



PINNACLE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Sermon Series

by: Dr. Wesley Avram

On Prayer, Part 1

Romans 8: 22-28

From a Human Perspective (expanded version)

In this first sermon, I'll think about prayer from a human perspective. Next time, I'll try to think about prayer from a divine perspective, from God's vantage--if that's possible. Then I'll take a third Sunday and talk about prayer from a practical perspective, the "how" of prayer for Christians.

Our passage is from Paul's Letter to the Christians in Rome, beginning in chapter 8.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

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Taken broadly, the idea of Christian prayer includes the ways we commune and communicate with God. Most often, we think of it as how we use *words* to speak to God, not *about* God but *to* God. Though we also know--somewhere in our bones--that prayer also includes silence. Sometimes it

includes movement, positioning our bodies, directing our eyes, using our hands, drawing, singing and more. However we do it, prayer is a non-negotiable part of Christian existence.

I've told you once before of the comment that Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas has made about being Christian. If you ask him what Christians believe, Stanley might say to you, "I can't tell you for sure what Christians believe, but I *can* show you what Christians do," and he'll ask you to join him in praying the Lord's Prayer.

Without prayer, we're pretty much left with only gossip about God—which we sometimes call theology.

Yet as central as prayer is to living as a Christian, prayer is also about the most difficult Christian practice there is to explain--especially in a scientific culture. Once you get past the simplistic lessons of Sunday School, try explaining prayer to a smart, curious teen who is learning about a universe of cause and effect.

Here we are uttering words into space, usually with our eyes closed. They are sometimes written for us and sometimes of our own composition. Or we recite lines we memorized at some point. We're sometimes alone and sometimes with other people. We act as if the Something, or the Someone who is outside of all we know hears us, and might even respond to us.

And we ask for things. Really? Yes. We ask for things, as if our asking can change the laws of nature or the will of others, or the hearts of nations, or the flow of conflict, or the movement of hurricanes, or the chanciness of our existence.

And how does prayer affect God, especially when the same preachers who tell us prayer makes a difference also tell us that God knows all, sees all, is all powerful, and loves us with the best intentions? Why would this God need our prayer to act?

We ask our pastor, or our friends to pray for our dying wife or suffering child. Sometimes she gets better beyond any doctor's predictions. And sometimes she doesn't. We're taught to see healing as a sign of prayer's power, but to not see death as a sign of prayer's impotence. We use great theological sophistication to explain apparent failures in prayer, or feelings of absence in prayer, or lack of energy for prayer. And then we accept apparent success in prayer at face value.

Explain all of this to a non-believer. It's not easy. Little wonder Sylvia Plath insisted, "I talk to God but the sky is empty." 1

But don't get me wrong. I very much believe in prayer. I've seen its power. I've felt its difficulty and even its seeming failure. I've prayed for people and events I do not know and can't otherwise impact. I've prayed in desperation for someone I love and seen nothing happen. I've prayed in a similar way and seen miracles happen. I've felt a presence and a knowledge in prayer--as if a word actually spoken from beyond. And I've felt deep silence and the absence of word from beyond. I've given perfunctory and rather tired prayers before committee meetings and I've felt a divine presence in a single word spoken by one of you when you've taken the reigns. I've loved the repeated prayers of the Prayer Book and felt bored by them. I've been moved by Pentecostal tongues and felt manipulated by enthusiasm. And you all have too, in your own ways: you've experienced some or all of this.

It's an amazing thing, this thing we call prayer. And it is the most important thing we do as believers--the absolutely most important thing.

Let me say that again: Prayer is impossible to explain, really, or justify in scientific terms. Yet it is the most important thing we do as believers.

So in this sermon series let me not try to *explain* the *act* of prayer. Let me instead *respond* to the *fact* of prayer. And in this first sermon, let me give you three ways of talking about prayer:

First, prayer is the ultimate freedom of speech.

Second, prayer is the ultimate opening of our hearts.

And third, prayer is our ultimate act of solidarity.

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First, prayer is our ultimate freedom of expression.

Anne Lamott wrote a little book about prayer last year that's become quite popular. It's called *Help, Thanks, Wow* (Penguin, 2012). The book is as insightful as it is incomplete, but I recommend it to you. For it shows in writing what it actually talks about in prayer. It's personal, incomplete, expressive, sudden, full of personality, rooted in real life, and remarkably honest in places. It's free.

Lamott assumes that prayer is the expression an individual makes to God, or to whatever one takes in a moment to be ultimate. She takes the individual part of what we experience in prayer seriously and takes us to three essential prayers when all else is stripped away:

“Help!” “Thanks!” “Wow!” and then “Amen.”

Somehow, sometime, whether over a little thing or in the single moment that makes or breaks your life--at the bottom of an addict's pit, or in the delightful fear of a parent holding a newborn for the first time, or in the sadness of arms empty for any number of reasons--at the moments when we turn our eyes elsewhere than toward the thing in front of us and we cry out, "Help!" we begin to pray.

Or when we learn to whisper a word of acceptance and gratitude for a bullet dodged, or a doctor's thumb up, or a love discovered, or a mission accomplished, or another day sober, or a meeting that went better than we thought it would, or a decent parking space even when we know it's probably more a coincidence than a divine intervention and we still say a quiet "Thanks," we are also beginning to pray.

Or when we're stopped cold, finally, against our controlling ways and intellectual confidence—stopped by another person, or by a sunset, or by the dangerous beauty of nature in a snakes rattle, and we utter only "Wow." That's also prayer, in its way.

Some of us have cavernous vibrations inside us when we communicate with God [Lamott writes]. Others are more rational and less messy in our spiritual sense of reality, in our petitions and gratitude and expressions of pain or anger or desolation or praise. Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence.

. . . Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union [she says], even if we are bitter or insane or broken. (In fact, these are probably the best possible conditions under which to pray.) Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. . . . prayer begins an honest conversation. (Lamott, pp. 10-11)

That's nice writing, don't you think? It's almost prayerful.

So prayer is an invitation to honesty, to giving yourself to what is most Real and True without fear of being beaten back.

The mystics have always taught us that there is no real freedom except in prayer.

Spend your life trying to sort that out.

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But I've got a second idea to give you, and that's that as much as prayer is an ultimate freedom of expression, it's also an ultimate opening of our hearts—our usually encrusted, often tight, sometimes closed off hearts.

This is so because prayer as self-expression, as powerful and freeing as that might be, is not the most remarkable way folks have described the experience of prayer. For if we spend time with it, and allow it to do its work, *prayer can actually change the one who prays.*

Lamott quotes C. S. Lewis, who said, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me" (63).

Soren Kierkegaard said the same thing theologically when he said that, "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." ²

And Mother Teresa said it in a statement of hope: "May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in," she prayed. ³

We do not understand how or why prayer works, but we understand that part of how and why it works is in what it finally *does*. For prayer puts *our* spirit into *God's* Spirit—God's Spirit, who is always working in more than one person, and more than one place, and more than one reality at a time. If you pray for another person—not to fix or control them, but to give them to God, God may become more active in your own life too. Or if you pray in the face of danger that it might be lifted from you or the one you love, you may also find that you are given strength to accept the very thing you fear will come. That's how Jesus prayed in the Garden before he was executed, we're told—and his prayers were God's prayers.

So think of Jesus' command that we pray for our enemies. We're not asked or urged; we're commanded. To pray for our enemies—for those who hate us or persecute us, for those we cannot seem to forgive—to lift them into God's love.

Why? Well, so we might learn how God sees the world and accept God's view, even in our anger, or our fear, or our disagreement, or our pursuits of justice. You cannot long seek revenge on someone you pray for, even when you can still name wrong for wrong and right for right. And as your heart is broken open by prayer, you can also see the pain, and the sin, and the wrong inside of you too. For in the end, prayer is more listening and opening than it is asking and directing. It's the slow movement from a cry of "Why me?" or "Why now?" to a prayer: "What, God, are you doing now—in me, or in my world, in your world?"

So there's another little book I recommend for your summer reading. It's a memoir by the novelist Christian Wiman, called *My Bright Abyss* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2012). At one point in the book Wiman describes the work of love in a heart that's been opened to life, and to God. As if he's writing a psalm, the author moves between his own voice and God's:

Life tears us apart, but through these wounds, if we have tended them, love may enter us. It may be the love of someone you have lost. It may be the love of your own spirit for the self that at times you think you hate. However it comes though, in all these—of all these and more than they, so much more—there burns the abiding love of God. But if you find you cannot believe in God, then do not worry yourself with it. . . . My love is still with you, my children, still with you, still straining through your ambitions and your disappointments, your frenzies and forgetfulness, through all the glints and gulfs of implacable matter—to reach you, to help you, to heal you. (161)

The more you pray, the more you'll understand that logic. Can't explain it. You can only experience it. For prayer is not magic. It is the mystery of communication with what is, and a participating in what God is doing.

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And so a final thought: Prayer is an ultimate act of solidarity.

Here's where things go past Anne Lamott or Christian Wiman, or you in your bathroom in the middle of the night or on the overlook of a canyon. Here's where it comes back to the church. For prayer, at first and at last, is not our accomplishment at all—despite all I've just said.

Prayer is never just the words, or quiet, or inclination of the soul praying. For when you pray, other voices and other prayers echo around you to perfect your prayer. They add to it. When necessary they even contradict it or correct it.

We don't pray alone.

Now often you can *hear* the other voices, as when we pray written or remembered prayers together—like our Prayers of Confession every Sunday, or the Lord's Prayer, or "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." or "Bless this grub" before lunch. But this community of prayer is also *spiritual*, known in a wager we've made that there's a cosmic chorus of hums and sounds and uttering words that prays with us as we pray. We don't *make* prayer you see. We *join* prayer. And this is the lesson the church has tried to teach.

I caught this in a monastery in the desert of Egypt, in the middle of nowhere. The place has been there since the 4th century, full of monks escaping the city for a life of disciplined, communal prayer and work. "Why did you leave the world to come to the monastery to pray?" I asked my new friend. He understood English, but still looked at me puzzled. I wondered if I'd broken a rule. Until he responded: "I never thought I was leaving the world. I believe I have finally come *to* the world, to its very *center*. Away from distractions, in this daily prayer I share with the monks I am most attuned to the world. I am in solidarity with all people everywhere, closer than I ever was in the city. In the city I prayed *for* the world. Here I pray *with* the world."

I doubt any one of us will be called to a desert monastery any time soon, but we can still, in our own desert space of shared prayer, experience a glancing taste of the sweet solidarity my Coptic friend described.

We can shift our point of view from thinking we are praying *for* to imagining we are praying *with*—

with the poor, the lonely, the terrified;
with those who work for peace, or justice, or righteousness;
with children, and elderly, and folks in between;
with each other when we are happy and ready for life;
with everyone who in one way or another says "Help," "Thanks," or
"Wow."

Prayer doesn't need to be authentic every time you do it, thank God. You don't need to feel it, or even every single time believe it, to be part of it. For we do not pray alone, ever.

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Prayer is our ultimate freedom to speak.

Prayer is also our ultimate way of opening our hearts.

And prayer is our ultimate solidarity with all that God has created, and continues to create.

Amen.

Next time: prayer from a divine perspective.

1 Quote in public domain, taken from www.goodreads.com/quuotes/tag/prayer

2 (same reference as above)

3 (same reference as above)