

Sermon Title: Shameless
Scriptures: Luke 11:1-13 (Psalm 85:8-13)
Location/Date: July 28, 2019 Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Preacher: Grace Boyer

How do we learn how to pray?

A disciple came to Jesus, after Jesus finished praying, and asked him to teach them all how to pray. The disciples, growing up in Jewish households, may have memorized traditional prayers for the morning and evening. They might have been taught standard prayers as children in the same way we might teach a table grace before meals like: "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food." Or a bedtime prayer like: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." The disciples probably already knew some sample prayers. And, it was true that teachers sometimes taught their students common prayers that summarized their beliefs and united them as a group, like John the Baptist did with his disciples.

But, the disciples had been watching Jesus. They had been living with him on the road and in villages, day in and day out, and watched as he would steal away to pray. Something was different there, and they wanted to understand.

In Luke, Jesus is often praying. Going off by himself to a deserted place, or mountain. Sometimes in the early morning, sometimes at night, sometimes all night long. Sometimes the disciples had to search high and low to find him when he slipped away. At other times Jesus would just step a stone's throw away, so the disciples could see but not hear him. Jesus prayed at his baptism, Jesus prayed in the desert, Jesus prayed before picking his 12 disciples. He prayed on the Mount of Transfiguration where God said this is my beloved son. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion, and on the cross ("Father forgive them, for they know not what they do"). And Jesus prayed after the resurrection when he breaks the bread and is recognized by his Emmaus road companions. For Luke, Jesus was a person of prayer. Of ongoing conversation with God during both the important dramas of life, and the ordinary day to day.

So it's no wonder that Jesus' disciple came to him asking, teach us how to do it too. They had watched him closely. And they wanted to understand. To experience and share in it.

How do we learn how to pray? We often teach children to put their hands together, bow their head, or close their eyes, or sometimes kneel by a bedside. It is a way to focus the mind by beginning with the body. To put the body in the posture of prayer. Prayer can also be taught with hands open and resting in the lap, or in a traditional orthodox Jewish way of hands and face lifted up to heaven with a rocking motion. A month ago I taught the children hand motions to the sung prayer "Spirit of the Living God...." Another way we learn to pray together is on the third Sunday of each month when we walk up to light candles during our Candle prayers. Prayer can be taught to children simply by circling up and joining hands before a potluck or family meal. They may not understand completely but they know they are part of the circle. Learning how to pray as a community sometimes starts with the body.

As youth grow or confirmands study, we often teach the contents of certain types of prayers. I learned this through the phrase "ACTS IS prayer". A for Adoration (praise of God), C for Confession (I messed up and I'm sorry), T for Thanksgiving (Thank you Lord), S for Supplication (please help me), I for Intercession (please help my friend), S for Self-dedication (God use me and my gifts to do your work in the world). "ACTS IS prayer". Or you can boil these down to one word prayers like: Help, Thanks, Sorry, Please, Wow! Those one word prayers that speak volumes and can be uttered anytime and anywhere.

We also teach praying together as youth grow through sentence prayers where you go around the circle sharing one thing you are grateful or concerned about. Have you ever done that? Or bidding prayers where you list a topic like “family member” or “nation” and members of the group say a name or concern that is related to it. In college I learned the alphabet prayer. Beginning with “A” all the way down to “Z”, you say a prayer for each letter of the Alphabet. It takes a while to go through it! Each of these give experiences in group prayer with some structure as we learn and grow together.

In my own life, all those ways happened, and taught me. But at least in my earliest childhood, it was less about being taught, and more about being surrounded by examples. Soaking it in by osmosis. The Korean woman who took care of me as a young child, who provided childcare during the day while my parents were working as missionaries. She was a deacon in one of the local Korean Presbyterian churches. Caring for me was both her paid work, but also her ministry. I remember her praying over me in the typical earnest fashion of the Korean church of my childhood. I didn’t understand the words, but I felt her heart’s emotion and sincerity.

My father, the seminary trained pastor that he was, his words were more bookish and theological. He also always used Thee, Thou, and Thy. That way of addressing God with Thee and Thou represented my father’s way of respecting and reverencing God. But over the years I began to realize that it also was his intimate prayer language. It was like the Spanish tu or the German du. It was a form of address that only was used when he talked with God. It was loving and intimate.

My mother, the one I heard the most in my early childhood, was always short, direct, practical. Nothing flowery, just honest and to the point, this is how it is Lord. She called them her “country prayers”, how she learned to pray growing up on a farm. But there was a change in her voice, it was always quieter and gentle when she prayed out-loud. As a child, sometimes you hear the tone of voice more than you hear the actual words. As I look back on my earliest memories, prayer was less about being taught as about being caught, caught up in the examples of the people I loved that surrounded me. Breathing in that air.

How do we learn to pray? Especially when we haven’t been surrounded by examples or breathed that air?

Maybe that also was part of the disciple’s question to Jesus. Jesus responds with a prayer that is simple, direct, and brief. Five sentences in total. There is no beating around the bush, just straight forward. It is missing some of the flourishes we are used to saying when we say the Lord’s prayer in worship, phrases found in Matthew’s gospel instead of Luke’s, such as: Who art in heaven, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, deliver us from evil. The simpleness of the prayer in Luke catches my attention. It is honest in its need and demanding, not even a “please” in sight. Father, holy be your name, come your kingdom, give us the bread we need, forgive us, bring us not into trial. In Greek those verbs comes first: Be holy, come, give, forgive, bring. Simple direct, demanding basic needs, for people who know they are dependent upon God for survival and feeling vulnerable. Jesus was teaching a simple, trusting prayer.

The disciple had asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. But Jesus goes further to teach them the nature of who God is when we pray. That God is like a good loving parent that can be trusted to give us what we need. Not a snake but fish when we are hungry. Not a scorpion, but an egg Jesus jokes. And just as it was unthinkable (even in Jesus’ time) that a good friend would not get up in the middle of the night to help with a crisis (even if it did mean waking the family), so much more so it was unimaginable that God would not get up to help in our midnight emergencies. God is more faithful than the most faithful of our friends. That is the nature of God.

Through all Jesus's stories about how God is when we pray, what stayed with me most was the word, "persistence." The unreliable friend may not get up because he is a friend, but because of the person's persistence he or she will get up. The word in Greek has a bit of persistence in it, but it is normally translated as "shamelessness." Shamelessness. This isn't about just disciplined persistence, showing up and knocking time after time for attention. This is about being so much in need that you don't care that you wake up your neighbor's family, or the whole neighborhood with your knocking and calling out for help. It is to be so aware of your need, that you are willing to put appearances and pretense aside and show humility. It is the honest prayer of the heart crying out to God for help. Asking for help, seeking shelter, knocking for a place to stay. This attitude of coming as we are to prayer, without pretense of having it together. That is one of the truest forms of prayer, Jesus seems to say. That shamelessness, that throwing away the illusion of having it all together and simply saying to God, give, forgive, bring, help.

How do we learned to pray? Sometimes it is examples or the people around us. But sometimes it is through the life experience of getting knocked down so rock bottom that all we can do is cry help, no matter who hears. Help for ourselves, our nation, our world. The eloquence of a broken heart shattered, surrendered. There's no right or wrong words to use. Just being honest before God.

But with all this talk of prayer, there is one caveat I want to mention. Matthew Skinner, a New Testament professor, writes that God is not some big cosmic vending machine for our prayers giving us exactly what we request. A vending machine where we put in the change and we get the candy bar or chips exactly as we want it. It doesn't quite work that way. Yes, we say exactly what is on our heart at the moment, but God's response, God's answer, Jesus says, is that God sends the Holy Spirit to those who ask, seek and knock. God sends the Spirit, God's presence to be with us, to work within us and through us, to change us, to support and sustain us. God sends the Spirit, and not necessarily the thing we have specifically asked to have happen. It is not about a vending machine. Jesus' prayer also does not address the crisis of faith, or the times when all we hear is silence. Except to point to the hope and trust that ultimately God is good, the good parent, the faithful friend.

So how do we learn to pray?

There are many ways we learn to pray. We can pray with our hands (Spirit of the living God....) We can pray with our words silently or out-loud. We can write in a prayer journal. We can simply sit and not say or think a word. To use John Calvin's expression, prayer is the expansion of the heart in the presence of God. We can simply cry, or say help, thanks, sorry, or wow. We can read a prayer written by someone else, or use a book of prayers, or let others pray for and carry us when we cannot bring ourselves to pray or believe. We can sing our prayers, dance our prayers, paint our prayers, knit and sew our prayers, hike our prayers, hammer our prayers, march our prayers at a public witness, whistle our prayers. There are so many ways to pray, all of which are correct, in that they bring us into relationship with God. And the attitude for prayer is to be just plain honest, shameless: this is where I am God. Knowing that God the loving parent will care, and God the faithful friend will answer with abiding presence, even in the midnight hour of crisis.

John Calvin suggests we pray throughout the day, at fixed times, so we don't forget. Times such as when we wake up or go to bed. Before going to school or work, or at meals. Our Hymn, "Lord of All Hopefulness" #683 speaks to that habit. Let us sing together.