**Celebration of Discipline Series**

**Sunday May 29, 2022**

**Inward Discipline #2: Prayer**

**“Teach Us to Pray” (Luke 11:1-9)**

 This morning I feel a bit like the disciple in the Scripture lesson, who discovered our Lord praying and asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” I realize that I have a lot to learn about prayer and so it feels a bit presumptuous of me to offer you guidance on prayer. Yet, the disciple’s humble request serves as a helpful reminder to all of us that we are still learners in the spiritual life. So, we need to embrace a humble, teachable attitude when it comes to prayer for no one is an expert. Even this most foundational activity of the Christian life must be learned, developed, and deepened. Like infants learning to talk, we must learn how to communicate with our heavenly Father. This realization is liberating, because when we recognize that prayer is a learning process, our anxieties are reduced and we are free to question, experiment, try new things, and yes, even fail. The beautiful truth about the Christian life is that God meets us where we are at and slowly moves us along into deeper things. No one goes from jogging down the street to entering a 10k marathon! It is the same way with prayer and the other spiritual disciplines.

When we realize that we’re a company of learners on the road of faith, we’ll gently help each other to grow closer to Christ and exercise great patience with one another, knowing that God is gradually working in each of our lives according to his perfect timing. Instead of being discouraged or threatened by other people’s commitment to prayer, we’ll be encouraged to grow deeper. Rather than beating ourselves up for all the areas in which we are lacking in the spiritual life, we’ll trust in God’s ongoing and transforming work in our lives. Yet real growth in the life of prayer also depends on our openness to God. Richard Foster writes, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic in our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ. . . When we pray God slowly and graciously reveals to us our hiding places and sets us free from them” (*Celebration of Discipline,* p. 30).

We can learn much from Jesus our Lord, whose holy habit was to retreat from the crowd to a quiet place and spend time talking to his heavenly Father. In this scene from Luke chapter 11, Jesus appears to be exhausted with ministry. Constantly surrounded by people, he needed to be alone, so he snuck away from the crowd and found a quiet place to pray. We can observe a similar pattern in Mark’s Gospel, “*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark*, *Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed*” (Mark 1:35).

Amidst this very busy time in his ministry, Jesus took the time to get up and go out to a quiet place and pray. Exhausted from his work, Jesus could have slept a little longer. He could have waited until the sunrise, rested and ready for another day of ministry. After all, it was quite clear the needs were great, and he was the one who could meet those needs. Being busy with the work of the kingdom could have easily become his justification for skipping his quiet time with the Father. Yet Jesus did not use this excuse, he got up at an inconvenient time, long before dawn, he went out a solitary place and connected with his Father in prayer.

Being too busy to pray is a real temptation for every Christian. Pastors are especially susceptible to this pitfall. Convinced that we’re busy doing God’s work, we work away and sometimes let personal prayer go by the wayside. Most tasks of ministry, such as preaching, are quite visible, but solitary prayer is a hidden, private activity. If I got up on a Sunday morning and didn’t preach a sermon, you’d all wonder if I was doing my job. But if I didn’t spend time in private prayer for a week, you might never know. Yet Jesus’ example teaches us that prayer is not a diversion from the important tasks of ministry; rather it is a foundational activity for life in the kingdom of God. Amidst the demands of ministry, Jesus intentionally paused and spent time in prayer with his heavenly Father. After his times of prayer, Jesus had a firm sense of purpose and real readiness for God’s mission.

In finding a solitary place to pray, Jesus was able to give his full attention to his Father. Many of us would describe prayer as a conversation with God, but all too often, our conversation is a bit one-sided and we’re inattentive to God’s voice. Praying in solitude enables us to focus upon God*.* Jesus intentionally withdrew from the noise and distractions all around him to talk to God. Have you ever tried to have a conversation with someone who’s distracted by something? It’s frustrating, isn’t it? That’s why whenever Sherri and I have dinner in a restaurant that has a giant TV screen, I intentionally take a seat with my back to the TV screen so that I can give her my full attention. Going into a quiet place and shutting out these external distractions sends a clear message to God that we are willing and available to have a life-giving conversation with him.

Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest, and prolific writer of spiritual classics wrote a great deal about the importance of solitude for the Christian life. In the book, *Making All Things New,* he wrote the following, “Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives – healing, teaching, and guiding – we need to set aside a time and a space to give him our undivided attention. Jesus says, ‘Go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to the Father who is in that secret place’” (Foster and Smith, *Devotional Classics,* p. 95).

Yet going to a solitary place to talk with the Father may be something that we are anxious about doing. Shutting out the noise and distraction of our world may uncover the concealed commotion that’s going on inside of us. Without books, TV, cell phones, Facebook, or YouTube to pre-occupy us, we might be forced to pay attention to our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings, and impulsive desires that we are desperately trying to suppress. It is not surprising that we have trouble with solitude and silence because we are constantly being bombarded with thousands of thoughts. Henri Nouwen described initial experience of solitude to be like a homeowner who closed his front door for the first time ever. Suddenly, the visitors who used to come and freely enter his house start to pound on the door, wondering why they’re not allowed to enter. Over time, these visitors will realize that they are not welcome and will withdraw (*Devotional Classics,* p. 96).

God calls us to find that quiet place where we can talk with him and hear his voice. With lives filled with commotion, both inside and out, we need to be like Elijah and go to the mountainside and listen for God’s voice (1 Kings 19:11). We need to listen carefully, lest we miss the *gentle whisper* of the Lord’s voice amid the chaos all around us (1 Kings 19:11-12). Henri Nouwen wrote, “The discipline of solitude . . . is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life. It is a simple, though not easy, way to free us from the slavery of our occupations and preoccupations and to begin to hear the voice that makes all things new” (*Devotional Classics,* p. 97)

God invites us to *be still and know that he is God* (Psalm 46:10). But what is the connection between stillness before God and prayer? At this point it is important to note that there are different kinds of prayer. Along with the sermon is a handout on prayer from the CBOQ, which nicely summarizes the various types of prayer that Christians can engage in. Of the prayer types listed on this handout, we’re most familiar with *intercessory prayer*, which is the act of bringing our requests before God and asking him to bless and help others. A less familiar form of prayer on this list is *listening prayer.* But if prayer is a two-way conversation with God, we must both listen and talk. This two-way dialogue is essential to a healthy prayer life. Richard Foster writes, “One of the most critical aspects in learning to pray for others is to get in contact with God so that His life and power can be channeled through us into others. . . Listening to the Lord is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for successful intercession” (*Celebration of Discipline,* p. 34).

If prayer is a conversation between us and God, then it must be assumed that the conversation is grounded in a *relationship*, one that is developing and growing deeper. Like any relationship, there are different levels of communication. When we first meet someone, we do a lot of talking to become familiar. But as we become better acquainted, we talk less and listen more. Our personal sharing increases as we become more comfortable and transparent with each other. We are not bothered by long pauses in the conversation because they allow us to think and reflect on things that have been said. A good indication that the relationship has significantly grown is the ability to spend long periods of silence with the other person without feeling the pressure to fill the gaps with meaningless banter. *You simply enjoy being together without the need to talk because you are completely secure in the other’s loving presence.*

In terms of prayer, this deep intimacy with God is best described as *contemplative* or *centering prayer.* While much could be said about this type of prayer, Joyce Huggett’s description nicely summarizes it: “In the quietness, aware of his presence, we open our hearts to receive his love. The prayer is usually wordless and fed by a deep desire for him. This leads us on to a place where instead of seeking God, we are found by him. We discover that, long before we came to our place of prayer, he was seeking us. So he responds to our longing. We bask in the warmth of his love. We feel his gaze on us. He fills us afresh with his Spirit. We receive a new perspective on life - his perspective. We draw so close to his heart that we sense his concern for the world, and from our contemplation flows intercession as we catch his compassion for a hurting world” (Foster & Griffin, *Spiritual Classics,* p. 13-14).

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Be still and know that God loves you and desires to spend time with you.

This is what prayer is all about.

*Abba, I belong to You.*

**Suggested Exercises**

1. Set aside five to ten minutes a day for contemplative prayer. Relax from the strain and stress and simply rest in God’s presence.
2. Do not run from distractions, but, rather, turn them into prayers. Keep a paper and pencil by your chair as you relax in solitude; when a distracting thought comes to your mind, write it down and then commit it to prayer.
3. Schedule appointments with God. Write them down on your daily calendar to prevent other things from usurping this precious time.
4. Learn about the practice of *centering prayer* by checking out some of the resources on this website (<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>).

(If you have any questions about centering prayer, I’d be more than happy to answer them as best I can. I’m just a beginner in this kind of prayer).