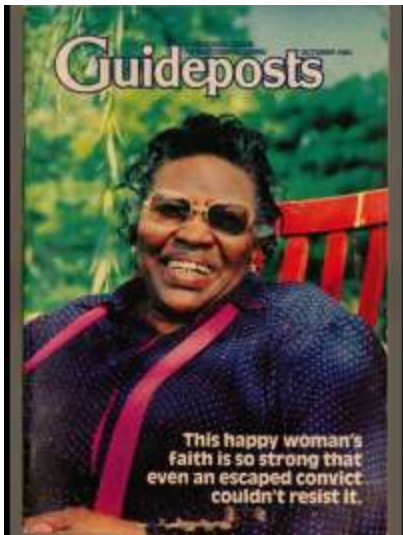




Reviving Prayer

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 6:5-15

June 5, 2016



There appeared a story in Guideposts magazine some 30 years ago about Louise Degrafinried. She lived with her husband, Nathan, in a small town outside Nashville. They were active members at Mount Sinai Baptist Church.

Nathan awoke one night to let the cat out, but the cat refused to leave the porch. Instead, he arched his back and hissed. "What do you see out there, Cat?" Nathan asked. Suddenly, a man stepped from the shadows and pointed a shotgun at Nathan. "Don't make me kill you," he said, and ordered Nathan back into the house. Louise and Nathan had heard the news about four men who had recently escaped from the Fort Pillow State Prison. They were considered armed and dangerous.

Louise wasn't intimidated. "Young man, I'm a Christian lady. Put down that gun and sit down. I don't believe in no violence here."

The convict, Riley Arzeneaux, complied and put down his gun. He hadn't eaten in three days, so Louise fixed him a first-class breakfast and put out her best napkins. When they sat down to eat, Louise took Riley's shaking hand. "Young man, let's give thanks that you came here and are safe." She led him in a simple table grace.

Louise asked about Riley's family and learned of his sad upbringing. Riley said no one cared about him. "Young man," she said, "I love you and God loves you. God loves all of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much."

They heard approaching sirens in the distance. "It's the cops," Riley said. "They're going to kill me." Louise

to pray and what to say. This sermon is intended for any of you who struggle with how to pray.

This famous “Our Father” prayer is striking for its brevity. It’s all of 52 words long and takes about 30 seconds to pray. It offers a marked contrast to the 18 benedictions people recited in the synagogue three times daily. Prayer doesn’t have to be lengthy to be effective.

I also noticed that all the pronouns are plural. There is no “me” in the Lord’s Prayer. It’s “Our Father.”

This is a shocking way for Jesus to begin his prayer. Observant Jews would never write or speak the name of God for fear of violating the 2nd commandment about taking God’s name in vain. That’s why they came up with substitute names for God. Yet Jesus uses a family name for God—pater meaning father. When he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Aramaic name he uses to address God is even more jarring. *Abba* is the equivalent of calling God *daddy* or *papa* (Mark 14:36).

The heart of this prayer is a series of six petitions. The first three focus on concerns that matter to God. The last three address concerns that matter to us.



Thy name
be hallowed

Thy kingdom
come

Thy will
be done

Jesus begins by praying for God’s name to be hallowed, God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done. Prayer is not merely a wish list of things we want

from God. Jesus begins further upstream with things that matter to God, such as God’s name, God’s kingdom and God’s will. When we pray for God’s name to be hallowed, we’re asking for God’s name to be honored by what we say

and do. When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we’re inviting God’s kingdom to come through us. When we pray, “Thy will be done,” we’re seeking God’s will to be done in our lives.

The last three petitions shift the focus of the prayer to concerns that matter to us, namely daily bread, forgiveness and deliverance from evil.

“Give us our daily bread,” is petitioning God for the things we need for the coming day. Give us bread, not fine cuisine. Give us essential things, not frivolous things. Give us what we truly need.

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” addresses a fundamental need in our lives for forgiveness, both our

forgiveness and the forgiveness we extend to others. If we ignore forgiveness, the cross of Jesus Christ will become incomprehensible to us.



If you are new to this church, you might hesitate before reciting this prayer with us, not knowing whether we are a *debt* or *trespass* church. Let’s clear up the confusion right here. In the body of the prayer, Jesus uses the word *debt* (6:12), while in his commentary that follows the prayer he uses *trespass* as a virtual synonym (6:14-15).

Jesus seems to place a condition on God’s forgiveness. “Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive our debtors.” Does Jesus mean if I’m unwilling to forgive someone, God will not forgive me? Conditional forgiveness is not really forgiveness, after all. If you start at the end of this petition and work

forward, it will make sense. When I refuse to forgive other people, I close myself off from the full range of God's forgiveness in my life.



“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,” is a prime example of what is called a parallelism in Scripture. The two balanced halves of this petition are joined with

a conjunction. What is stated negatively in the first half of the sentence is reinforced positively in the second half of the sentence.

“Lead us not into temptation,” seems like a non-sequitur. Why would God lead us into temptation? But the word *tempt* in the Greek is the same word for *trial*. So, the force of this petition is: do not let us not succumb to a time of trial.

Why don't we pray more often? Some of us claim we are too busy to pray. Nonsense! We always make time for things important to us. My suspicion about why we don't pray has to do with our disappointment with prayer. We prayed for something, maybe a situation to break positive or a family member to become well, but nothing seemed to happen. Our prayers seemed to be met with stone-cold silence.

God always answers prayer. It just so happens that sometimes the answer is “no” or “not now.” We don't take kindly to such answers. The only answer we want from God is “yes;” anything less is unacceptable.

I ask God to change my circumstances. Instead, God uses prayer to change me!

Prayer, at its most basic level, is talking with God. Admittedly, it's distinct from the way we communicate with anyone else. Speaking with people



has obvious give and take. With God, it's different. I've never actually heard God's voice. Not that I am complaining. If ever I heard God's voice in the middle of the night, I might freak! God's restraint is not unkind, it is merciful.

When I pray, sometimes I develop a sense or a hunch to say or do something. Thoughts come to me out of the blue about reaching out to someone or expressing regret over something I've done. Coincidences happen far more often when I pray.

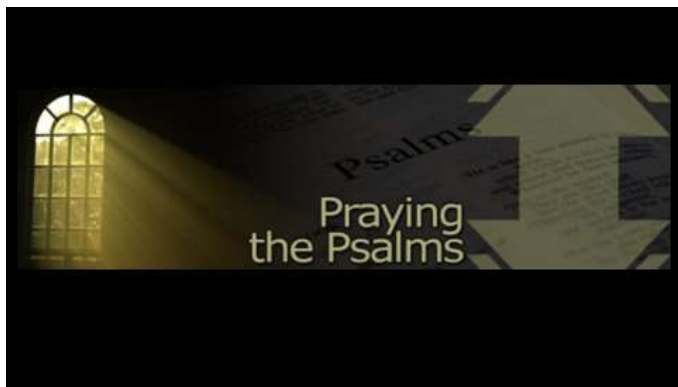
So what difference does this sermon on prayer make in my life? There is real value in incorporating prayer into your daily routine. We want you to establish new habits for prayer. Virtually everything you did this morning was by force of habit—getting dressed, what you had for breakfast, the route you took to church, where you parked and where you are sitting is by force of habit. We're urging you to incorporate the habit of prayer into your daily routine this summer.

I'm helped by something Madeline L'Engle wrote about prayer: "Praying is like playing the piano. You don't do it well every single day but unless you do it every single day, you'll never be able to do it well."

We want you to think creatively about prayer. If you like to exercise, why not incorporate prayer into your exercise regimen. If you enjoy walking, why not engage in a prayer walk where you talk through matters that concern your

everyday life. Don't pray about your life as you think it ought to be; pray about what is. If you are anxious, pray about the things that make you anxious.

There is real value in praying with other people such as we are doing in worship today. We're also encouraging you to gather in smaller clusters for prayer. Some of you are petrified at the thought of praying out loud in front of other people. I'm urging you to take a risk and pray more conversationally with people. Perhaps you can identify someone who could join you as a prayer partner to share prayer requests and uphold you before God in prayer.



To help in your prayer life, I suggest the book of Psalms, which functions much like a prayer book in Scripture. There are 150 time-tested prayers written for our benefit.

For the past year, I've been praying a Psalm each day. Yesterday's Psalm was Psalm 22, which begins, "My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?" Which of us has not felt this way? The Psalms give us a vocabulary for prayer. Why not write down a verse or thought to carry it with you through the day.

Prayer takes grace and effort. It takes grace on God's part. I don't have to say all the words just right. God knows that I pray in fits and starts. But prayer also takes effort on our side, much like any other endeavor in life. Grace and effort can lead us to reviving prayer.