

“Praying love”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
May 6, 2018

*John 15:9-17*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

As a pastor, I’ve heard a lot of prayers in my time—some of them quite beautiful. There’s one prayer, however, that I will always remember. It was some years ago, and I was working as a hospital chaplain in New Jersey. There was a patient on one of my units, a middle-aged woman, who was making inappropriate advances upon the male staff: orderlies, nurses, doctors, and chaplains. Nevertheless, she was my patient, so with the door wide open I visited with her several times. When it came time for her to be discharged, I prayed with her, when suddenly she asked if she could pray too. I didn’t get this request very often, and was thrilled.

She grabbed hold of my hand and began, “O God, please hear my prayer! I have just one thing I want to ask from you. Just one thing that would make me so happy. Please, God, let Patrick give me his phone number. I just feel like we have this special bond. In the name of Jesus, give me his phone number! Let it be your will that we go out for coffee!” And all I could think of was Jesus’ promise that God would give us whatever we ask for in his name.

So I prayed silently: “O Jesus, please do not give her my phone number.”

Only one of our prayers was answered that day.

And just so you don’t think I’m entirely callous, I did tell her she could call the chaplain’s office if she needed help.

Truth is we often get prayer wrong, or in fear of getting it wrong, we avoid it altogether.

Maybe prayer hasn’t worked too well for us in the past. We’ve asked for things, important things, life-saving things, and not received them.

When Jesus tells his disciples that anything they ask in his name will be granted them, he is confiding in his friends, who are afraid. There, they sit, all twelve of them, at the Last Supper. Jesus has washed their feet. He has told them that the hour has come for him to depart. He has foretold their betrayal and denial of him. And they are grieved. The earth beneath their feet has dropped away; they are falling. And they feel powerless to stop it.

Jesus wants to give them something to hold onto. He wants to comfort his friends. He knows they will be tempted to pray against this, just as he will. And they will not understand why their prayers were not answered, why this grief could not be averted.

Jesus wants his disciples to hear that there is only one way to pray, just as there is only one way to live, and one way to die: it is through love.

This beautiful passage about love is also, it turns out, about prayer.

When praying, we often try to skip over Jesus' instructions about love and jump right into asking things from God. We think that's prayer: a list of things we want or need. But Jesus, in this passage, says that such asking—such prayer—is only possible after we have chosen to abide in God's love, only after we have loved one another, only after we have laid down our lives.

We are not wrong to bring our desires before God. We are called to bring our whole self to God, including our wants and needs. Jesus does not tell us to refrain from asking. But he does tell us that, in bringing our whole selves to God, we do so not to gain life, but to lose it.

In 2013, a collection of prayers by American author Flannery O'Connor was published posthumously. She wrote these prayers in a journal in the years 1946 and 1947, while a student at the University of Iowa, as she struggled to find her voice as a writer.

In this journal, she writes, "Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see, and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon. The crescent is very beautiful... but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. I do not know you God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside... I want to love... Don't let me ever think, dear God, that I was anything but the instrument for Your story."

It was at this same time, just as Flannery O'Connor was turning herself over to God, that she began her first novel, *Wise Blood*. Though she died at the young age of 39 from lupus, she authored dozens of short stories and two novels and is regarded by many as one of America's greatest authors. Every day of the 12 years she lived with lupus, she wrote, she read, and she went to church. Every day.

Her prayer did not save her from death or illness, just as prayer did not save Jesus from the cross. Prayer was never meant to protect the self, to guard its boundaries.

Prayer was meant for one thing and one thing alone: the outward path of the self to neighbor and God. To remove us from ourselves, until we are no longer alone but one with God and each other. Prayer is not protection; it is reconciliation. It is Emmanuel: God with us. It is... love.

Prayer gave Flannery O'Connor's life meaning and purpose. It gave her God and God's voice, directed outward to the world. Prayer made her a writer, just as it made Jesus a savior.

This is what Jesus means when he instructs his disciples to abide in his love. To abide in love is to lay down your time, your energy, your mind, for another, for God, bridging a connection, in the same way the Father is connected to the Son.

This is no mere metaphor. Neuroscientists have observed that the brain measurably changes during prayer and meditation. The parts of the brain that control compassion, love, and

interconnection burst into unusual and heightened activity, while the parts of the brain that control fear, hatred, and anger diminish. What's more is that, during prayer, the orientation association area of the brain—that part which enables the individual to orient in physical space and draw clear boundaries between self and everything else—shows decreased activity. In some cases, it goes silent altogether. In other words, the self disappears; the brain experiences more of reality than it ever has; it experiences an unbroken continuity with the rest of existence. Neurologist Dr. Andrew Newberg suggests this is a “photograph of God.”

Every time we think about someone, every time we say their name, pray for them, and pray for their welfare, we make a connection, a neural pathway. We literally change our brains.

I've found that, when I pray for someone whom I dislike, or someone who has hurt me, my feelings change toward that person. My heart opens. I am able to love them better.

I've found that when I pray for you, dear ones, I feel closer to you; I feel your pain and your joy.

I have found that when I pray, I become part of everything.

Prayer is the thread with which we knit together the scattered and divided parts of the body of Christ. Prayer is the lighthouse in the storm, the whistle in the night, beckoning us home, bringing us to God and each other. Prayer is love that can cross any distance, be it enemy... or death... or hate... or prison walls... or hospital beds.

Prayer is a rising consciousness that we are not alone.

To focus the mind on God, to pray for another human being, to sit in silence and listen, is to break the bonds of individual existence and to dwell in love with each other and with God.

So hear me, my friends: Jesus will always find you when you pray. **Amen.**