. Prayer is a conversation with God, Jesus, Holy Spirit. That’s it. And it has to be real. It has to be authentic. Just be real. Just be honest.

I pray. I pray all the time. When I was serving at our Village on Antioch campus, I loved watching the folks who would bring their children to our preschool from my office window each morning. It is the office that Pastor Anna has now. There was a grandmother, a lovely South Asian woman dressed in a beautiful sari, who would walk her little granddaughter to preschool. The grandmother

would carry the bag of snacks. I got to look for a young father who would wear scrubs. He brought his twin boys who each had Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle backpacks which I loved because the backpacks were almost as big as they were and it made them both look like turtles. I would stand there and pray, “O Lord Jesus, you loved when the children came to you. Well, there they are. They are your own. Bless them and keep them strong and healthy. Bless our preschool and bless their families.”

My office here at the Mission campus is above our nursery and not often but every once in a while I will hear through my floor someone who has been blessed by Jesus with great lungs and is not having a good day Village Church and I stop and pray, “O dear Spirit. First, thank you that this little one has such great strength to cry that loudly. Second, comfort them and even more comfort the mom or dad who left the little one behind and bless Sandra and Kim and Seretha and whoever else is downstairs caring for them.”

Some of you know that I am an early riser. Twice a week we put out our church prayer list. Every morning, I sit at my dining room table. I read a psalm, sometimes a word from a devotional book, then I pray, out loud, for each person on our prayer list. Every morning. A number of you do this, too. Prayer is a conversation with God. God just wants to hear from us. Just keep it real.

I know many of us struggled with the news of the horrible mass shooting near Union Station on Wednesday. We started Sunday with an incredible Super Bowl victory. On Tuesday night, here in the Sanctuary, we had a wonderful 75th Anniversary celebration. Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, Valentine’s Day and then the Chiefs Super Bowl parade—with a million people—and then a mass shooting. Now we’re finding out that it may have been two teenagers who got into some kind of argument and they pulled out their guns and began firing at each other.

And just to be clear, there are all kinds of things wrong with that statement. In no society, even one like ours that values the right for its citizens to bear arms, in no society should guns ever be in the

hands of adolescents—period. What was a day of celebration turned into yet another day of tragedy. Lisa Lopez-Galvan was killed and 22 persons were injured including nine children.

And I know, thoughts and prayers. Some people are criticizing thoughts and prayers as worthless. But here’s the thing about thoughts and prayers. When they’re real, when they’re authentic, when we give our thoughts and prayers over to the power of the Holy Spirit, then thoughts and prayers lead to action.

No doubt you’ve heard this and other stories. The shooting started just as the Chiefs and their families and staff and friends were leaving the main stage. Henry Louis Smith III, “Trey,” is 6’6” and 321 pounds. He’s a right guard. The police officers were yelling at him to evacuate and get to safety. He said he and others took shelter in a closet. As he was heading to the closet, there was a little kid in front of him so he just scooped him up and said, “You’re hopping in here with me, buddy.” He said there were 20 people in there with teammate James Winchester, the long snapper for the Chiefs. The little boy was with his father but was panicked so Trey Smith gave him his world wrestling championship belt (that he had been wearing during the parade) and he told him, “Hey, buddy. You’re the champion. No one is gonna hurt you. No one is gonna hurt you. We got your back.”

He’s 24 years old. In an interview on KCUR, Trey said he has been a Christian his whole life and that when he was in college playing for Tennessee, he had developed blood clots. He was scared but made a full recovery and he credited his faith for making it through. He said he had to “walk by faith and not by sight.” He said his mom and dad took him to church all the time and it helped shape him. “Being around church just molded me in terms of how I thought and how I believed. For me, just thinking about my journey and my story, I know God is a part of all of it.” “It molded me in terms of how I thought and how I believed. Just thinking about my journey and my story, I know God is a part of it.”

Thoughts and prayers. I know that may not sound like much but thoughts and prayers mold and shape us.

The Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, said, “Be careful of your thoughts, they become your words. Be careful of your words, they become your actions. Be careful of your actions, they become your habits. Be careful of your habits, they become your character. Be careful of your

character, it becomes your destiny.”

In this Lenten season, I urge you to renew your life of prayer. It starts with your thoughts. Just keep it real.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.