

Help

November 8, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Psalm 121

Philippians 4:4-9

When I was a senior in high school, I officially began what is called, in the United Methodist Church, the “candidacy process” – basically, a long (in some cases many years long) discernment process meant to help me determine whether or not God was calling me to become a pastor. Every few weeks for that year I would meet with my pastor and we’d talk about all things church and call and vocation, and then I went off to college and I would meet with my university chaplain to continue my way through this process.

So the summer after my freshman year I went home for that summer and my pastor thought, “hey, I’ve got a great idea! How about for the whole summer I put Melissa up there as the worship leader every week. Give her some experience in front of a congregation.”

So, I knew I wanted to be a pastor, but as a barely-19-year-old, I was intimidated. And a little bit shy. And not at all comfortable speaking in front of a congregation – especially speaking off-the-cuff. Every week we’d meet together 5 minutes before the service started and talk about who was going to do what. And it was never the same, from week to week. Maybe one week he’d have me do the welcome and announcements, and another week I’d invite the ushers forward for the offering, and another week I’d read the scripture, and another week I’d do the pastoral prayer.

And there was nothing. That I dreaded more. Than doing the pastoral prayer.

Welcome and Announcements? No problem. I could welcome people and then stand up there and talk about what was on the calendar for the week. I could even throw in a joke or two and liven it up a bit. Offering? Easy peasy. Scripture? I loved reading the scripture. That was fun.

But every time I would get up there to do the prayer, it’s like something in my brain short-circuited. Everything went blank. Like I lost the ability to speak, or form coherent words. I’d try to open my mouth and say something, but it felt like everything that came out was complete and total nonsense. And then, not knowing what to say or do I’d panic, and that would make everything far worse. I think that my pastor sensed my discomfort with prayer, and rather than saying, “you know what? I’ll take it from here” and saving me from total and complete humiliation, he decided to assign me the prayer time *more* often.

Jerk.

That was almost 20 years ago, and still, even now, if I were to be honest, leading prayer is the thing that brings up the butterflies in my stomach, faster than anything else.

And I'm guessing I'm not alone in this. In a group of people there is no faster way to get everybody's eyes off of you than to ask "who wants to pray?" All of a sudden, that fly on the wall and that spot on the carpet and the page that we have been taking notes on are the most fascinating things in the world – anything to avoid meeting the pastor's gaze and getting called on to pray.

And I'll let you in on a little secret – when pastors get together, we do the same things. We make up silly little rules, like the last person to show up, prays. Or the first person to touch their fork, prays. Almost like we make prayer a punishment.

I think there are maybe a few reasons for this.

- First, when we enter into prayer, we are entering into a life, a world, a relationship that is far bigger than we are. It's not like we are holding a casual conversation with an acquaintance about the weather. We are talking to *God*. We are placing ourselves in the presence of *God*. That's big.
 - I'm reminded of the scene from C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are describing Aslan – the great Lion – the king of Narnia – to the children.
 - *"Ooh!" says Susan. "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."*
- Second, prayer is intimate. It's a personal conversation between myself and God. And to invite a large group into that moment, is a really open and vulnerable place to be. It's like my faith journey is on display for the world. And that's not always a comfortable feeling.
- And third, I think that maybe sometimes we make prayer too complicated. Like we feel like for it to be "legit" it has to be full of beautiful and fancy words and insights and spoken with just the right tone of voice, and it has to strike just the right balance between confidence and humility, and it has to be at the same time both reverent and authentic, and...and...and.... That's a lot of pressure to put on a prayer.
 - Another kids' book that I absolutely love is *Anne of Green Gables*. There is this sweet little scene when the little orphan girl Anne is learning to say her bedtime prayers for the very first time. So not knowing what to do, she tries to "copy" the beautiful language that she has heard in church:
 - *"Gracious heavenly Father--that's the way the ministers say it in church, so I suppose it's all right in private prayer, isn't it?" she interjected, lifting her head for a moment.*
"Gracious heavenly Father, I thank Thee for the White Way of Delight and

the Lake of Shining Waters and Bonny and the Snow Queen. I'm really extremely grateful for them. And that's all the blessings I can think of just now to thank Thee for. As for the things I want, they're so numerous that it would take a great deal of time to name them all so I will only mention the two most important. Please let me stay at Green Gables; and please let me be good-looking when I grow up. I remain,

"Yours respectfully,

Anne Shirley.

"There, did I do all right?" she asked eagerly, getting up. "I could have made it much more flowery if I'd had a little more time to think it over."

This week we are starting a series – actually, it's more like a little, 3-week mini-series – on prayer, loosely based on a little book by Anne Lamott titled *Help, Thanks, Wow*. I love this book – it's a little irreverent in places, but I also find it to be refreshingly *real*. Sometimes our lives themselves are a bit irreverent, messy, confused and confusing, but it's precisely when we engage God through the messiness that God is the most present to us.

In her book, Anne Lamott argues that at their core, when we take out all of the extra "stuff" – the fancy words and the nervous babble, every prayer that we pray boils down to one of three words. Help, or thanks, or wow. So we are going to spend a week talking about each one of these prayers, hopefully in an effort to *un*-complicate our prayer lives. To make prayer a little bit less scary and a little bit more relatable.

So today we are talking about the prayer "Help." This is what Anne Lamott calls "our first and best prayer." This prayer, is where prayer *starts*. The place where we recognize that we are not God, and that we cannot do life by ourselves. That we are not in control, and we don't have all the answers, and we need somebody else – someone bigger and stronger and wiser than us – to go this life *with* us. And so, this is the place where we stop trying to *be* God, we release our death grip over our lives, and we invite God in.

I say this is our first prayer, because this is what happens on a large scale when we first come to Christ – "I can't do it myself anymore, God; I need you to go this with me." But it's a prayer that we never stop praying, in one form or another. "Jesus, take the wheel." "God, a little help here?" "So-and-so is hurting and I don't know what more to do. God, please step in." "Heal my friend." "Give me the words to speak." "God, give me wisdom. And patience." "God, if you will help me with this, then I will promise to do a better job following you."

Our life is full of pleas for help. The Psalms are full of them, too. God, smite my enemies. God, how long must I endure?

"I lift my eyes up to the hills, from where will my help come?" When life feels like an uphill climb; when things don't go our way; when we are struggling to understand

what's going on around us; when we are 8 months into a pandemic and we are just *over* it already; when the goalposts of life feel like they are constantly changing; when we are facing medical challenges; health challenges; mental health challenges; financial challenges; relationship challenges; major life changes and transitions; when we are walking through the ups and downs of grief and loss; when we feel helpless and we are trying our best not to lose hope but it is getting harder and harder with every waking moment, and I lift up my eyes to what is right in front of me and it looks like a monster of a mountain that I have to climb, from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

God, help me! God, where are you?

"I am right here," God says.

The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

"I'm right here. And now, so that I can help you, release that fierce iron grip that you are using to try to hold everything together, and let me take it from here."

Sometimes, that can be hard, though. Sometimes, we ask for God's help, but we want to dictate the terms. We want to keep holding onto things once we've supposedly handed them over to God. Anne Lamott has a great suggestion for us about that:

One modest tool for letting go in prayer that I've used for twenty-five years is a God box. I've relied on every imaginable container – from a pillbox, to my car's glove box, to decorative boxes friends have given me. The container has to exist in time and space, so you can physically put a note into it, so you can see yourself let go, in time and space.

On a note, I write down the name of the person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed I fold the note up, stick it in the box and close it. You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this: "Here. You think you're so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed." Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off the spaceship until I hear back.

The willingness to do such a childish thing comes from the pain of not being able to let go of something. The willingness comes from finding yourself half mad with obsession. We learn through pain that some of the things we thought were castles turn out to be prisons, and we desperately want out, but even though we built them, we can't find the door. Yet maybe if you ask God for help in knowing

which direction to face, you'll have a moment of intuition. Maybe you'll see at least one next right step you can take.

When we think we can do it all ourselves – fix, save, buy, or date a nice solution – it's hopeless. We're going to screw things up. We're going to get our tentacles wrapped around things and squirt our squiddy ink all over, so that there is even less visibility, and then we're going to squeeze the very life out of everything.

Or we can summon a child's courage and faith and put a note with a few words into a small box in the hope that we can get our sucking, inky squid tentacles off things. We do this without a clue about what will happen, how it will all turn out.

And with that cry for help, with that simple, act of releasing our grip, with that invitation that we extend for God to come and join us in our journey, faith is born. We are released from the prisons that we bind ourselves in and we are led to see life and our place in the world with a fresh set of eyes. Which leads us directly into our second prayer – which we will talk about next week – thanks.

[Wrap it up!]