

I said it before, but I really appreciate Jellyroll for being real. How many of us only talk to God or pray when we need a favor?! For those who weren't here last week, we're in a new Sermon Series for the season of Lent based on a book, entitled, "Meeting Jesus on the Road," by Cynthia Campbell and Christine Coy Fohr. Since this is Lent, I'd like to edit the title to, "Meeting Jesus on the Road to the Cross," just to reiterate where we're headed if we choose to follow Jesus. Last week Pastor Trevor talked about the need to repent on the road and today our focus is on the importance of being grounded in prayer while on the road with Jesus. As with repentance, prayer is not a one-time thing but continues throughout our faith journey. Today we continue in the Gospel of Matthew but before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ. I'm extended the verses from what is indicated in the bulletin. Matthew 6:5-13.**

Years ago, the advice columnist, Ann Landers, asked for letters about children misinterpreting the Lord's Prayer. I recently rediscovered this article and boy, did she get some unusual interpretations. Things like... "Our Father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name." The person writing in said for years she thought that Howard was God's real name. Or... "Our Father, who art in heaven, how didja know my name?" One parent eavesdropping on her children praying at bedtime heard, "Give us this steak and daily bread, and forgive us our mattresses." "Give us this day our jelly bread and forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." "Lead us not into Penn Station." Or as one brother thought he was praying for his little sister to get into

trouble- "Lead a snot into temptation." "And deliver us some email or from eagle. Amen." Out of the mouths of babes! We laugh because it is cute, and yet if prayer isn't performance, I wonder if we can often give a confusing message to our children?! Don't get me wrong, I think it's important to learn the Lord's Prayer. I just wonder if having children perform it in front of the church or on video doesn't set them up to think that prayer is a show?! I come from a large family on my mom's side, and there used to be five or so preachers present at family gatherings. Now there are only two of us, me and my brother, remaining. This past Thanksgiving, my cousin said, "Would you be offended if we asked your brother to pray? He wasn't here last year." Sometimes I want to say, "Why don't we ask others to pray?" I get it. You all think because we've been to seminary that we majored in prayer. That is not always the case. Though all the reading and paper writing strengthened my prayer life, I would not say that I aced prayer- whatever that means. The words we, professional pray-ers, use may sound lofty but many times we don't always have the prayer lives of those of you sitting in the pews. Prayer is not a competition nor is it a way to assume who is closer to God. Sorry to disappoint those of you who, jokingly or not, tell we preacher folk that we're closer to "the Big Guy Upstairs" and therefore, we can put in "a good word" better than you can. Absolutely false! We can surely join you in praying, but we have no secret sauce or any different hotline to God than anybody else. Pastor and writer, Frederick Buechner defines prayer as "an honest, often desperate, communication with God- shooting shafts into the dark and unclench[ing] the fists of your spirit" (*Godric*). Prayer, like most disciplines, takes practice, and I would add

vulnerability. Did you know that it was the Jewish custom in Jesus' day to pray 3 times a day: early AM, middle of the day, and once at sunset? Prayer is a sacred practice meant to connect with God rather than elevate the individual in the eyes of others. Prayer is essential for spiritual life; it is a "soul cleansing" confession that often takes the form of surrender and can be found in the everyday, rather than just formal words. We don't need fancy or formal words. We don't even need words in order to listen for God. We often forget that conversation is two-way: one listens and one speaks and then hopefully you switch. That's what prayer is: conversation with God. And for that we only need our authentic selves! If you notice Jesus' prayer practice in all four Gospels, he always makes space for prayer. He goes away by himself and sometimes he invites a few disciples. "Often without words, Jesus demonstrates this rhythm: prayer and action, prayer and action, prayer and action. As much as in his ministry he moves, just as often Jesus makes space for prayer. That prayer gives breath for the movement, and the movement gives inspiration for prayer. But the type of prayer Jesus invites us to practice isn't a task. It is nourishment and encouragement. It is bread broken and cup outpoured; silent stillness and active engagement. It is the fuel that gives life to our work and involvement" (Campbell and Coy Fohr).

Right before today's text Jesus, in the middle of his Sermon on the Mount, speaks of the importance of practicing righteousness (eg. 5:20). What does that mean? "The righteous life is one that is "right" from the perspective of embracing God's grace and living according to God's

design for people to be together in mutually supportive, covenantal community. Indeed, the righteous life is one that manifests the qualities” (Ronald J. Allen, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) (WP)) of the kingdom of God- where God reigns. And the practice of righteousness is essential to being a faithful Jew, which Jesus was. Spiritual disciplines such as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are fundamental to the Jewish faith. Almsgiving is in the first verses of Chapter 6 and fasting comes right after today’s verses. If you read these verses together, you’ll see that Jesus teaches his disciples to give, to pray, and to fast, all “in secret.” Why? Simply put, it’s so we won’t be tempted or seduced by pride or religious showmanship. Jesus commands secrecy so that “our actions are not aimed at receiving praise from others” (Shore). If we pray by ourselves, we practice righteousness away from other’s gaze. The temptation to appear to be what we wish we were instead of who we really are is real. As human beings we are tempted to do good works in order to be seen and honored by others. We naturally lean toward hypocrisy. And “hypocrisy is born of an inability to trust the mercy of God” (Shore). Let that sink in for a moment. “If we identify with such actors, it may be because we know that we, too, look elsewhere- that is, away from the mercy of God- to be assured that we matter and are good, or at least good enough. The secrecy Jesus commends gives prayer the freedom to be real rather than fake. To be clear, “Matthew does not object to these actions but wants the reader to believe that many Jewish leaders misuse them” (Allen), hence the call to focus on an “Audience of One” when doing these things. “Jesus calls for this different way: one that is unseen by human eyes but

fully visible to God” (Danny Zacharias, WP). Because the focus of prayer and other practices of righteousness should always be on God.

Jesus interrupts himself between the words about praying in secret and the words about fasting in secret. Between these two topics, Jesus teaches his hearers the Lord’s Prayer” (Shore). Jesus shows his disciples how to pray. The Lord’s Prayer models not only a Jewish prayer but also expresses Jesus’ teachings, beginning with the presence of a loving father. Jesus prayed for: the kingdom to come, the will of God to be done, daily bread, forgiveness, and a final affirmation that God is all in all.

Theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, in their book, *Lord, Teach Us*, suggest that when we pray the words, ‘your kingdom come,’ we are acknowledging that faith in Jesus is not simply an idea or an emotion. It is a concrete reality in which we are to become part or else appear to be out of step with the way things are now that God has come into the world in Jesus.” They say, “When you join a club, they give you a handshake and a membership card. When you join the church, we throw you into the water, bathe you, half drown you, clean you up, and tell you that you have been given new life. To be Christian is to be adopted by a new nation, the kingdom of God. We’re now to embody God’s values and priorities in our daily lives.” That can be especially hard when the world doesn’t embody God’s values. Perhaps that’s why every other petition in the Lord’s Prayer is also a characteristic of God’s kingdom- to remind and encourage us in our faith. This is why prayer is not merely spoken. Prayer is also enacted. “Authentic prayer is not a meek, contrived, and merely ‘religious’ act; it is the act of human beings who know how hard

it is to be human. Real prayer cannot be faked” (Douglas John Hall). Reciting the words that Jesus taught us will do nothing if we don’t embody them. And embodying the ways of God’s kingdom doesn’t come naturally, so we need the Holy Spirit to do this work in and through us.

Friends, God’s mercy is worth our trust and worth our practice and authentic selves. And incorporating prayer- not so much as a to-do item on the never-ending list but as a steady, practiced rhythm- can be an incredible way to reorient ones journey of faith, not only because it is counter-cultural to our noisy, hectic lives but also because it resets our expectations. This Lenten season, consider what might fuel your ability to do the work Christ calls us to. How, in a task-filled or chaotic-filled life, can we each pray as preparation, rest, and retreat- not just going to God in prayer when we need a favor. So, I’m going to invite each of us to practice praying. I invite you to take an index card or a piece of your bulletin and write a heartfelt prayer to God. Don’t put your name on it. If you’d like to put your prayer in the offering pouch, we’d be honored to pray your prayer with you without knowing who you are because God knows and that’s all that matters. If your prayer has no words, God knows what’s in your heart. And I invite you to be uncomfortable- this is one of the many challenges when we meet Jesus on the road. I will give us a minute or so of silence and then conclude by saying, “Lord, in your mercy” and you will respond, “hear our prayer.” Let’s practice. “Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**” Let us all pray. (*A minute of silence*)... “Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.** Amen.”