

January 25, 2009 Part One of Series: Prayer, Presence, Gifts, Service and Witness

The question asked in our Membership Vows is as follows: "As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?"

This week we embark on a journey to address each of these important facets of our Christian journey, not only as Members of the United Methodist Church, but I believe ingredients that should be included in the DNA of every Christian as we seek to live out our faith.

I want to be certain that these alone are not sufficient for salvation; the Lord's gift to us of eternal life. One must believe that Jesus Christ was and is God's most extreme gift of love; that he was born, lived, died as the only perfect sacrifice for our sins, that he was raised from the tomb. When we say "Yes" to Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, we do so believing that we are cleansed from our unrighteousness and the relationship between us and God is restored. No other than Jesus can do that.

So, after we have received Jesus Christ into our lives and he cleanses us, what do we do? Do we simply sit down and bask in it? Do we call it good: "I'm saved so now I can just sit back and find my way to heaven"? After all, the Bible

does say that if you believe with your heart and confess that with your lips, you shall be saved. Right? It does say that but it also says, faith without works is dead. In other words, if you have that saving knowledge and do nothing with it you really don't have faith and it is of no value. What it says is, you've got to do your faith, not just keep it to yourself.

As a Christian, it is important to develop holy habits – a vital, living piety (or practice) that helps to reinforce our journey on a regular basis. If you are going to get better at whatever your vocation or favorite hobby is, you need to practice. Practice gives us muscle memory, it gives us confidence, it gives us insights that we just don't get if we stop doing what we know we need to do. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:14, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

The first topic of these five we are going to talk about is Prayer. So what is Prayer really and what does it mean for the Christian life?

Prayer is the language of God – being in conversation with our sovereign Lord, listening, speaking with more than our lips – letting our spirits commune with God. For some, prayer must be done in a certain form or they feel God doesn't hear. For others, you must know how to speak in tongues for it to be a real and effective prayer. For me, it is coming to God at our most basic level of

communication – our heart language, often combined with words or song or music, with tears, with sighs, with shouts of joy pain.

Prayer is one of the greatest “holy habits” we can have and frankly, most folks I know, including myself, aren’t real good at it; we sort of fumble at it. We are really good at praying for a season and then like it is working too well, we quit practicing this vital lifeline to God. Am I right?

I think one of the problems of prayer is that we seldom get to the place where we aren’t hearing our own voice or thought so that we can hear God’s. It is so hard to tune out the din of our busy, crazy lives. If not careful, I can be praying along and suddenly find myself chasing butterflies in the outfield (sometimes figuratively, sometimes for real). In other words, distractions within our own minds oft times get in the way of real communication with God. At our Thursday evening Prayer Meetings we are trying to get a better handle on what it means to really center on God, to the place where our own stuff is silenced long enough to hear the still small voice of God.

For our Prayer Meeting on the 15th, I shared a paragraph written about Rabbi Baal Shem, the founder of Hasidic Judaism. The article said that Baal Shem “...once stopped on the threshold of a House of Prayer and refused to go in. I cannot enter, he said. It is crowded with teachings and prayers from wall to wall

and from floor to ceiling. How could there be room for me? When he saw that those around him were staring, unable to understand, he added: The words of those whose teaching and praying does not come from hearts lifted to heaven, cannot rise to heaven; instead, their words fill the house from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling.”

What does it mean, how do we get to the place where our souls are communicating with God’s Spirit and not a bunch of earthly words awkwardly thrown together – I mean, to the place where we can experience the real power of prayer? As many of us never really get there except on rare occasion, it is easy to get discouraged when our prayers seem to bounce back at us empty and just fill the room around us.

God has given us this amazing method of communicating directly with him but not unlike our crazy cell phones, blackberries, etc., we need to learn how to use it. I think it might be a good idea to see how Jesus used prayer.

Jesus had a real issue with the Pharisees who walked the streets and filled the temple porticoes with noisy prayers and urged his followers instead to go into the prayer closet not only so you wouldn’t show off as the Pharisees were but so that you wouldn’t be distracted by the scenes around you. Jesus often went off by

himself so that he could commune with our heavenly Father. The night of his arrest, what was Jesus doing when the soldiers came to take him away – praying.

You can pray on your knees, you can pray in your closet, you can pray giving thanks, you can pray in your anger and frustration, you can pray in a crowd, along with the pastor or at your dinner table – how ever and wherever but pray. How else can we come to know the will and way of God intimately unless we are in conversation with the only one who really knows us?

It is important that we pray together, that we pray for one another's needs here in this congregation – this part of the family of God. It is important that we pray seeking wisdom and strength for our journeys together. It is vital that we seek God's direction for the church and it is important that we pray without ceasing for ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with a hurting world. Jesus himself told the disciples to pray for those who were lost.

In Matthew's Gospel (NIV) account beginning with chapter 9 v. 36 we read, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Other translations say: “Pray (to) the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

The world is filled with people who are seeking God through all kinds of spiritual avenues but are just wandering without direction. Who will go and tell them of the One who the Way, the Truth and the Life if we who are Christians are unwilling to even really communicate with God long enough to be empowered by him to fulfill the work?

Mike Slaughter – pastor of the Ginghamburg Church just north of Dayton says, “real change for individuals and congregations comes through commitment to radical prayer – prayer that brings into an intimate awareness of God’s Presence, that enables us to sense the will of God and do it.

Without that, intuitive sense of direction discovered through prayerful communication with God, we will not grow as individuals or as leaders of God’s church.” (“unlearning church” published by Abingdon, 2002, 2008)

We pray for those that we love, we pray for the sick, the dying, the lonely, the fearful, the strong, the weak, the poor and the wealthy. We pray for our own daily bread, a roof over our head. We give thanks for what we have been blessed with even in sorrow and pain. We pray for the people who have served long and

faithfully Christ's church and we pray for those who have never even stepped over the threshold into a church.

The question remains, "Will you be loyal to the Church by your prayers so that all we do within the church and community might express the will and compassion of Christ? If we can commit ourselves to such a task not only will our hearts be changed but one at a time we draw others to Christ and eternal life in him.