

Prayer: Being Bent Toward God

Luke 11:1-13 October 2, 2011

Well, here we are - a community of faith, the Body of Christ - gathered to be reminded of who we are so that we might scatter again and live lives of faith worthy of who calls us and who sends us.

I'd like to begin by thanking all of you for your continued support this past year, but especially this past weekend. I know many of you have heard us say it already, but Dorothy and I are a bit overwhelmed by the response to our invitation to help raise the awareness about ALS by participating in the Walk and donating to the ALS Association. Those of you who followed online are aware that our original goal was to raise \$5,000 and have maybe 50 people walk with us. We are currently over \$26,000 and we had 220 people walk - 80 of those Maple Grove folks. And the whole association effort went \$20,000 over their goal!

I'd like also today to offer a special word of thanks to Pastor Glenn. When I talked to Glenn back in July about my intention to send email invitations to folks in the church whose email addresses I had, he caught me off guard

by inviting us to set up a table in the lobby, cosign a letter in the newsletter inviting your support, and (the one that caused some interesting conversation at the Walk) that participating on the Walk would count as being in worship that day! Talk about living out the vision of outward-focus he so wonderfully proclaimed in last Sunday's sermon. Glenn! Thanks!

But, we didn't come to talk about ALS this morning, we came to consider prayer. So, pray with me.

PRAYER: Lord of all of creation, redeemer of our souls, comforter, take now the words of my mouth the meditation of all the hearts and minds here gathered and do Your work within us. Amen.

A few weeks ago I received a Facebook message from Dave Beckett, a ministerial friend serving as a District Superintendent in the Alaska Conference. In the email he asked me what I consider to be an awesome question. He asked: "How do you want me to pray for you?" It's a question I wished I had asked more often in my own pastoral ministry.

Frankly, it caused me to ponder what my own praying has been like this past year. Quite honestly, it's not been to be miraculously physically healed. Don't get me wrong, I'd love for it to go away. It's just that, that's not the way I understand God to work - or prayer to work for that matter. Those of you who know me have heard me share before that I'm not particularly fond of the idea that it's because of God's grace that one family's house isn't destroyed when all the others in the area are. God doesn't decide athletic events. Prayers aren't going to help the Browns win ballgames. God doesn't cause players to miss tackles or score touchdowns. God doesn't cause innocent people to die in airplane crashes because one person on the plane had an affair! American soldiers dying in war is not God's judgment on our nation for changing attitudes about gays! All illnesses are not God's way of telling us we need to change our lifestyle - some perhaps, but not most! I personally don't think it's sound theology to promote an understanding of God as genie-like, a power who arbitrarily chooses some to get better and some not based on how many people are praying for the person or situation or even based on the amount of faith the one in need has or doesn't have.

So, how have I been praying this past year - what have I been praying about? Well, I've been praying for those doing research - that they will find treatments/cures that will bring this disease to it's knees - for some understanding of the causes, if there are any. I've been praying for scientists and researchers and doctors and nurses and the miracles they are looking to discover in this arena just like they have in so many others over the centuries. I think miracles happen every day in hospitals in our community, in our nation, and around the world because of the curiosity and intelligence of those who research the wonders of God's creation. God is the creator - scientists are those who help us understand how God did it and what all God did and what God continues to do as this world and we humans continue to evolve. And so, I pray for their continued work.

I also have prayed that God would be with me - that I would know God's comfort, God's peace - that those around me trying to help would not have to be put through too much and would also know God's comfort, peace, strength.

Jesus' disciples had observed on several occasions that Jesus prayed and after he prayed some fairly interesting things happened. It caused them to

wonder how he prayed. Leading up to this interchange Luke recorded that time when he was baptized; and, that time when he went out to the mountains and prayed all night and the next morning selected twelve to be his disciples; and, there was that time when Jesus privately prayed while the disciples were nearby and Jesus asked them what others were saying about him, what they thought about those thoughts and their own; and Peter boldly stated that he believed him to be "The Christ of God!" – and, finally there is the wondrous story of the transfiguration which James, Peter, and John observed, again on a mountain.

We can be pretty sure these were not the only times Jesus prayed. But they were certainly times when something fairly significant happened after his spending time in prayer or during it thus earning for it a place in Luke's report on Jesus' life from his perspective.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem and Jesus paused to pray, and when he was finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, you know, like your cousin John taught his disciples."

You've probably heard sermons before on this text and remember that the custom was for religious leaders to teach their followers a simple prayer that they could regularly use to remind them who they were and what they were about. I promised Glenn I would not speak for an hour and so I'm going to assume you've also heard a fair number of sermons on this text - the prayer itself and the little story following - maybe even a series with a phrase each week being reflected upon.

What I want to do this morning instead is move to a sort of summation of what I think is a take-away from this portion of Luke's accounting of things in his encounter between Jesus and his followers. When his disciples asked him about prayer, he modeled for them a prayer. But, the Lord's Prayer is not just a model for praying. It's also, if you will, a summary of what it means to live a Christian life. The prayer sums up, in a very condensed version to be sure, the way Jesus read and responded to the signs from God in his life - the way in which he understood his own vocation and mission and the way he invited his followers to share in it. "The Lord's Prayer" is a vignette in which we can see Jesus and what he was about.

The Lord's Prayer reveals what it takes for us to be formed into faithful followers. We are to take up the way of life described in the prayer: God's kingdom is to come among us - God's will is to be done in us and through us - we are to forgive others and seek God's forgiveness - that's what we pray will happen when we pray The Lord's Prayer.

One of our United Methodist bishop's, William Willimon, once noted that by praying The Lord's Prayer we're being made into a people whose life is a sign to the world that God has not abandoned the world but is still present in the world as a people on the move. Our lives are being bent toward God when we pray. It's a lifelong act, this being bent toward the one that reaches out to us.¹

We are the Body of Christ and one of the things we do together is we pray this prayer when we get together. One of the things our repeating this prayer together reminds us of is that the Christian journey through life is tough to do alone.

Willimon went on to say: "We, who are accustomed to thinking of prayer as a good strategy for getting what we want, an appropriate opening for

football games and important civic meetings, may be surprised that we must be taught to pray. This prayer is not for getting what we want but rather for bending our wants toward what God wants. This is the Lord's Prayer, the prayer 'in Jesus' name,' which means that this prayer, unlike some other modes of prayer, is distinctively related to the one who teaches us to pray. This prayer is the enactment of the story of a God who called a people into existence through Jesus. In praying this prayer we become the people God has called us to be in Jesus."²

Praying bends us toward God. That's what I've been praying for this past year – to be bent toward God. In our membership vows, which we spend some time each October examining, is the promise to support the ministries of the church with our prayers. We're going to spend a little time now formulating some prayer concerns. We're not going to collect them. They aren't intended for the staff to read. They are meant only to be between you and God. There should be a postcard in your bulletin. We invite you to use it to share with God what your prayer is this morning – some thoughts about what you would like to converse with God today. It can be about something going on in your own life, someone you know about, something in the life of the church, concerns in our world. Then, we invite you to put

the prayer card in your pocket or purse and take it home with you with the intention of spending some more time with it later today or tomorrow or this week. Let us be in an attitude of prayer as we put on paper what's on our hearts and minds this morning.

1. William Willimon, The Pulpit Resource, July, August September, 1998, p. 16 – 17.
2. Ibid.