



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Persistent Prayer

Rev. Louise Rogers

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Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

*Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.³
Give us each day our daily bread.*

⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you (Luke 11:1-9).

Does prayer work? This is a question we all seem to ask at some time in our life. Other questions surface too. How can we make prayer worthwhile? Am I talking to myself when I pray? A recent magazine article dealing with prayer caught my attention. **Prayer may help relieve stress, but**

fewer Americans make time for it. Notably, fewer Americans are turning to prayer. Only 29% of Americans polled said they pray to relieve stress, a gradual but consistent decline since the high of 37% recorded in 2008. “Do people consider prayer or attending church not necessarily something that manages stress?” asked Lynn Bufka, a psychologist with the APA’s Stress in America team. “We don’t know.” I found good news and bad news here. Prayer in the headlines is a good thing. But to limit prayer to a relaxation technique, a stress reliever is to miss the true purpose of prayer which is to know God and to develop a relationship with God our lives. Prayer is not mostly about us. Prayer is when we commune with God who loves us. Prayer is where we cultivate a relationship between ourselves and God. Do you yearn for a walk with the Lord that is intimate, rich and fulfilling? Who can we look to learn to pray like that? Today we will look to Jesus.

Jesus prayed. That is not exactly a new headline because we associate Jesus and prayer together. Jesus preached on prayer and composed the Lord’s Prayer which we say whenever we gather together in worship. More than that, Jesus models prayer throughout his ministry as we heard in our scripture for today. We can almost hear the disciples saying “Has anyone seen Jesus? Oh wait, there he is, he is outside, out there in his special place praying again.” The disciples had never seen anyone pray personally and alone like Jesus. Jesus prayed **early, often, persistently and passionately.** Prayer was a top the priority.

Jesus prayed before meals. He prayed for children. He prayed for the weak. He prayed with thanks and with tears. Jesus is the Son of God who set the stars in their courses and yet he devoted time to prayer. Especially when

He had a decision to make, a difficult task to do, He would first spend time with God in prayer, and then go with assurance and direction to do what He had to do. Jesus made personal prayer a priority in the most stressful time and in the busiest of times.

Prayer for us begins with the intention of our heart. We can decide if we will follow this powerful example for ourselves. Not only do we have the example of Jesus but we are blessed to have others who travel with us on the road of faith to give insights and encouragement about prayer. In listening to one another we can see the real impact that prayer can have on our life.

On Friday mornings a group of us have been reading a book on prayer called Help, Thanks, Wow. During the study one participant shared her experiences with private which she said I could relay to you today. When I was younger I used to pray as I was taught. I would pray at meal time and then at church. But when I left church I left prayer there too. In my twenties my life fell apart which included an unexpected divorce and I found myself raising a young daughter alone. I was afraid about the future and angry at all that had happened. My mother came over one day and said honey you need to pray about all of this. Then she gave me a book, **I've got to talk with someone God**. This book is a practical guide on prayer and talking with God in our everyday life. She discovered a freedom to converse with God anywhere, at any time. And she had a lot to say. She started praying to God throughout her days, she found while she was peeling potatoes was a really good time to pray.

She poured out that consuming anger to God and her honest fear about what the future would hold. Praying from her heart slowly changed her life as she became aware of

God's presence. The prayer time brought a relationship with God that was personal. She kept praying, carving out a time each day to share her life with the Lord. Now years later – she still prays today. As I look back at my life. she said, I can see that my life is changed because I turned to god for times of private prayer. In the hard times and in the joys God is with me and setting aside a time for talking with God has changed the way I see the world. My problems don't all go away but I trust that God will be with me and this gives me a peace for my life. She echoes what others have discovered. Prayer changes our heart, Prayer changes our life.

Private prayer is a practice that is available to each one of us. Yet, be forewarned, when we first sit down to pray the voice of doubt may appear to move away, not toward God. The voice sounds like this: Do you really want to invite the Lord into the most private places in your lives – isn't that a bit frightening. Just consider the Light of the World shining in all those dark crevasses in your life. What will be found there? Scripture reassures us, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, Lean not on your own understanding, In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will Make your paths straight.”* Another voice of doubt will say: do you know how to address god, do you know how to pray just right?

Sometimes we are hesitant to pray because we listen and think we have to **“get it right”** when we pray. When you meet the Queen of England you have to curtsy and address her as your majesty. It seems to follow that when you address the Creator of the Universe you should have the right title and the proper phrases. No so with God. Prayer is really simple. Resist the urge to complicate it. Don't take pride in well drafted prayers. Don't apologize for confusing prayers. No games. Just be honest with God. We can certainly pray the words of the Lord's prayer which is a gift

from Jesus. When we want to bring our own prayers to God we can follow that style of prayer or we can simply talk to God.

Perhaps we think the particular happenings of our life really aren't important enough to bring to God. After all doesn't God have some really big problems to deal with, world peace or race relations or the rising temperature of the oceans? It is precisely because we do face tragic and heavy burdens in this world that we do need to kneel before God in prayer. We trust and depend on God to help us work through the prayers large and small before we stand to take action. The Psalmist reminds us The Lord is exalted and God is a friend to the lowly -- that's all of us here. No hierarchy exists for God to hear prayers. Prayer exposures the soul to God; God's Spirit is impressed upon our spirits, then amazing things can begin to happen.

Where could your certain place for prayer be found in this season of Lent and beyond? Some people have a prayer place in their homes, or at the office. A certain chair or at their desk to pray when they first arrive to begin the day. Others tell me they pray commuting to work -- that is fine, just don't close your eyes. The important point is to focus our mind, to settle ourselves and direct out thoughts toward God. The key is to keep at it. Schedule time to be with God. **Pray early, pray often and pray persistently.** Ask, Seek, Knock. As Anne Lamott says, if we are trying to finish up quickly so you can check your cell phone messages, you are missing the chance to spend quiet moments with the giver of life and the eternal. Bring your real self to God prayer honestly and often. We can't determine the outcomes but we can voice our prayers.

In the quiet places our souls will be restored and we will be touched by the Lord who brings:

the unfailing love of God,

companionship in the midst of trouble

and a friend who brings strength and hope for all of our days. Amen.



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