

“Prayer with Intention”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – July 24, 2022

Luke 11:1-13

When I outlined this sermon a few weeks ago, I thought I would give you some wisdom about how to pray. Here are how the master prayer warriors do it. But something happened to me a week ago. I listened to how we pray *The Lord's Prayer* in our worship and God spoke to me. God told me to preach something different about prayer.

You see, we rely on being able to do some things automatically, without thinking our way through them. Some things -- like tying our shoelaces or riding a bike -- are the result of skills we have learned so well that our bodies perform them without fail. Other things -- like brushing our teeth or putting on the seat belt -- are habits we have developed so fully that we no longer realize we are doing them.

But in other parts of our lives, we don't want to be on automatic pilot or to rely on programmed skills or habits to get us through. In some situations, we need to give our full attention, and demand that same degree of attention from others. Spouses can quickly tell the difference between an automatic, "I love you," and a heartfelt expression of genuine love. Our kids can tell the difference between an automatic, "What did you do at school today?" and a parent's honest, authentic interest in the events in their lives. Friends can tell the difference between an automatic, "How are you?" and the compassionate reaching out of one soul to another.

It is amazing and amusing how we have convinced ourselves that God hasn't yet caught on to the difference between our expressions of genuine spirituality and our automatic, rote readings of *The Lord's Prayer*. How many times have you recited *The Lord's Prayer* in worship, at weddings, at funerals, with your mind and your spirit on full automatic? The words are so familiar that we can be on "cruise control" for the entire prayer.

For too many people, in too many situations, *The Lord's Prayer* has become little more than a meaningless mantra, or even worse, a kind of "good luck" saying. One person recalls this tendency like this:

"I remember reciting The Lord's Prayer with the high school football team for four years. Every Friday night, right before we'd go out to play, the whole team would gather around in one moment of sanity, as together we said, "The Lord's Prayer" and ended it with "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Then two or three seconds later, we'd all scream, "Let's kill 'em!"

The tragedy of that story is that it demonstrates how the very prayer Jesus gave us to keep us spiritually alive and alert, and not tied to praying simply "vain repetitions," we have managed to turn into the biggest vain repetition of all.

In Luke, Jesus promised us that we could stay fresh and alive and plugged into the power of the Spirit. "Ask," he insisted, "and you will receive" -- not just some of us, not just those with special gifts, but "everyone."

In fact, Jesus gave his disciples their own prayer so that they might live a "wired" life -- being "wired in" to the Spirit. *The Lord's Prayer* was never intended to be a creed or a catechism, repeated exactly the same by all Christians at every stage of their lives. *The Lord's Prayer* is only a template, a blueprint, showing us how we can gain access to the power and love and grace God offers to us daily. Essentially, Jesus says, all we have to do is ask.

Admittedly, there is something compelling and comforting about a mantra. There are, and need to be, mantra prayers. Consider the quieting peace that comes from repeatedly reciting the "Kyrie" -- "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." To stay vitally connected to the Spirit, however, we must expand our understanding of a "mantra" and view it as the repetition of certain practices, attitudes, and relationships, instead of just the recitation of words alone.

A Christian mantra, empowered by the spirit of *The Lord's Prayer*, has at least three components:

1. **Daily Scripture Reading.** This does not mean commentaries, or study guides and manuals for investigating Scripture, though they are very helpful in learning and interpreting scripture. But prior to that is the ability to simply immerse yourself in the Word through repeated readings of the Bible.

The men and women of the Old and New Testaments should not be strangers to us. They are our family. We are related to them in the faith. Daily readings soaked in the stories of our tradition will make for a stronger, fuller, richer faith. We can only remain spiritually "fresh" by conscientiously feeding and watering the roots of our faith. Scripture remains a miraculous gift of God because despite its misuse by the church, its abuse by its doubters and its overuse by literalists, it still speaks a fresh word from God to us every day.

2. **Daily Prayer.** *The Lord's Prayer* was not intended as a "daily prayer." It only points to the fact that "our Father" wants to hear from us every day. Jesus counseled his disciples to be persistent in prayer -- to the point of peskiness.

Four-year-old Thane likes to get up at 5 am every day -- weekends, holidays, winter, summer. He immediately climbs into bed with his parents and parlays a series of specific requests: a pop tart, orange juice and a video. Every morning, his parents groan sleepily and tell him to go back to bed because it is just too early. Every morning, he prevails -- not because his parents love him, not because he is a joyful child, not because his parents want him to be happy. His parents give in because they want him to go away! His persistence pays off.

Likewise, Jesus encourages his disciples to go continually into God's presence in prayer. But God, unlike human parents, delights in our persistence and our rambling in prayer all hours of the day and night.

3. A Daily Relationship With Others. Reading the Word and praying to God are faith mantras we must exercise on our own, but we must also read and pray, praise and question, in gatherings of other Christians. We need that communal, cellular contact with faith every day of our lives.

Part of our spiritual freshness depends on opening up our hearts and spirits to the sounds and sights of other Christians. We need to be involved in small groups, where the members are spiritually connected to one another. We are called not to just pray for ourselves but for others. But how can we pray for one another if we don't let each other into our lives? We are so afraid that others will see our flaws and know us as we really are, that we never let down our guard. We don't let others see "the real me." So, we say we are fine, but deep down we know just how much we hurt. Little do we realize that pain can be gone if we only let others know and pray for us.

Willard Gaylin puts it this way . . .

"Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional. We cannot avoid pain, but we can avoid joy. God has given us such immense freedom that he will allow us to be as miserable as we want to be.

"I know some people who spend their entire lives practicing being unhappy, diligently pursuing joylessness. They get more mileage from having people feel sorry for them than from choosing to live out their lives in the context of joy.

"Joy is simple (not to be confused with easy). At any moment in life, we have at least two options, and one of them is to choose an attitude of gratitude, a posture of grace, a commitment to joy."

All Christians struggling to keep their faith fresh and vital develop favorite ways and personal mantras, that aid and sustain them in their daily lives. They might employ techniques as ancient and honorable as fasting, or they might involve something as trendy as "Christian aerobics." What are your personal mantras? What do you say to help you get through the day?

Make sure that what you are doing, truly leads you to God and is not used as some magic spell we say to make us feel better. Make sure it is Biblically sound and that you are incorporating all the power of prayer into your life.

And lastly, connect with God on a basic level of just talking it out with God. If we say we believe in a God, then we must also believe that God knows us and wants to hear from us. Talk with God. He is always waiting to hear from you. Amen.