

What Isn't Prayer?
Isaiah 5:1-7/ Matthew 6: 5-13
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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The sermon title asks the question, "What Isn't Prayer?" People have a lot of mistaken notions about prayer. That's why I chose to share some thoughts on why we should pray and what we should be praying for, as the Holy Spirit guides us.

Two weeks ago I was invited to attend a meeting of residents living in Knettishall and Loch Raven Village, the two communities bordering our church. The meeting came about in response to the rise of petty thefts. The organizers of this meeting were concerned about the possible rise of fear and anxiety in our neighborhoods that could hamper any efforts to build a sense of community.

About seven of us met in a neighbor's house to begin the conversation about what the Christian response to these concerns might be and concrete ways to tap into the power of prayer. We all sensed we were being called implement an ongoing process of praying for the victims of these thefts, the young men in the neighborhood who were caught in the act, and the rest of our neighbors who will hear about these incidents and could become angry and fearful.

But that's not the only thing we would be praying for. The scope of our prayers expanded, to also ask God to bless each family on the streets where we live with the knowledge of Christ and his Gospel and then experience a growing sense of community within our neighborhoods. We agreed we should also pray for Loch Raven Village and Knettishall becoming neighborhoods where people are committed to becoming Good Samaritans, who love and support each other.

(By the way, doesn't this group's effort seem to dovetail with our New Beginnings ministry? God does indeed move in mysterious ways!)

After this meeting, I started thinking about verses and stories in the bible informing us why and how God wants us to pray. There is a right way and there is a wrong way. Through the scriptures, we also need to identify the right attitude for prayer.

Why are we called to prayer?

First, praying helps us become aware of God's presence around and within us. In other words, prayer helps us become nearer to God and with God. Look at it this way. We believe that God is always with us but we also need to be with God.

Jesus taught, "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and door will be open for you." (Matthew 7:7)

This verse is open to misinterpretation if we don't put it into the context of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, which is all about living in the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus urges us to seek out God's presence not only during the best of times but especially during the worst of times.

I think this is true, people who rarely or never pray have a harder time being comforted by God in times of trouble. Notice I'm not saying, people who rarely or never pray can never be comforted by God in times of trouble. I believe God can and will comfort them, whether they realize it or not. I am saying, it's probably harder for people who don't pray to know God's comfort in times of trouble Why? Because they're not looking for God's comfort.

Instead, they seek out other sources for comfort in times of trouble, some of them healthy, others not so healthy. On the other hand, people who do pray go straight to the source of our spiritual, emotional and physical health. They know this because someone once told them that God is for us and not against us. So, they took a risk and gave prayer a chance. In time, they experienced improvement in their spiritual, emotional and physical health, causing them to continue practicing the presence of God through prayer.

Second, prayer helps us get in sync with God's will. This is fundamental. We can't always have what we ask for because our prayers aren't wishes and God isn't our genie. That's a hard lesson to swallow, especially when you're earnestly praying for something dear to your heart. Sometimes we pray for a job we don't get. Other times we pray for healing for someone who dies. When our prayers aren't answered, we can get angry and decide praying is a waste of time. Maybe this happened to you, and certainly this happens to people you know and love. That's why accepting unanswered prayer is a hard pill to swallow.

Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, just hours before he was crucified. Remember his prayer? "Abba, Father (Abba is Aramaic for Daddy) take this cup of suffering away from me..." (Matthew 26:39)

Here we have a child begging a parent for help, but apparently none is given. That's how it seems until we listen to the end of his prayer... "Never the less, not my will, but yours be done." (Matthew 26:39)

Jesus didn't get what he asked for, or did he? You see, his second petition was answered. Jesus asked for his father's will to be done. And it was done. After praying his heart out, Jesus was able to stand up and face what was to come because praying empowered him to be in sync with his father's will. Jesus began his prayer, hoping to be released from his calling to be the suffering Christ. He ended his prayer recommitted to his calling to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

No one has ever come up with a satisfactory answer to the question why God allows bad things to happen to innocent people. It's one of those mysteries never meant to be solved. That's why it's so important for you to accept God's will over your will because that's when healing begins. Again, it's a hard, if not terrible lesson to learn but it's the only way for genuine peace of mind and good spiritual health.

Let me review what I said so far:

First, prayer helps us become aware of God's presence living around and within us.

Second, prayer helps us get in sync with God's will.

Finally, Third, through prayer, we prepare ourselves and others for the coming of God's kingdom.

Let me repeat that. Through prayer we prepare ourselves and others for the coming of God's kingdom.

Prayer goes beyond making requests for yourself, your family and your friends. Yes, these prayers are important, but just as important is praying for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth. I'm not just talking about the Second Coming, described in the Book of Revelations. Jesus will come again whether we pray for him to come or not. I am talking about the coming of God's kingdom now, to our neighborhoods, our nation and the world.

You remember that at the very beginning of his earthly ministry Jesus proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." (Matthew 4:17) What does that mean?

Jesus was saying that the Kingdom is already here, but unless we become aware of God's presence living around within us and unless we are in sync with God's will, the Kingdom of God will pass us by like a speeding freight train.

In other words, God's Kingdom is right in front of us, but without prayer we're blind and can't see this kingdom, growing from that tiny mustard seed into the biggest tree, housing the birds of the air.

When we pray for God to give us sight, the scales fall off our eyes. Once we were blind but now we see. Now we can see the Spirit of God redeeming our broken world. That word "redeem" means God buys back what rightfully belongs to God. Through Christ's passion on the cross, God purchased not only our salvation but the salvation of the whole world. The old is finished and gone, now everything is fresh and new.

God re-creates his creation and through prayer, we become active agents in that process of recreation. But before that happens, we need to be prepared before we can prepare others for the coming of Christ's Kingdom.

This was John the Baptist's ministry. He took seriously Isaiah's call to prepare the way of Lord and make straight highway for our God. The Baptist's job was to prepare people for the Messiah by urging baptism and repentance. He commanded the religious people to bear fruit worthy of repentance. When the common people asked, "What should we do?" he answered, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; whoever has food must do likewise. He told the tax collectors, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the soldiers he said, "Do not exhort money from anyone by threats or false accusations and be satisfied with your wages."

John the Baptist exhorted his people to turn away from their old ways and take on new ways, worthy of the kingdom of God. Like a little-known band at a rock concert, playing before the headliners, John was preparing his audience for Jesus. He was preparing the way of the Lord, to get God's people ready to welcome their long expected Messiah.

John the Baptist was prepared to do this because he was prepared through his own fierce prayers, asking God for enough wisdom, courage and faith to set the stage for the God's Kingdom and His Christ.

John the Baptist wasn't the only one ever called to prepare the way of Lord. Neither were the prophets before him and the apostles after him. Every believer in every generation is called to prepare the way of Lord so God's kingdom will come and God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's what that prayer meeting I attended last week was all about. That's what our New Beginnings ministry is all about. Prayerfully preparing ourselves so we can prepare our neighbors for the coming of God's kingdom in our neighborhood. We are being instructed from above to pray for others while we pray for one another so we can love and serve our neighbor in need.

Need is everywhere, not only in the inner city but in the most affluent neighborhoods. There's drug addiction, broken families and broken lives all around us. Maybe we don't know about it but it's there. So the question is, what are we going to do about it? Does Jesus want us to hide in the church or does Jesus want us to be the Church, the body of Christ, God's agents of reconciliation in an aching world?

I hope the Spirit is convicting you today to go into a season of reflection and action. I pray that you pray and become aware of God's presence living in and around you. I pray that you pray to get in sync with God's will and I pray that you pray to prepare yourself, so you can prepare others for the coming of God's kingdom, right here, right now.

My calling is to exhort you to be your best for Christ and his kingdom. I can do no more. The rest is between you and God. How will you respond when the time comes? Amen.