

March 4, 2012  
Psalm 69: 13-16  
Matthew 6: 5-15  
Upheld By Prayer

The apostles asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and he taught them to say what we call the Lord's Prayer. They must have seen him praying. They knew he regularly went up the mountain or to some other place to be alone and pray.

They wanted to know how he prayed because it resulted in such an amazing relationship with God, such tremendous love for people, such renewed strength to do what he was born to do.

The prayers they had been taught in synagogue did not have that transformational effect. In fact, people like the scribes and the Pharisees prayed often and they didn't have what Jesus had.

The apostles wanted to know a better way, a different way, Jesus' way. They wanted their prayers to have the same effect in the world---to result in healing and bread multiplying and water turned into wine.

But more than that, I believe that they wanted to be renewed and strengthened by prayer, to know what it was like to hear the voice of God and come away as certain of their own calling as Jesus was.

They wanted to be upheld by prayer the way that Jesus was.

And so they asked “Lord, teach us to pray!”

And he taught them. And we say that prayer every Sunday as the body of Christ.

But it's not the only way to pray. We certainly don't restrict ourselves to just those words in that particular order. Jesus said, “Pray like this” not “Pray exactly these words and these words only.”

After all, we have the examples of the psalms to show us many ways to pray---prayers of praise, of thanksgiving, of desperation and pleading, even of anger at God. There are as many ways to pray as we have needs and emotions and experiences.

There are many prayer practices---many approaches to how to go about praying. They have one thing in common. They are all ways to communicate with God. Sometimes we are doing most of the talking.

Sometimes we are mostly listening. Sometimes we are sitting still. Other times we are in motion, praying as we walk or even run, maybe to the bedside of someone who is dying, maybe to the scene of a tragedy.

This week I thought of people praying in that Ohio school. The teacher who chased the shooter out of the school said he prayed with the victims. I don't know if he prayed as he ran, but he was surely an answer to the desperate prayers of the students.

I thought of the parents praying when they heard the news. I thought of the faculty and staff and what they might have been saying to God during and after the shooting.

In times like these, we don't use formulaic, proscribed prayers. Whatever is on our hearts is what we pray.

And that's the way it should be. The Lord's Prayer is a good reminder of our need for God---for protection from temptation and evil. For our physical needs such as daily bread. To be humble enough to praise God in heaven who has the power and the glory forever and ever.

Good things to remember always.

Many of us learned to pray as little children----God bless Mommy and Daddy and blessing our food and that kind of thing. As we grow older, our needs change, our lives become more complicated, and our prayers often reflect our maturing relationship with God. But sometimes our prayer life gets stalled out.

For some of us, prayer comes quite easily, but others of us feel that we have to prayer using a special vocabulary, using words that we don't normally use in conversation.

And this makes our prayers feel awkward.

Some of us hurry through our prayers, listing names and needs and just wanting to get to the end so we can go do something else.

And this is not what prayer should be. Certainly I understand that everyone is busy, that we all have a hundred things to do. We can't spend all day sitting and praying----not when Mom is saying "Time to go to school!" or Dad is saying it's time for dinner! Not when we have to go to

work and the grocery store and the Home Depot and do the laundry and cook dinner and all this other stuff.

The apostle Paul told us to pray continuously---at all times. If only we could figure out how to do that, we might be able to take our time in prayer, to spend a lot of time with God.

So how can we do this?

Lent is a time for repentance. Repentance literally means “change”--- a change of heart, a change in the way you live, and change in the way you see things. It’s a shift in your view of the world, from your way to God’s way. It’s a change in lifestyle.

Too often we try to fit God into the way we live. We want to keep all the things we’ve always done and just kind of stick God in there somewhere.

The world makes us do a lot of things. We have to work to make a living. We have to go to school to get a good job. We have to do a lot of things just to survive. And I'm not saying that's a bad thing.

I know we can't just stop doing those things and go up a mountain to pray all the time. But we can find time to dedicate to prayer. What I am suggesting here is **not** to sit and pray all day like a monk who has nothing else to do.

What I'm suggesting is that we pray all day in whatever we have to do.

After all, monks still had to eat and do laundry and recopy the Bible or nurse the sick or whatever the task of the monastery was. They didn't sit motionless in prayer all the time.

They prayed as they worked. When they were washing dishes? Time to listen to God in the swishing of the water. Time to talk to God as the towel moved across the plates.

I'm sure they sang as they worked, putting their prayers to music. As they grew their food, working the soil and planting and weeding and harvesting, they prayed---gratitude for enough to eat, for help to bend over and stand back up many times, for rain to come so they didn't have to haul water, and on and on.

Working didn't mean they stopped praying. Last summer when the team and I were in Mississippi, I saw every cut of the saw, every swing of a hammer, every stroke of a paintbrush as a prayer. Not a prayer with words, but praying with our bodies---with all of our strength.

And we can do the same. I don't want to fit prayer in between other things. I want everything I do to be for the glory of God, with an awareness of God and how God is working in my life.

I want to be upheld by prayer as Jesus was, and as the apostles wanted to be. For Jesus, prayer was as constant and as natural as breathing. He walked and talked and taught in a continuous state of communication with God. I don't know if it's humanly possible for us. It is a goal, a journey.

And you know what they say if you want to get to Carnegie Hall? You have to -----practice, practice, practice.

There are many prayer practices that can move us toward our goal of praying like Jesus. We can pray the prayers our Christian tradition gives us, beginning with the Lord's Prayer and including our traditional prayers of confession and blessing.

We can pray well-known prayers like the Serenity Prayer----

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

We can pray a breath prayer, simply "Christ have mercy!" as we inhale and exhale. We can meditate, listening more than we talk. We can walk and pray, either in a labyrinth or just mindful walking. We can write out our prayers. We pray alone and pray together. We pray for others and we pray for ourselves. We pray for our world and we pray for the future.

All of these ways of prayer are ways of spending time with God, acknowledging our need of God and deepening our relationship.



Because prayers bring us closer to God, they uphold us! They give us a way to experience the power of God and to know that we are loved by God, and this upholds us!

For those of us who are members of this church, one of our membership vows was to uphold this church by our prayers! I ask you, if you don't already, please take this vow seriously and pray for Linda Vista UMC in your daily prayers.

Pray that we may be the Body of Christ that we are called to be, that we may see God's plan for us more clearly, that we may become the congregation that God created us to be. Pray for the leadership of this church, that we may all be the people God created us to be, fully and always focused on God's mission and purpose. Pray for me, please, that I may remember what God called me to do, and do it without fear or hesitation.

Uphold this church by your prayers. You made a vow to do that when you joined. Please keep that vow. Because if all of us do that, there is no telling what will we do, all for God's glory and the transformation of ourselves and the transformation of the world! Let us pray----- Amen!