

Just Be Yourself

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Romans 8:26-27 — Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as is needed, 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.

Well, I'm leading us into new territory today. For the first time since I became your pastor, I'm deviating from the lectionary. For those of you who don't know, the lectionary is basically a schedule of suggested scripture readings for churches to use each Sunday, and our denomination is one of numerous denominations that often uses this schedule. So, for the past ten months, I have been selecting two of these lectionary readings each week for us to read together on Sunday morning, but today, I have selected different scripture readings, because today, we are beginning a sermon series on prayer. Today, and for the next two Sundays, we'll be thinking together about what it means to pray; we'll be asking some tough questions about why we pray; and we'll be invited to experiment with prayer, to imagine new ways that we can implement this spiritual practice into our lives.

On that note, I'll repeat what I said during the announcements this morning: you have an index card in your bulletin, and at any point during the service, I ask that you write a prayer on that card. It can be any length, any style, any tone. During the offering, I invite you to put that card in the offering plate (they are meant to be anonymous), and I'll collect those cards at the end of the service. And actually, we'll be doing the same thing for the next two services. You'll get an index card in your bulletin on each Sunday of this sermon series, and I'm asking you to write a prayer during each service and to place it in the offering plate. Once the series has ended, all of these prayers will be displayed for our whole congregation to see, and those cards will be a testament to our journey, our ongoing journey, into the practice of prayer. Sound okay? No revolt yet? Alright then.

So, while planning this sermon series, I've been thinking a lot about how many of us find it hard to pray. Our second scripture reading this morning says it for us: we don't know how to pray as is needed. Prayer is challenging, I think, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps we aren't sure where to start or how to proceed. Without a set structure to follow and a routine to rely on, we just don't know how to get the ball rolling. Perhaps our schedules are so full and our days so fast-paced that we just don't feel like we have *time* to pray — except in our more dire moments, when we utter a hasty word or two. Perhaps prayer is hard for us because we've been let down by it in the past. We tried praying for a loved one to be healed, or for our financial situation to work out, or for a problem in the world to finally end, but it seemed like things never got better and only got worse. Perhaps we just can't convince ourselves that prayer does any good. Even if something in

our hearts urges us to try, our head tells us, “Why bother? My prayers haven’t worked in the past, and I don’t want to be disappointed again.”

Finally, perhaps prayer is challenging for us because we’re not sure how much we actually trust in the God to whom we are praying. Do I *really* believe that there is a God over all the universe who is listening to me, right now? You know, it’s one thing to sit here and recite the weekly liturgy along with everyone else in the pews; it’s another thing entirely to be on your own and to choose to pray, “Dear God....” Really, you can participate in our Sunday worship without ever having to practice faith. You can go through all the liturgical motions easily enough, regardless of what your mind and heart are doing. But if you, on your own, choose to speak those two words, “Dear God,” you are beginning a monumental act of faith.

It makes perfect sense to me, friends, that we would find it hard to pray. It makes sense to me that *any* act of faith, including prayer, would be a challenge for us, because any act of faith — in God, or in anything else — catapults us into the unknown. To choose faith is to step towards something that you do not comprehend, and thus faith is never about certainty; it is always about trust. It’s about reaching out for God, always with a mixture of hope and doubt in our heads and hearts; it’s about stretching out our hands and about stretching our very selves, as we strive for something unknown that is greater than ourselves.

Sometimes we talk about faith as if we are running a race, but often faith looks more like stumbling through the dark. And often prayer looks like that, too. I don’t expect any of us to glide through prayer with ease, with eloquence, or with total assurance, and I don’t think God expects us to either. God knows that we are human beings naturally bound by time and space, and God knows that when we pray, we are reaching beyond these natural boundaries. When we pray, we are stepping into the dark. And I think God expects us to stumble, to stutter, to be challenged again and again by this incredible action of praying, of being human and trying to connect with the Divine.

Here’s my main message this morning, friends: there isn’t a wrong way to stumble or stutter, and there isn’t a wrong way to pray. The main goal of prayer, as I see it, is simply to be yourself and to share yourself with God; to bring your thoughts and your feelings, your desires and your fears before God, whatever they may be, and in whatever way you want. As our second scripture reading this morning says, you don’t even have to use words: you can sigh, and in that sigh, God’s Spirit is praying for you. If we can wrap our minds around this, if we can convince ourselves that what matters to God isn’t so much *what* we share or *how* we share, but *that* we share, then prayer doesn’t have to be so hard. It can actually be quite easy — like the prayer on your bulletin cover. I bet that prayer brought God more pleasure than just about any other prayer I’ve prayed.

I’ve mentioned to you before that when I was growing up, every night before bed, I said prayers with my parents and my two sisters. First, we would all recite our “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayer, and then each of us kids would get a turn to say our own prayer, however we wanted to

pray. When Sarah was six and seven years' old, she had this ritual of prayer that was unique to her. Whenever she was ready to finish her prayer, she'd say, "In Jesus' name, Aaaaaaa- Aaaaaaa- Aaaaaaa-," and she'd keep doing this, saying, "Aaaaaaa," until finally, our dad or mom would say, "Sarah..." and then she'd say, "Aaaaaamen!!" Do you think that bothered God? Do you think that was a wrong way to pray? I don't think so. Because I think that God wants us to bring our true selves into prayer, and Sarah was, truly, a goofy 6-year-old child. She was simply sharing herself with God, and I think that God delighted in that.

So, here's some optional homework for you this week (in church, the homework has to be optional, I think). Experiment with a bedtime prayer ritual. If you already have one that you're satisfied with, that's perfectly fine — keep doing that, but consider trying something like this: each night this week, before you close your eyes for the last time, name at least one thing that you are grateful for from earlier in the day, and then give thanks to God for that gift. Then, name at least one thing that's weighing on your mind for the next day. Maybe you're feeling some anxiety about something. Maybe you feel like you could use some help in dealing with a certain situation. Share your concerns with God. Ask for strength, or patience, or wisdom, or whatever you feel like asking for. There's no wrong way to do it, friends. Just be yourself. Amen.