

Pray Daily—in order to grow we need to breatheⁱ
Luke 11:1-13ⁱⁱ
Romans 8: 26-27
I Thessalonians 5:16-18
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, Clemson, SC
October 15, 2017

We all know that when trouble comes, people pray. Meet Dee and her story of prayer. **These are Dee's words.**

“Prayer is an area where I desperately miss my elderly friend Paul. I used to steal glimpses of his face as he prayed. The last time I prayed with him, I opened my eyes and he had his hands folded on the kitchen table with his head resting on them. Bowed before his Maker, I always felt that when Paul prayed, God silenced heaven, leaned forward on his throne and said, “Be still, my faithful servant Paul is praying.”

“Now I treasure my Wednesday evening prayer times with Paul's widow, Margaret. I head over to her cottage soon after work. We share a meal and go to a prayer meeting at her church, then afterwards we have our own time of prayer together. She too prays in a way that silences heaven. I'm wondering if living in prayer comes with age, if maybe by the time I'm eighty-something, I too will have simple, elegant, trusting faith.”

Dee continues, *“Back in my dark ages my therapist, who had been laboring with me to forgive my father, suggested to me that, given the choice between forgiving my father for what he had done to me and going to hell, I'd choose hell. He was right. Hell—hands down.*

*At some point in the darkness, while still shaking my fist in God's face.” Here Dee is praying Scripture. **“He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”ⁱⁱⁱ** I kept reminding God that **“any”** and **“all”** are inclusive words, and therefore must include me. It was all I could pray.”^{iv} **That's how Dee tells it.***

The disciples were often viewed as missing the point of many of Jesus' parables, but here we find them smart enough to ask Jesus for what they do not know how to do. And Jesus answers their request. Jesus gives his disciples a prayer, The Lord's Prayer that helps us learn the mind of Christ—it begins with connecting us to Christ with the simple word **“our.”** In **“our”** we become Christ's brothers and sisters. Jesus also gives us his Father, Abba, the one who created us and knows us and loves us better than anyone else. And the Spirit helps by praying with and for us. Paul says in Romans, **“When we cry, Abba! Father! It is that very Spirit itself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”^v** We are invited into this incredible relationship of love. Through prayer Jesus builds relationships intentionally with his disciples.

When I was in the 10th grade I was in a serious car wreck. It was after school and I was coming back for a tennis team meeting. I pulled up the hill to the stop sign and stopped. I looked left and couldn't see anything because of the cars parked outside the old filling station that was

now a fraternity house. I looked right and the way was clear. I inched out a little more and looked left and right again. Still not sure about the left, I decided to go ahead and cross the double lane road. There to my left just past those cars I saw it coming, an old light blue pickup truck headed straight for my driver's side door, headed straight for me. I called out to God, "O God! Not now, I don't want to die. I'll do anything." Then I looked at the truck to brace for the hit and I saw a sign and knew that I would be okay. Right there on the front of that truck where the license plate holder is was a plate with one of those sacred heart head of Jesus surrounded by the words "Jesus is the Answer." It could not be any clearer that He was coming right for me. Bam! I believed it as I watched the windshield fracture, was forced across the seat, and hit my head on the passenger door.

When I came to a stop, the old man who was driving the truck was at my window asking if I was all right. I was and I was able to get out the passenger door without even a scratch. The man told me he was praying I would be alive. The car was totaled and God had answered the man's prayer and my prayer. "I'll do anything." That's what I bargained with God and that's why I'm here today. You have to be careful what you say to God.

Jesus tells the disciples to ask, seek, knock. He also tells them to expect God to show up. In teaching his disciples to pray that God's name be hallowed, God's kingdom come, God's will be done, Jesus indicates God answers prayer. He also tells them to keep on praying, don't give up. Be persistent, even when you don't feel like it. Keep on praying. God loves it when we want to spend holy time together.

In the story of Moses at the burning bush we learn that **the name of God is I AM THAT I AM** and the name radiates power and energy to give life and preserve it.^{vi} Asking that God's name be hallowed, made holy, is a request that acknowledges we are in the presence of the Holy One and hopefully some of that holiness will rub off on us. "**The kingdom of God is near**"^{vii} is what Jesus was always telling those who followed him. That is because the Name of God, the Kingdom of God and the Will of God are inseparable.

Kingdoms are about allegiances and wills are about activity. Jesus invites us to choose his way and to join his kingdom rather than the rulers of this world. A choice is required of us. **Jesus was tempted by evil when Satan offered him the kingdoms of this world.**^{viii} But Jesus named that offer for what it was—idolatry. I wonder, can we do the same in naming the kingdoms of this world? Where is our allegiance? Where is our money given? Where is our time shared? Where do we offer our gifts?

Like the beatitude the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff says that "The test of the kingdom of heaven is the poor. He says this is not because they are especially moral, but simply because of who they are, predominantly women and children, victims of abuse, war, hunger, injustice. When their oppression ceases, the kingdom will be here. 'The kingdom comes through the poor in opposition to poverty, which will have no place in the kingdom of God.'"^{ix} Here is where our faith practice of Serve Eagerly interfaces with Pray Daily. The kingdom of God is about righting

the wrongs of society, about lifting up the humble and making low the exalted,^x about the first being last and the last being first.^{xi}

It is also where our faith practice of worshipping weekly intersects. When we pray daily and worship God weekly our allegiances are formed and shaped by the Holy One. Our wills bend to God's will with the more time we share with God. God's will becomes more evident to us when we worship together, for we pray this prayer together asking for God's will to be revealed to us and for us to be within it.

I remember a time when I was in Clinical Pastoral Education at a hospital in North Carolina. The patient had requested a chaplain to come pray for her. I checked in with the nurses about the patient's condition, which was terminal, and then entered the room. The woman was in her late 40s. Her husband and daughter sat at her bedside. A nurse was monitoring the woman's vitals. We talked and I learned that she believed in God. They all did. She then asked me, "Will you pray for what I want?" I told her that I would. Then she said, "I want you to pray for me to die." I was not prepared for that request, but everyone in the room was.

I took a deep breath. So I prayed for that woman to die concluding with the only words that made sense to me, the Lord's Prayer and we all joined in the prayer. Within a few hours the woman entered into her eternal rest with her Savior Jesus Christ. That day I found the words, **"thy will be done"** to be of the greatest comfort for the family, the nurses, and me. So when we pray these petitions *about God to God* we are dealing with the Holy One who authors life and death, the Holy One who shapes and forms us to be holy in the humble way of Jesus, and the Holy One who deals with principalities and powers with a Great Reversal.^{xii}

The Lord's Prayer also includes three petitions for human concerns: our bread and our sins and our struggles with evil. The bread is daily—the sustenance of life, but it's like the manna God provided to the Hebrew people in the wilderness—it is enough for today, with promise and provision for tomorrow.^{xiii} It is how daily prayer with God feeds us too.

The bread and the debts are related, for if we ask for bread we become indebted to the giver and therefore need to ask to be forgiven the debt too. The debts unpaid can lead to sin, whether we owe them or they are owed to us, so we best seek to forgive as we have been forgiven. The biggest debt we owe is to God because of the sacrifice that Jesus made for us. Sin likes to consume so it goes for whole communities, even churches. We pray the plural "us," "our," and "we" and collectively need forgiveness for the sins that we, the community, own—public shared indiscretions like racism, usury, war, hunger, human trafficking, gossip, lack of mental health care, and the list goes on. Paul reminds us that **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."**^{xiv}

The final petition is for God to save us from evil. Jesus acknowledges that evil will be present, but he also acknowledges God's power over evil to deliver us. If we have not forgiven as we have been forgiven by God, we run the risk of being tempted by evil much easier. **Listen to the rest of Dee's words about prayer.**

Sitting in my cubicle at work one day, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the longing to be prayed for and I thought of Paul and Margaret. Miraculously, they were home and had no commitments. My pastor and his wife came too, as we sat together in Paul and Margaret's living room I spilled out the sewer in my heart. Paul felt, in addition to praying for me, they should also pray for my father. I wasn't so sure. I clearly remember my pastor's first words in his prayer, "I don't want to pray for this man."

There really is not a word in the English language to describe how I felt at the conclusion of their prayer for me. The combination of all the emotions made me feel like I was going to disintegrate. In a very uncharacteristic move, I reached out and placed my hand on Paul's knee. He immediately picked up my hand and held it in his, tenderly stroking it. That prayer session was the initial assault on the stronghold of evil in my heart.

So many times when I pray I feel like I'm either shaking my fists in God's face (defiance) or pounding them on his chest (grief). Would that I could just place them on his knees, and have him hold my hands in his.

*I saw a movie in which the lead actress is hurt and angry and pounds her fist on the hero's chest. As he very calmly takes his hands in hers, the camera zooms in for a closeup on their hands—his holding hers. That image is a visual prayer of mine.^{xv} **Dee's words** may ring familiar to us.*

Hopefully Jesus' words do too.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us and lead us not into temptation."^{xvi} Jesus gives us words of salvation. When we cannot speak them, we are assured that **"the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."^{xvii}**

The prayer concludes with a doxology of the kingdom, the power, and the glory being God's forever.^{xviii} In a similar fashion I want to leave you with a prayer that you can embody in your holy time with God each day this week. It is a prayer offering our whole selves to God. I told you about the sign God gave to me. Now we are going to give ourselves as a sign to God.

I invite you to open your hymnbooks to number 468 and place them on your knees. I invite you to open your hands to join me in signing this prayer for God's glory. I want to acknowledge PSA student Chandler Schramm for helping me help with these sign motions. I learned this many years ago and he has made sure I'm teaching you correctly. There are 4 verses and most of the words are repetitious. Please follow my movements to the words. We will learn these motions before singing it together.

In **my life**, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.

In my life, Lord, be glorified today.

In **our song**, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.

In our song, Lord, be glorified today.

In **your church**, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.
In your church, Lord, be glorified today.
In **your world**, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.
In your world, Lord, be glorified today.^{xix}

May God speak to you this week. Amen.

A Franciscan Benediction

*May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and
To turn their pain to joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness to all our [God's] children and [especially] the poor.^{xx}*

Amen.

ⁱ In preparation for this sermon I read several wonderful works on prayer. Here are the titles with authors that I recommend: *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of The Lord's Prayer* by John Dominic Crossan; *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* by Richard J. Foster; *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & the Christian Life* by William H. Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas; *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, The Creed, The Commandments* by Albert Curry Winn; *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* by Philip Yancey.

ⁱⁱ The Lord's Prayer is also in Matthew 6: 5-15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 18:14, paraphrased.

^{iv} "Shaking My Fist" by Dee from Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* Zondervan, 2006, 76-77.

^v Romans 8: 15-16.

^{vi} Exodus chapter 3.

^{vii} Mark 1:15, Luke 21:31. The kingdom of God is both "already" and "not yet" so we understand that the kingdom of God is both among us now and will be completed in the future.

^{viii} Matthew 4: 1-11.

^{ix} Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, The Creed, The Commandments*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1990, 45-46 quoting Leonardo Boff, *The Lord's Prayer: The Prayer of Integral Liberation*, Orbis Books, 1983, 60. The beatitude is found in Matthew 5:3.

^x Luke 1: 46-53.

^{xi} Mark 10: 31.

^{xii} The term Great Reversal is from Winn, 45.

^{xiii} The manna story is in Exodus 16, and retold or referred to in Numbers 11, Deuteronomy 8, Joshua 5, Nehemiah 9, Psalm 78, John 6, Hebrews 9, and Revelation 2. Obviously it is important since it shows up throughout both the Old Testament and New Testament.

^{xiv} Romans 3:23.

^{xv} "Shaking My Fist" by Dee from Philip Yancey, 77.

^{xvi} Luke 11:4 or Matthew 6:12-13.

^{xvii} Romans 8: 26b.

^{xviii} The doxology was added to the prayer when it was used by the church for instruction in how to pray. Versions of it are found in the *Didache* 8:2 and in I Chronicles 29:11.

^{xix} Bob Kilpatrick, "In My Life Lord, Be Glorified" in *Glory to God*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013, Hymn No. 468.

^{xx} Philip Yancey, 105. My adaptations in [].