

“Talking with God”
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Menifee United Church of Christ

A train was traveling late at night and was going to go through the town of Chattanooga and make a stop. A businessman on the train had an important morning meeting the next day in Chattanooga, so he had to get off the train at two o'clock in the morning. He asked the porter to please wake him - because he was going to try to sleep for a few hours - to please wake him at two in the morning to get off the train in Chattanooga. He said, “No matter what I say to you, because I’m really tired and I’ll probably want to keep sleeping, no matter what I say to you, be sure I get off the train, even if you have to throw me off physically from the train, make sure I get off the train at two in the morning in Chattanooga.” The porter said he would. Then the businessman went to sleep and when he woke up he saw daylight. The sun was bright. He looked at his watch and saw that he’d missed his stop in Chattanooga at two in the morning. He went to find the porter and, when he found him, he screamed at him for a couple of minutes. Then he stormed off. A passenger near the porter said, “Wow! I’ve never seen somebody so angry.” That guy was more angry than anybody I’ve ever seen.” The porter said, “Aw, that’s nothing. You should have seen the guy I threw off the train at two o'clock in the morning in Chattanooga!” That businessman didn’t have a prayer of making his morning meeting in Chattanooga.

Prayer is what I want to talk with you about today. I think we all need to have a prayer life. If we want to have a spiritual life, if we’re religious, if we are Christian, God wants us to pray. That’s how we converse with God. That’s how we talk with God. God wants to have that conversation with us. Prayer works. I know prayer works. They’ve done studies where a group of people in a hospital were prayed for and another group was not prayed for, that anyone knew about, and the people who were prayed for got better quicker. Now maybe the fact that they knew they were being prayed for lifted their spirits and helped them get better, but I think that also God helped those that were prayed for. God remembered them. Prayer works. That’s why it’s important for us to pray.

Jesus taught us how to pray and how not to pray. According to the gospel of Luke, chapter 18, Jesus told a parable about two men, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. Now the Pharisees of Jesus’ day were sticklers for rules and regulations. They obeyed the law of the scriptures, but not necessarily always in the spirit. Tax collectors back then were hated. Maybe they still are today. But tax collectors were often crooked. They would take the tax money they collected to give to the government and keep some for themselves. So the Pharisee and the tax collector went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee looked up towards God and said, “God, thank you for making me such a good person. Thank you for not making me like these other people, these sinners, these tax collectors, these rogues, these adulterers.” Thank you for making me perfect, basically, is what the Pharisee said. The tax collector, on the other hand, beat his breast and said, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus said the Pharisee, who exalted himself, would be humbled. The tax collector, who humbled himself, would be exalted by God. The Pharisee reminds me of an old Mac Davis song, “Oh, Lord, it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way.” And also a book by football player Joe Namath entitled, “I Can’t Wait Until Tomorrow Because I Get Better Looking Every Day.” The tax collector, on the other hand, was humility personified. That’s how God wants us to be is humble when we pray to God, and not self-righteous.

Listening is an important part of praying. We have to take time to listen to God in addition to speaking to God. That’s why, when I do our Pastoral Prayer, I start off saying, “God of amazing grace, before we say what we want to say to you, we take a moment to listen to what you want to say to us.” Then I give about 30 seconds or so for us to maybe hear from God. I think we need to do that. I think God wants to talk to us as much as we want to talk to God. And God has an infinite number of ways to talk to us. God might speak to us through a movie. We saw a movie the other night at church for our Movie Night, a movie by Michael Moore, “Where To Invade Next.” And it was about ideas in other countries that we should maybe adopt for our own, ideas about extended maternity leave, extended vacations. I recently read someplace that we get an average of one or two weeks vacation a year, where in Europe they get two months a year. So I think that God was speaking to us, those of us who were there, through that movie. God can speak to us through a television show. God often speaks to me in songs on the radio. God has many ways of speaking to us and I think an important part of praying is listening to God.

Anne Lamott, a wonderful writer, came out with a book a few years ago about prayer. The book is entitled, “Help. Thanks. Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.” And they really are, when you think about it. I’m going to take them in reverse order. “Wow!” If we see a spectacular sunset over the ocean, there’s not much we can say but “Wow!” That’s our prayer to God. “Wow!” When the astronauts in space looked back and saw the big blue marble, the first thing they probably thought was, “Wow! Wow!” When a child is born, at that moment there’s not much else to say but “Wow! Wow!” But we also need to say, “Thanks.” When we see that spectacular sunset, and we say “Wow!” we also want to say, “Thanks.” Thank you, God, for letting me be here to see that. Thank you for that. When the astronauts see the big blue marble from space, in addition to “Wow!” I bet they say, “Thanks. Thanks be to God for letting us see that.

Letting us be here.” And when we see our child being born, in addition to “Wow!” I think we want to say “Thanks. Thank you, God, for letting me see this miracle of life, the birth of my child.” It’s just awe-inspiring. “Help!” her third way of prayer, may be the most used prayer of all. “Help! Help me, God, to get through this day, to get through this week. Help me, God, to deal with this situation at work. Help me get through the holidays with my family. Help!” Help. Thanks. Wow.

Seeing is an important aspect of prayer as well. We have to be able to see people in need in order to pray for them. See the homeless person lying on the sidewalk in order to pray for him. We need to be able to see a loved one struggling with something in their life. We need to be able to see our own situation, our own issues that we have to deal with, in order to pray about them. We have to be able to see the tragedy in the world, the war-torn countries, in order to pray about that. See refugees, see children with bloody faces in order to pray about that. Seeing is important in praying.

Lamentations is one of the books of the Bible. Theologians believe it was written by the prophet Jeremiah, but no one knows for sure who wrote the book of Lamentations. “Lament,” according to the dictionary, means “crying out in sorrow, complaining, lamenting.” Jesus on the cross, when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” that was his lament. But we know that God did not forsake Jesus. Three days later he was born again. He was raised from the dead. Lamentations starts out complaining, but it ends with hope. Take Lamentations, chapter 3, for example. The writer cries out to God because he’s been victimized by God’s wrath. But then later in chapter 3 he remembers God’s mercy and love. And that’s what lament is all about. It’s complaining but then remembering that we are God’s children. We are children of God, made in God’s image, blessed by God, loved by God. So while we complain to God about something, we also remember that God loves us and cares about us and helps us.

When I pray, I try to be conversational with God. I know some people pray with a lot of Thees, Thous, and Thines, but I try to just be casual when talking to God. I hope that’s OK. So a lot of times when I pray by myself I say, “Hi, God, Hi, Jesus, Hi, Holy Spirit.” Then I’ll say what’s on my heart, say what’s in my head, say what’s in my soul. Praying is expressing what’s in the bottom of our heart and lifting it up to the highest heaven. So when I pray I just try to have a conversation with God. I just try to talk with God, speak with God as a friend, because I believe God is our friend. So there’s no right way or wrong way to pray. We just say what we want to say to God.

St. Francis was quite a pray-er. The prayer of St. Francis is the second most popular prayer ever in Christianity next to the Lord’s Prayer. In fact, I know of churches where one week they’ll pray the Lord’s Prayer and the next week they’ll pray the prayer of St. Francis. That’s how revered the prayer of St. Francis is. “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console. To be understood as to understand. To be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” A wonderful prayer, poetic, prophetic, profound.

How about you? Do you pray to God? Do you pray here in church? Do you pray to God that my sermon will be over soon? Do you use high-fallutin’ language when you pray? Do you say, “Thee, Thine and Thou”? Or do you just have a conversation with God? There’s no right way to pray. It’s just talking with God. And we are able to do that because we are God’s children. It’s like children talking to their parents. That’s a joy; that’s a delight. Parents love to talk to their children, usually. And children, hopefully, love to talk with their parents. And that’s what prayer is. It’s talking with our heavenly parent. With God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray:
*God of Love,
Help us to pray.
Help us to say what we want to say.
And help us to listen to what you want to say.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.*