

# Marion weekly update

APRIL 3, 2022

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**SERMON** March 27- Disciplines: Prayer Joshua 7:6-11,13, 1 Thessalonians 5:15-22

We continue our series on Spiritual Disciplines. This week we focus on the discipline of prayer. While it may seem this discipline doesn't need much unpacking, given many modern grasps of it we are wise to parse through it intentionally.

The idea of prayer has become greater in concept than what it is. Prayer is simply communicating with God. That's it. What too many forget is that communication is a two way street. For many, prayer is all about us doing the talking. If we consider that in time regards out of 24 hours the majority of our day isn't about talking to God but rather going about other things, we have to acknowledge that the greater part of our communication is listening.

Before diving into our scripture for this morning, there are other aspects of prayer that demand our attention.

One of them is the notion that there are models, or otherwise that God favors when we pray. Do we pray in the morning? The evening? All the time? How does all the time look? On our face? Sitting? On our knees? Running? Walking? Standing still? What is the reality?

The reality is none of it. Putting parameters on what qualifies as "real" prayer is stifling. The point is connecting to God. Real prayer is whatever helps us find that soul space to communicate with the Lord. We are all individual and unique. The result is that what gets us in that proper space is as individual as we are. What quiets my mind and spirit may be different from what quiets yours. And that's alright.

If we do want a model for prayer, one was given by Jesus. It's called the Lord's prayer. This is a beloved prayer of the church and recited word for word. There is a comfort in having this common prayer among us. If we're at a loss for words, Jesus gives us some. At the same time, the intent of this prayer is far more than a rote repetition. It is a framework that can be intensely personalized.

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed by your name reminds us to begin by honoring God in God's majesty.

Your Kingdom come Your will be done on earth as in heaven is about asking for God to, and to help us to, correct those things in the world that are out of God's design.

Give us this day our daily bread is asking God for what we need.

Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us is confessional and asking for the compassionate heart to be as gracious and merciful as God is to us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil is acknowledging those things that we want to do outside of God's will and asking for the help to not do so.

For yours is the kingdom, power, and glory forever ends as we began, praising and honoring God in all God's greatness.

The point being that in our lives, those things not right with God in the world, what we need, our personal sin and whom we need to forgive, and what threatens to lead us astray is all unique to our own experience and lives. Praying more specifically is a help and a means to connect more deeply with God.

We must also address the tone, or agenda of our prayers.

The story of the religious man who prays loudly and publicly thanking God he's not like those "other sinners" and the humble contrite man who asks mercy as he confesses to God he is a sinner demonstrates this. The arrogant, boastful, flowery prayer intended to impress isn't desired by God. Because it's not about God, it's about the person praying and their looking good. This misses the point entirely.

On the other hand, the contrite, humble prayer is what God seeks. The agenda is to connect with God and honor God through working towards becoming who God calls us to be.

The idea that prayer has to be lengthy, wordy, and eloquent is completely unscriptural. Quite the opposite, God desires sincere, simply prayers that are direct and honest. While corporate prayer is good and powerful, personal prayer isn't a show. It is private between the individual and God, with no one having any business in being part of it. We find that space that is personal and where we can focus humbly on God, rather than focusing on what others might be thinking or feeling about us.

Intent is more than just this kind of tone, it's also remembering the purpose of prayer. Communicating. Not preaching. The preaching prayer misses the point. This is the prayer that becomes directed at those listening rather than God. A telltale sign is that we

address God as God and not “You”. Some public prayers are so long because they aren’t prayers at all, but rather mini sermons. If we want to honor the discipline of prayer, we must approach it with this kind of singularity of purpose. Communicating with God, not one another.

The power of prayer is also often misunderstood. We assume that there is power in prayer to change circumstances. This isn’t untrue. It does. We see this so clearly in scripture when Abraham communicates with God (prayer) to sway God’s plan to destroy Sodom to protect his nephew Lot. God bargains with Abraham and Lot is saved.

Yet at the same time, experientially we see other things that are somewhat difficult to fully grasp. Some of you remember Connor, the 13 year old boy who died of brain cancer. Thousands of faithful people around the world prayed for him to survive, yet he passed away. There are also atheists with cancer who never pray, nor have anyone praying for them and are healed. This seems somewhat contrary to our grasp of the power of prayer.

The point here isn’t to doubt prayer. It’s to acknowledge simply that we don’t have a full bead on exactly how it works, what moves God to act or not, and that we can’t expect prayer to strongarm God to give us what we want. Faith and life are more complex than this simple formula, and God is not a genie in a bottle waiting to grant us wishes. Rather overall I believe God’s desire is that whether life hands us wonders or tragedies, we walk with God through it all, listening, loving and learning. Prayer, communication, is part of this. In fact the idea of “answered prayer” is a testament to this. We still make lists of what we pray for and check them off as “answered” when we get what we want or twist getting what we don’t want to convince ourselves that it’s actually what we wanted all along. The truth of the matter is that every prayer is answered immediately. Yes, No, or Wait. The idea that prayer is only answered when I get what I want is immensely selfish and short sighted. The wisdom of God is far greater than our own. Sometimes what we want might hurt us. Sometimes bad things happen simply because the world is fallen and broken. Sometimes we are asking in line with God’s will. Sometimes, whether we know it or not, God is “working all things together for the good of those who believe and are called according to His purpose.”

Finally before getting into our scriptures for the day, there is the passage that says that God knows what we need before we even ask. If this is the case, why pray at all? God already knows! If your belief in God is anything like mine, you believe that God is acting and working all the time. God is trying to direct us in the best way possible. And if God is better than we are, certainly God doesn’t sit on the sideline when we are in legitimate need.

If one of our children is clearly broken and hurt, we don’t sit in our chair and petulantly say “well, they’ll get my help when they have the respect to ask for it.” No. We go to them. We want to know what’s wrong and try to help them through it. If we, in our fallen nature do this, how much greater is the love of God reaching into our lives and experience to help us at our point of need?

So why pray? It’s not like God needs informed from us. It’s not about God so much as it is about us.

Prayer as we confess ties us to the grace of God and connects us humbly in a way that opens our heart to the Spirit to be transformed. Prayer as we petition on behalf of ourselves and one another is a reminder to us that God does indeed love us abundantly and has the power to direct us in paths that will grow us and lead us to those things that we need.

Acknowledging our needs verbally cements the reality that they are there. This increases the likelihood that not only will we ask, but we’ll also look for the answers. Our words aren’t just words wafting through the air, but actually connect us to God in a way that makes us actively communicate not just by speaking but by looking and listening.

Prayer as we honor God, bare ourselves, and allow a vulnerability to God’s Spirit and will build the strong bonds of relationship with God, which is what God desires so dearly. God wants us to be in relationship for our own good and redemption. The stronger these bonds grow, the greater God can work through us to change us and use us as instruments in the world that make a difference for the Kingdom of God.

Which now brings us to our scriptures.

At first Joshua and Thessalonians may seem at crossed paths. I love the Joshua passage.

The context is that Israel has been winning victories in battle. On one occasion, as they went through the defeated enemy’s camp. They were told by God to not take any “accursed” items. A man named Achan did. As a result, Israel’s winning streak went away. Joshua is praying to God about it and God essentially says “shut up and go do something about it.” For some this sounds like “stop praying and start doing”.

Thessalonians has a different message. Pray without ceasing. How can we do both?!!!!!! Stop praying but never stop praying? Fortunately these two passages go together wonderfully when we grasp the larger sense that prayer is communication. 2 way communication.

Joshua was wringing his hands over a situation. God’s response is a lot like a cartoon I see pop up every now and then. A man is standing there with a shovel leaning on a fence. It says “it’s good to pray for a hole, but realize you also may need to pick up the shovel.” Yes, God answers prayer, but rarely is it some wild mojo that falls from the sky and just sorts everything out and makes everything right and perfect. Often we are participants in the answer. We have to do something. If God does everything, what does that relationship look like? It looks like spoiled children of a parent that doesn’t want them to grow.

Does God sometimes do all the heavy lifting? Sure. But that’s the exception, not the rule. We have to put in not just our faith, but often our effort, And God works through that combination to make amazing things come about. Including our own growth and transformation.

With Joshua, he is told to do something about the problem. But this doesn’t mean the praying stops. As Joshua carries out God’s design, what else is he doing? He’s looking and listening. He’s trying to find signs of what’s going on so things can get sifted out. He’s listening for God’s direction and prompting. He’s trying to see where God is leading and guiding him. He’s doing what we talked about at the beginning of the message. He realizes that prayer isn’t just himself talking to God. Most of the time it’s him listening and looking for God at work and answering.

Of course he finds out the perpetrator and deals with the situation. But the lesson is clear. Prayer without action is nowhere nearly as effective as prayer with action.

We need to pray. We need to pray asking God to move. To pray expectantly for God's response. To pray knowing we are deepening our relationship with God. To pray open to the Spirit's response, moving, guiding, and changing us. To pray recognizing that God is wanting to lead and direct us.

To pray with the intention of backing it up with action.

When heartfelt prayer and courageous, faithful action come together, the world is shaken and lives are changed by the light and love of Christ shown through us.

## BIBLE STUDY – Acts 16

This chapter of Acts begins the turn away from Paul and Barnabas who were kind of a power duo to focusing on Paul and his continuing journeys in this case with Silas and then with Timothy as well. Timothy's story shows us some things about Paul and the early church's mission.

Timothy represents the diversity of what has happened in the Jewish community. He is Jewish in identity through his mother, however she has married a Gentile man. This mixed marriage looks not dissimilar from the early church now. It is a mix of both Jews and Gentiles. Timothy is a bit of an outlier, however, because though he's Jewish, he's uncircumcised.

Paul takes a liking to Timothy enough so that he invites him along for the journey. Then Paul does something unexpected. After all the fuss in Jerusalem with the apostles about circumcision, which Paul didn't think was necessary and even got the council to agree, he tells Timothy he needs circumcised. Why would Paul make such a demand given his stance on circumcision?

One suggestion is that Paul himself remains very Jewish and agrees that the Jewish culture and tradition is worthy of preserving. As such, it is correct for someone who is Jewish to undergo the rite of circumcision. This isn't the same as asking a Gentile to embrace something entirely foreign and unnecessary. This is asking someone who is truly Jewish in identity to embrace that identity fully. In addition, doing so might be a nod to James as James had given the grace to free Gentiles from circumcision, here Paul encourages Timothy to participate in a covenant ritual dear to the Jewish people.

In addition, Timothy will be ministering to a mix of Jews and Gentiles. Many if not most Gentile converts at this point are proselytes who attend synagogue. By being circumcised, this might keep things less confusing to the believers who could wonder how this whole circumcision argument plays out if this Jew is crossing lines and being more like a Gentile in this particular capacity.

On a larger scale, we also see that ministry sometimes involves accommodating those around us even if it costs us personally. We may have to compromise in some things that aren't of necessity. Paul's letters have this notion in several places. When he talks about not offering meat sacrificed to idols in case it offends someone's conscience. When Paul talks about "becoming all things to all people." The reality is that we all have our preferences and things that may not be offensive to us but are to those around us who need the gospel. It's not their job to "get over themselves" so they can hear us. Rather it's our job to meet them where they are and deliver the message in a fashion that is hearable to them. Often this is the difference between effective and ineffective ministry. If the only people who can hear and relate to it are those who already believe, we have a problem.

The transition from the mission going from Asia to Europe is more than just a list of places they did and didn't go. There isn't a lot of reason to share where they don't go unless it's for some larger purpose. Luke wants us to understand that this journey is wholly under the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit confirms both places that are on and off limits. We don't have reasons why, just that this is how Paul and Silas are sorting out the map. Paul's response to urgent direction from the Holy Spirit (his vision) is to act immediately and with urgency. He is as dedicated an apostle as they come.

Landing in Philippi, a larger story unfolds as they go about their ministry. Looking for a synagogue (place of prayer) they come up somewhat short. What they find outside the city is a group of women. Most likely these are Gentile women who are similar to Cornelius. They have come to appreciate some of the Jewish beliefs about God and have allowed themselves to come into a place of reverence and allowed God to change their character and hearts. Paul and Silas spend time with them and speak Christ to them. What this tells us about the town is rather interesting. That there is no synagogue in town reflects a small Jewish population. The custom was that in order for a synagogue to be present and carry out more formal worship, a quorum of 10 Jewish men needed to be present. This was clearly not the case as the gathering was entirely of women. That this story is told highlighting women is also one of the reasons the New Testament is considered to carry authenticity. In a world dominated by men, to bring women into the spotlight is to go against the grain. Yet the New Testament does this time and again.

One of the women is named Lydia. We know that she is likely a woman of some social standing. Trafficking in purple cloth is revealing. Purple was the color of wealth, status, and royalty. That this is her primary ware means she likely had a profitable business. It also means that her clientele were people of means. They had money and status. This is who she rubbed elbows with perhaps on a daily basis. To be in this company confers an automatic status. Lydia is the one cited of this group of women to be the one who received the message of salvation. She and her household are baptized, and she invites Paul's group to her home showing them wonderful hospitality.

While this story is separated from the story of the jailer's conversion by another incident, we need to see them as connected. Lydia is a Gentile proselyte to Judaism. The jailer is likely fully pagan. Both are offered the gospel. Both accept. Both and their households are baptized. Both show genuine gratitude and hospitality to the ones who gave them the message. That they are so different yet strikingly similar gives a larger picture from Luke. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. It doesn't matter if you are Jewish, Gentile proselyte, or Gentile pagan, the message of the gospel is universally offered and available. None are excluded, all are included. All that needs to happen is to accept it.

After the experience with Lydia, Paul and Silas venture about the town and encounter a woman who is the property of some men and earns them good money by fortune telling. Her “gift” is the product of having an unholy spirit. Right here we have an inkling of the character of this town. This woman represents some sense of pagan spirituality or religion. Clearly the people are fine with exploiting religion for financial gain. This is something the apostles are clearly not aligned with. Peter scolded Simon the Sorcerer for thinking the Spirit can be bought and paid for. There is a definite clash of values here.

She follows them about telling everyone they are slaves of the “Most High God” and preaching the way of salvation. This is not a compliment. She is not advertising for or advocating on their behalf. She is mocking them. Likely a follower of Zeus, the woman is even challenging them. Through mockery the message is that Paul is inferior to her, and his God inferior to her own. Paul’s response is a response to a challenge, not terribly unlike Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. His action, dispelling the demon and removing her power, is a show of authority and a demonstration that whatever spirit she had is no match for the Holy Spirit Paul wields. Her masters aren’t happy. They take Paul and Silas to magistrates. For what? This is an issue of property. Paul damaged their property to the point of taking their income away. This is a prosecutable offense. Except there is no trial. There isn’t a chance. Immediately insults are made and accusations about their Jewishness and contrariness of their message towards Roman culture. They are stirring up the crowd and the magistrates offer that they be stripped and beaten which the crowd gladly obliges. They are then jailed.

A couple details here. That they are insulted for their Jewishness reveals that this town has a strong anti-Semitic culture. They are hated simply because they are Jews. Imagine in the 60s a black man in the deep south going into an all white town and saying things that were taken offensively by the townspeople. Similar situation.

Luke also goes to the trouble of telling us where they are positioned in jail and that they have their feet in stocks. He wants us to recognize that in this town where they are hated, they are in a place and spot where the only way out is divine intervention. It’s the set up for the deliverance.

Meanwhile, Paul and Silas are there praising God and singing hymns! This is a tremendous and inspiring display of faith and devotion. No matter what the world throws at them, they will continue in their love and adoration for God. They will not be dissuaded from their mission. Would we be able to do the same? Could we do the same? This is a faith worth striving for.

God sends an earthquake and the prisoners are sprung. Or are they?

The jailer thinks they are and almost kills himself until Paul cries out to him that everyone’s still there. The jailer spares himself and asks what he needs to do to be saved. Here there is insight that is pertinent to our reading of this incident.

Often it’s suggested that the jailer is asking about salvation as we understand it in Christ. This makes no sense. He is a pagan Roman. There is no reference point for his asking a question along these lines. We impart this to the statement because we read it as we are, not as he is. Understanding how he is makes an even more compelling case.

Earthquakes were understood to be sent by the gods as a sign of impending punishment or as punishment itself. The jailer likely thought perhaps Zeus had sent the earthquake to free the prisoners as a punishment, and that may have even had uglier plans in mind to continue punishing the jailer. Death would be preferable to whatever the gods had cooked up for him. But then he hears Paul. If the intent was to spring Paul and Silas, and Paul is the one speaking out, then it must have been Paul’s God who caused the earthquake. Paul’s God is angry with the jailer. So what does the jailer ask? Not how to be saved from sin, but saved from being killed or worse by Paul’s God. Paul takes advantage of the situation and uses it to present the gospel message of redemption. The jailer accepts the offer, and as we previously noted in similar fashion to Lydia, he and his family are saved. Not from death or punishment at the hands of God in the physical realm, but from consequence eternally in spirit.

Once again, Paul is living into his sense of “becoming all things to all people”. For Lydia he presents the gospel in light of her already existent sense of revering the God of the Jews. For the jailer he presents the gospel in light of his understanding of the earthquake and the gods. For both, the message is compelling and they believe.

The magistrates order the release of Paul and Silas the next morning. Paul isn’t having it. He and Silas aren’t some mongrel foreign Jews. They are Roman citizens deserving the full respect of the law. They have been beaten and jailed without trial, a punishable offense for those that issued the verdict. If they are going to leave, they will be escorted by the ones who mistreated them. Fearfully, the magistrates honor Paul’s request. There is a not subtle message here that Luke has told over and over. Whenever something threatens to crush the spread of the gospel it actually empowers it. The magistrates represent the empire of Rome, and they tried to squash Paul and Silas’s message. Now the representatives of the empire shamefully have to escort the two out of the city. Even the power of the empire can’t stop the gospel from going out.

Before leaving, Paul and Silas visit Lydia’s home, where believers were now gathering. This is a tremendous win and affirmation.

Prior to Paul and Silas arriving, they were meeting outside the city and somewhat secretive. With Lydia, those who came to believe have a haven within the city and are meeting to worship and so forth. They are freed from the shackles of “quorum” and such that denied a synagogue in the city. They are free to meet and worship and so on. This is a wonderful verse of liberation.

So much happens in this chapter. I’d like to sum it up in a few thoughts. When we humble ourselves to accommodate the needs of the unbeliever, the message becomes more digestible. There is no one to whom the message of grace isn’t offered. We can endure legitimate persecution and still be joyful, as Paul and Silas were in prison. God’s power will not be mocked without consequence. The spread of the gospel will not be stifled. May we be as diligent in our own walks of faith.