

“Pray and Live”

New London UMC

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Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:6-15 *CEV*

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After spending a week in Duluth, Minnesota, I can tell you there are MULTIPLE ways to get to the same destination – even when you have a couple van loads of people with smart phones finding directions and using GPS systems you can still hear, “Oh, yeah! We should have turned there!” So some of the many ways to get to a destination are fairly direct, while other ways are more ‘scenic’ or circular. But no matter which way we might choose to go, the destination remains the same. This also holds true for prayer: no matter how we choose to pray – our prayers still get to God. But for some reason this truth is not reassuring to a lot of people. They still feel intimidated about praying, and unsure they are doing it “right.” They are not confident in their ability to pray on their own, and they wish that they had some kind of prayer GPS. Well, to the best of my knowledge, there is no prayer GPS. There is no disembodied voice that tells us to start this way, proceed here, merge there, turn at the end of this sentence, and arrive at ‘Amen.’ Sorry, I don’t believe there is an app for that. (But feel free to correct me if I am wrong.)

If you are someone who feels lost or disoriented when you try to pray; or if your mind goes blank when you are asked to pray out loud at a church committee meeting or somewhere else; what help can you get? How can you learn how to pray? We should be grateful that Jesus’ first disciples implored him, “Lord, teach us how to pray.” These disciples had heard Jesus pray; they had seen Jesus pray; and they have had Jesus pray for them. Yet they still didn’t feel like they knew how to pray. But when Jesus heard their request, he helped them without any hesitation. He gave them a place to start from – a prayer to show them the way to pray. This prayer is one that we still pray, and that we know as the Lord’s Prayer. It is a prayer that doesn’t require us to be anything other than who we are – human beings with human needs, who are in an on-going and close relationship with God. This prayer may seem pretty simple and straight forward, but it covers quite a bit. It begins by claiming and naming God as our Father, and acknowledging that we are to honor God’s name both as we would an earthly parent and because of the holiness of God. This speaking directly to God also invites God into the prayer with us. The prayer also leads us to speak of our daily need for food for our bodies. Forgiveness for our sins; and the ability to forgive others. It acknowledges the reality of temptation, but also the real strength that God can provide to help us to turn away from temptation. So we can stay focused on God’s kingdom taking shape in our lives, and in the world around us.

That’s the model for ‘how to pray’ that Jesus gave us. And then he went on to say that persistence, and not being ashamed of asking for what we need, are also important. Along with understanding that whatever God’s response is to our prayers, it will always be good for us – whether we realize it, or not. And that God will always be with us in the gift of the Holy Spirit in us.

That's what Jesus shared with his disciples. And then I think Jesus might have looked at the disciples and thought to himself, "OK, that's probably enough for now." Because the disciples had probably reached the saturation point for absorbing new information on how to pray. And what he had shared with them might have been enough right then.

But even if the first disciples, or disciples of our generation, could only learn and remember one thing about prayer – I hope it is this: we never enter into prayer alone. Prayer is an open conversation WITH God, and the Holy Spirit is always present with us to help the conversation along. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes:

In certain ways we are weak, but the Spirit is here to help us. For example, when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit prays for us in ways that cannot be put into words. All of our thoughts are known to God. He can understand what is in the mind of the Spirit, as the Spirit prays for God's people. We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him.

(Romans 8:26-28a CEV)

Even when we don't have the words for what we want to pray about – we still have our thoughts, our feelings, and our presence with God in prayer. It is our very 'being' that opens up to God in prayer. That lives in God's presence and is filled by God's Spirit.

And prayer undergirds our life in Christ. It is part of the root system that Paul wrote about in his letter to the Colossians. A root system that provides us with daily nourishment, encouragement, strength, and thanksgiving. Prayer keeps us rooted in our relationship with Christ, with God, with the Holy Spirit. And as our roots grow stronger and deeper, we are able to grow and mature as disciples of Christ. Paul writes:

You have accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord. Now keep on following him. Plant your roots in Christ and let him be the foundation for your life. Be strong in your faith, just as you were taught. And be grateful. . . . God lives fully in Christ. And you are fully grown because you belong to Christ, who is over every power and authority. *(Colossians 2:6-7, 9-10-28a CEV)*

"Plant your roots in Christ and let him be the foundation for your life." Don't be afraid to pray for the nourishment you need through this root system! Don't be afraid to ask for the help of the Spirit. Because reaching our roots out in prayer helps us to remember to be grateful to God.

Amen.