



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Three Parts of Prayer: Ours”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Romans 8: 18-28; Mark 11: 20-25

July 26, 2020

Series Introduction:

Before we start our Scripture readings for this morning, I want to share a story that dates back some 13-14 years now. I think I may have shared this before, so forgive me if you have already heard it, but it is the story of a hospital visit to a dear woman named Marilyn. Marilyn was a pillar of the church I was serving at the time, and her heart and compassion breathed through everything she did, everything she said, and everything she was. She was one of those people who never needed to speak a word of the depth of her faith – it simply emanated from the core of who she was.

Near the end of her earthly life, I had the opportunity to visit with her in the hospital. We chatted for a while, and as I was preparing to leave, I asked her if we could share in a moment of prayer. I took her hands and began to pray. I prayed for her peace and comfort, I prayed for her family, and I prayed that she would know the assurance of God’s eternal love in every moment that followed. As I concluded the prayer, I gently started to stand up and was just about to pull my hands away from hers when she grasped them tightly. I paused for a second, not knowing what was to come next, and the next thing I knew, Marilyn was praying for me. She prayed for my ministry. She prayed for my health – both physical and emotional – in light of the demands of my vocation. She prayed for Sharon and the kids. For a good 3-4 minutes, this ill woman, lying in a hospital bed, nearing the end of her own life, prayed for me!

There aren’t many times in my life in which I have been speechless – but that was one of them. To this day, that moment stands as one of the most profound experiences of prayer I’ve had in my life. We were connected to the Spirit, to God, in that moment in ways that I can barely express. And, I wanted to share that story today because prayer has a way of doing that. There is a power to prayer that we can’t quantify or explain, that we often struggle to understand. And yet, we know in our hearts that there is something about prayer that matters. We may not understand what that is, but we know there’s something – and so we pray.

What concerns me sometimes, however, is whether or not that ambiguity of the power and process of prayer somehow hinders our approach to it. What concerns me, sometimes, is a worry

that our lack of understanding when it comes to prayer sometimes leads to our doing less of it. What concerns me, sometimes, is that we don't really get prayer – and so we don't really pray. So, over the course of the next 3 weeks, we're going to spend some time on it. For those who may recall, we did a Lenten series on prayer a few years ago – one in which we looked at prayer through the model of Jesus at prayer. This time, however, I want to come at it a little differently. I want to spend the next three weeks on what I am calling the three 'parts' of prayer. Now, I don't mean the elements of the prayer – I want to look at the participants of prayer – the parts that are played in prayer. As I look at it, I see three parts, three roles, in prayer – there's the part we play, there's the part of the Spirit, and there's the part of our creator God.

For the next three weeks, we're going to tackle those three parts. And, while each week will have a focal Scripture – like that from Mark that Julie will read shortly, the series as a whole is based on this passage from the eight chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. This reading starts with the 18th verse.

Romans 8: 18-28

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 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.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Mark 11: 20-25

²⁰ *In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ Then Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” ²² Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. ²³ Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. ²⁴ So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*

²⁵ *“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”*

The Three Parts of Prayer: Ours

“Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Those who remember the series on prayer we did a few years ago might recall the sermon I did that referred to what I called the ‘Nike Prayer.’ We all know the classic Nike catch phrase – ‘Just do it!’ Our prayer life is very much the same – just do it! That’s our fundamental part in prayer – to do it. It’s not about form or formality, but we’re going to talk more about that next week. When it comes to our part in those three parts of prayer, our primary part is that – to just do it. Our part is to take the time, to exert the energy, to invest ourselves in the opportunity to be with God in prayer. I do wonder sometimes, however, how often we actually have that faith-driven, miracle-inspired, illogical, irrational and scientifically indefensible understanding of prayer that Jesus proclaims in those words shared in Mark’s Gospel.

“Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Do you all remember the book, *The Prayer of Jabez*? This little book, written by Bruce Wilkinson, came out about 20 years ago and quickly became a favorite for church book studies and sermon reflections. I did a series on it myself. It’s an entire book based on two sentences about a man named Jabez that appear in the fourth chapter of I Chronicles. “Jabez was honored more than his brothers;” we read in I Chronicles, “and his mother named him Jabez, saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ 10 Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!’ And God granted what he asked.”

In the opening of his book on those two sentences of this Scriptural afterthought named Jabez, this how Bruce Wilkinson starts off, “The little book you’re holding is about what happens when ordinary Christians decide to reach for an extraordinary life – which, as it turns out, is exactly the kind God promises.” Now, setting aside any debates on the manner in which Mr. Wilkinson stretches the particular meaning and import of those few sentences of Scripture, and certainly disregarding any impression his words might give towards a sense of a ‘prosperity Gospel,’ I do think it is worth asking ourselves how often we come to God with that sense of expectation. I do think it is worth asking ourselves how often we come to God with that faith-driven, miracle-

inspired, illogical, irrational and scientifically indefensible understanding of prayer that Jesus proclaims in those words shared in Mark's Gospel.

I think our prayer life is laden with our search for God's will – and rightfully so. We try to come to God with open hearts and minds – with willing spirits – longing to understand that which God is trying to do in and around us and yearning to be a part of it. 'Show me the path, God.' 'Teach me your ways.' 'Work in me and work through me.' These are all heartfelt, meaningful, and fitting prayers for a life of Christian discipleship. We've talked a number of times before about the fact that we don't want to come to God with a list of instructions as though we're rubbing some sacred lamp in the hopes that God will emerge and grant us our wishes three. That said, I think there's a fine line between coming to God with our delineation of that which we are instructing God to do, and coming to God with our heartfelt conviction that we face profound difficulties in this life and that we are counting on God to get involved and be an active part of resolving them! And right there, in that distinction, is another essential element of our 'part' in prayer.

You know, this series on prayer is a reflection of a series of encounters and reflections I had, early this week, that led me down the path to really considering the prayer life of us as individuals, and as a church. And one of those encounters was with a member of the church who was raising this very issue in a what I felt was a very poignant way. "It's not that we want to test God," he said, "we should never put God to the test." 'But, what if prayed almost like that?' He asked. 'What if we prayed almost like we were putting God to the test? What if we prayed with the expectation that God would do what we asked?'

Now, I want to be clear, again, that this is not some manifestation of the Prosperity Gospel. I think if you really look at the manner in which Scripture speaks of prayer you will see that there are more than a few caveats that clarify that God's not going to drop a Ferrari on our front porch tomorrow just because we asked for it. God isn't a divine genie granting our wishes, and God isn't Santa Claus – we don't get our special present because we kept ourselves off the naughty list. This isn't about material things, karmic rewards, or the 'to do list' we might find ourselves bringing to God in prayer.

No - this is about the spirit, the heart, the faith that stands behind the prayers that we bring. We have big problems in this world. We face tremendous challenges one day after another. From our loved ones who are ill, to others who are facing job losses or relational breakdowns, to the mind-numbing politicization of a global health crisis, to the extraordinary racial divides that continue to tear at the very fabric of our social constructs – we have extraordinary problems in this world, and we need extraordinary solutions that go beyond that which we, or any others, can provide. We have extraordinary challenges in this world that cry out for the grace, the glory, the wisdom and the power of God – and we need to bring those things to God not with some reverent longing for God to help us in our time of need, but with the declarative expectation that God has promised that our prayers will be answered and that we need these answered too!

When I think of our part in the wondrous depths of prayer – it's this that I think is so often missing. It starts with that Nike Prayer – Just do it! As we do it, however, I think we need to look within at the heart and faith that drives that prayer. Are we coming to God in prayer

because we're supposed to? Are we coming to God in prayer because that's what we do at dinner? At bedtime? Are we come to God in prayer because we think there might be some ambiguous way that prayer might be helpful in this situation? Or, are we coming in prayer with that faith-driven, miracle-inspired, illogical, irrational and scientifically indefensible understanding of prayer that Jesus proclaims in those words shared in Mark's Gospel?

"If we hope for what we do not see," Paul writes, "we wait for it with patience." "Whatever you ask for in prayer," Jesus says, "believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Prayer not a blank check for our every whim – that's not the point. And, the result of prayer will often not match the picture we have in our minds – but we'll talk more about that in two weeks. Prayer is, however, an invitation, an opportunity – a chance not to ever put God to the test, but to come close. Prayer is an invitation to come to God with that faith-filled expectation that God will answer.

So, just ask yourself – how often are we coming to God in prayer because we're supposed to? How often are we coming to God in prayer because that's what we do at dinner or bedtime? How often are we come to God in prayer because we think there might be some ambiguous way that prayer might be helpful in this situation? And, how often are we coming in prayer with that faith-driven, miracle-inspired, illogical, irrational and scientifically indefensible understanding of prayer that Jesus proclaims in those words shared in Mark's Gospel? How often are we coming to God saying, 'We have profound needs, we have remarkable pains, and you have promised to answer our prayers – so I know you will answer these as well!'