

PRAYER (PART 3 OF 3)
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on October 24, 2021

FIRST LESSON:

Psalm 146

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord!

SECOND LESSON

Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

When I was a kid, my family went to the big Lutheran church in the town where we lived. It was a hundred-and-fifty-year-old building, and I remember it had a beautiful sanctuary—a huge pipe organ up front, stained glass windows all around, a vaulted ceiling with exposed rafters. When you walked in, it really did feel like you had entered a sacred space.

But I also remember how uncomfortable it was. You were basically sitting on a board with a straight back and no cushions. And for anyone, but especially for a child, that was a lot to ask—to sit there and pay attention for an hour when your butt was sore and you felt all restless and squirmy. If the point of going to church was to be in the moment and focus on Jesus, those pews weren't doing anybody a favor. All I could think about was how much longer before it was over and we could go home and I could put on my play clothes and go run around outside.

Anyway, today we're finishing up a three-week sermon series on prayer. Two weeks ago we talked about going beyond asking God for stuff and developing a prayer life that's more of a conversation with God. Last week we talked about how the image of God we have in our heads can have a big impact on our desire to pray, for better or worse. And this week we're going to talk about having a prayer life we actually enjoy, if you can imagine that.

Because the fact is, a lot of people don't enjoy prayer. A lot of people see it as a chore, and if they pray at all they do so out of a sense of obligation or guilt, and not surprisingly they don't get a whole lot out of it. For them, it's like sitting in a beautiful sanctuary with uncomfortable pews. They're supposed to be having a spiritual moment and connecting with God, when in fact they're sitting there thinking, *How long do I have to endure this?*

So why is that? Why is prayer sometimes not very satisfying? Well, I think Howard Rice is right on the money when he says one of the main culprits is a prayer life that's not well-rounded, a prayer life that's not diverse, a prayer life that doesn't have any variety. He points out that when we only have one or two ways of praying, it's easy to get into a rut. It's easy for prayer to become repetitive and boring, and when that happens, and we're just going through the motions, obviously it's not going to be productive. We're not going to get anywhere in terms of spiritual growth.

It's like having a salad that's nothing but lettuce—not even any dressing. Who wants a salad like that? We'd much rather have a salad with some tomatoes and olives and chick peas, maybe a little bleu cheese crumbled on top, some Bacon Bits and a nice

vinaigrette? Same thing with prayer. Who wants a prayer life that's always the same? It's much better to have a prayer life with lots of different flavors and textures.

So the key word that Rice uses is *balance*. We don't want a prayer life that's all one thing. We want to pull up to the old spiritual salad bar and pile on lots of toppings so they all balance each other out. And Rice offers four ways to do that.

First, Rice says we need to balance individual prayer and corporate prayer—praying alone, by ourselves, and praying with others in community. Because on the one hand if all we ever do is sit home and pray, it's easy to become too inwardly focused. On the other hand, if we only ever pray in church when we're reading something out of a bulletin, and our voice is just one of many, that can start to feel impersonal, and we can end up doing it in a robotic kind of way and not putting much of ourselves into it. But if we do both, it keeps us in a happy middle ground, where we can be self-reflective without being self-absorbed, and where we can join our hearts and minds with others without losing ourselves in the crowd.

Second, Rice says we need to balance our own prayers with other people's prayers. Because we all go through times when we try to pray, but we just don't have the words. We can't articulate whatever it is we're feeling, maybe because our feelings are too big, or too fresh, or too fleeting. Or maybe because we're going through some kind of spiritual dry spell, and we just can't get motivated. Whatever the reason, that's when we need to lean on someone else to say for us what we can't say ourselves. We can read a psalm out loud. We can pray the words of a favorite hymn. We can say the Lord's Prayer, or the Serenity Prayer, or whatever other prayer we can find that articulates where we are at that moment in our relationship with God.

At some point, though, we want our prayers to "become our own," as Rice puts it. Because what we're doing when we pray is opening ourselves to God, and at a certain point no one can do that for us. We have to find our own voice. And it doesn't have to be fancy or eloquent. It just has to be honest and real.

Third, Rice says we need to balance the mind and the body. Because when we think of prayer, most of us think of a mental activity—something that happens in the space between our ears. But prayer can also be a physical activity—something we do with our bodies—and that opens up a whole new range of possibilities. When we pray through some kind of movement, like walking a labyrinth, it has a way of shutting down the rational, thinking part of our brain and letting our intuitive, creative side come out. And the nice thing is, just about any activity can be prayerful if we approach it in that way.

I have a pastor friend in Kentucky who has four acres of grass that he mows every week. It takes him half a day. But he says some of his best ideas for sermons come to him when he's sitting on that mower, thinking about whatever the text is that week, and letting his thoughts wander. And I know what he means. I took a blacksmithing class a couple years ago at the Mystic Seaport, and I can tell you, when I was

hammering away on a red-hot chunk of iron, it was very meditative, and I got at least a couple of sermons out of that.

Last, Rice says we need to balance speaking and listening—addressing God and letting God address us. And of the two, listening is usually more of a challenge. Most of us don't have any problem talking to God, especially when there's something we need or want. But listening to God means letting go of our agendas and saying, *Okay God, tell me what you want me to do, and who you want me to be.* And that can be a scary door to open because we never know where it's going to lead. We might end up serving on session or teaching Sunday school. We might end up going on a mission trip and sleeping on the floor of a gym for a week. We might end up marching in a demonstration and getting arrested. You never know. But that's what's exciting about prayer. It can take us to new places. It can bring us to new understandings. It can open us to new faith and fill us with joy like the psalmist: "Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live." But first we have to let God into our lives, and that's not easy.

This week I was getting ready for the book discussion I've been leading, and one of the chapters we're covering today deals a little bit with prayer, and the writer made an interesting statement. God doesn't always answer our prayers in ways we want or expect or even understand, he said, but "the essence of prayer is trust."

What struck me about that is how it echoes my own recent experience. I've shared my story about quitting ministry and becoming a truck driver and realizing that being on the road five or six days a week wasn't going to work for me or my family. And I've told you how scary that was because I didn't know what I was going to do. I had no job and a mortgage to pay. And I've talked about how, in that moment of terror, I prayed like I've never prayed before and asked God for help. I didn't know what that help would look like. I couldn't see any way out of my situation. There was no visible path in front of me. But somehow God made a path, and it led me to places I never expected to be. It led me back to ministry, it led me to this church, and it led me to a deeper relationship with God, one based on trust—trust that God sees my life and knows what I need even when I don't; and trust that God will always guide me toward who I am even when I make decisions that take me away from myself.

So don't be afraid or anxious about letting God into your life. I firmly believe that when you open your heart to God in prayer, God will not lead you anywhere except where you need to be. Because God knows us better than we know ourselves. God is "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart," as we hear in the reading from Hebrews. And not only that, but we also hear that God is able to sympathize with us in Christ, who understands us because he was one of us, and in every respect was "tested as we are."

So let us "therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Let us therefore turn to God in prayer. Amen.