

This month, we are exploring what it really means when we take the membership vows of the church. Last week, we talked about how we promise to honor God and others with our presence. Today, we'll look at prayer. When we promise to support the church with our prayers, what does that really mean?

Obviously, it means that we'll pray for the church, its leaders, and each other. Just like we vowed to be present with one another, we are vowing to pray for one another. This may seem like a no-brainer, but believe it or not, prayer can be difficult for some. They don't think praying will change anything. They think that problems and life situations are going to happen whether we pray about them or not.

And, in this volatile time that we live, telling people that we are sending "thoughts and prayers" has lost its meaning. It's viewed as being passive instead of taking active steps to help them in need. Sometimes, we say this phrase because we don't know what else to say, but then we never actually pray for them or give them another thought. Telling people that we will pray for them was never meant to be a default reaction. We need to reclaim prayer as the most important action that we can do for each other.

Our scripture today shows how two people approach prayer differently. The Pharisee sees prayer as another religious practice to do along with fasting and tithing. He's very proud of himself for doing all the "right" things, yet he doesn't recognize his own sin. In fact, he thanks God that he's not like "those people." He won't even tell the tax collector that his "thoughts and prayers" are with him because he thinks he's too good for him.

The tax collector practices prayer a different way. He is on his face, self-aware of all his sins, and his need for Christ. He begs for mercy. What he prays is very

simple, what is called the Jesus prayer, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner" (v.13). Jesus shows that it's not what we say when we pray, but how sincere we are.

When Jesus tells this parable, he gives us some very important reminders about why we pray and what happens when we pray. In verse 14, Jesus tells us "that the tax man, not the other, [was justified] or made right with God." Just like these two men, we pray in order to make things right with God.

We also see in this parable that prayer is simply talking to God in order to build and nurture our relationship with God. For those who are married or have been married, would you have a good marriage if you didn't talk to your spouse or if you only talked to him or her when you wanted your spouse to do something for you? That's not a very healthy relationship. This goes for any relationship – parent and child, siblings, neighbors, and friends. If we want a healthy, thriving relationship, we have to talk to the person and share what is going on in our lives. It's the same way with God.

When we open ourselves and share our most intimate thoughts, when we share our lives with others – and especially with God – we are humbling ourselves. We are not the Pharisee who is looking down his nose at others. We are on our faces, knowing that we can't live this life on our own. We need God and we need each other. Jesus tells us in v. 14: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Sooner or later, as all of us know, life has a way of humbling us, reminding us how small we are. Prayer is about humbling ourselves and acknowledging God's place in our lives. And, Jesus tells us in this verse that we will be lifted up when we recognize God is greater than us.

Prayer is how we stay connected to God and to each other. A researcher and

writer, Brene' Brown says, "We are wired for connection." God created us to be in community and to stay connected to God and to each other. When we pray, we are connecting ourselves to God and to each other. When we share our celebrations and our concerns with each other, we are connecting ourselves to each other and to God. We are throwing out a lifeline, hoping that someone will grab it and pull us in. The lifeline connects us and pulls us back to God.

When we think about our "thoughts and prayers" being a lifeline that physically rescues us, I cannot think of a more active step than that. There may be a time that someone's tragedy or grief is so devastating that there is nothing we can do to help but pray. A childhood friend just lost his brother unexpectedly, and on the night of his brother's memorial service, his father passed away too. There is nothing I can say to comfort him, but I did tell him that I am praying for him. Because when I pray for him, I am staying connected to him. I'm not leaving him alone to drown in his grief. I am keeping him connected to God, on his behalf, because right now, he is overcome about how to move forward. When I keep him in my thoughts and prayers, I am keeping him connected to God on his behalf. I am standing in the gap between him and God.

Teresa of Avila said, "Prayer is just an intimate conversation between friends." When we pray, we are opening ourselves to each other and to God, nurturing a special connection with one another. Prayer isn't supposed to change things like waving a magic wand. Prayer changes us. When we pray, we acknowledge that God is big and we are small. God is in control; we are not. We humble ourselves and confess our great need for God's grace. We are throwing out that lifeline.

When we think of prayer in this way, it's no wonder that our membership vows specifically ask us to support each other through prayer. Praying for one another is how we have healthy relationships with one another and how we stay connected as the family of God. When we leave out prayer, we are saying that we can do things on our own. There's a reason why we open and close meetings with prayer and include prayer in worship. If we didn't, the work we do together is all about us. When we pray, we are humbling ourselves and staying connected to God by looking for how the Holy Spirit is already at work and how we can join in.

This morning we have the great privilege of joining in the work of the Holy Spirit to reclaim the importance and the power of prayer by reclaiming our prayer room. Not long after I arrived last year, Andrew asked if we could re-establish the prayer ministry. The prayer room had become a storage room, and Andrew began leading the project to reclaim our prayer room. He experienced many God moments along the way. All the new furnishings were donated, including the beautiful mural. He knew the Holy Spirit was working to reclaim this space, and he joined in to make it happen. Thank you, Andrew, for leading us.

Let us gather now in and near the prayer room to consecrate this sacred space for the glory of God.