

Community Church of Issaquah
Sunday, April 21, 2024

Three Ways to Pray

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Put your thinking caps on and see if you remember that in January of 2023 I preached a message with the very same title as today's. Do you remember my sermon on Three Ways to Pray? Well, life is always teaching us more and more about such things as prayer that cause us to think more deeply and explore more intensely to learn new things that bring us closer to feeling like we've become better students of the important teachings of Jesus. Today's message takes a different approach to this concept of the thing called 'prayer.' I've been in a deeper delving into the Scriptures and more reading of other ministers who offer some bright and informative ideas about so many subjects that we as Christians are seeking to find.

Recently I read an article by a young Methodist minister from Portland who had some very enlightening things to say to readers, listeners, and seekers like me. The theme of his article was the concept that the major reason churches are not on the upswing after the pandemic and the abandonment of younger generations is that we do not pray enough. When I first read that, I smirked and rolled my eyes. Really? We don't pray enough? So how much prayer did he think we needed to engage in to meet our quota? And what exactly is our quota? As I delved deeper into his article, my opinion completely changed, and I began to nod my head in agreement with both his concept

and his urging for churches to think more seriously about how we pray and how we teach and encourage those in our congregations to engage in prayer time individually and in groups. I suppose it's true that you can teach an old dog a new trick.

Let me take us on an adventure into the world of prayer. Our Scripture today concerning how to pray is but one example of how Jesus instructed his followers and those to whom he ministered how to pray. The Epistles of the Bible are also loaded with wonderful passages that build on the concept of prayer. Do you remember reading a verse in Philippians chapter 4 verse 6 that says:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Does that sound familiar? Or how about the 5th chapter of James where we find these words:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let them pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let them sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church and let them pray over that person, and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick.

The Bible is filled with passages that support the need for individuals and groups to pray. It clearly defines what prayer is and how God is the recipient and responder of our prayers. The young Portland minister was wise to remind those who read or heard his message to spend more time and energy with prayer. Included in his article was the interesting concept of "praying with our 'middle' voice." When I read that the first time, I thought it unusual

to divide our prayer voices into different categories. I had thought that I used the same voice to pray regardless of the circumstance. But his message rang clear when I began to understand what he meant. I'll interject here that this concept is not new and is the source of a great deal of reading materials about prayer.

With all the new thinking I found myself engaged in, I came to understand that indeed there are different ways to pray. I've limited my own personal approach to three ways that I spend my time praying, and ways I think are important to share with you, my faith family. Here are my three ways to pray.

The first way would most logically be 'Vocal Prayer.' Each time we engage in our Prayers and Praise time here at church, or each time I offer a pastoral prayer after a sermon, or as we offer prayers on our Zoom calls, this is vocal prayer. We raise our voices aloud so that others can hear what we have to say or pray. This is perhaps also an example of what I would call 'active' prayer. Many people are a bit intimidated when asked to offer a vocal prayer and desire to leave that job to the preacher. When I was the teacher for Adult Sunday School at First Baptist a few years ago, I always got a chuckle when we would have our prayer time and I would begin by saying, "Let us pray. I'll ask one of you to offer a prayer for all of us." The look of panic in some of the faces was priceless. It wasn't a nice thing for a Sunday School teacher to do, I know. But the purpose was to encourage people to learn how to voice a prayer aloud, a 'vocal prayer.' You can rest assured that I won't do that to you here. I promise.

The second way of praying would be what I call a 'mental prayer' or a way of quiet meditation. There are times in our lives when we close our eyes and, in our minds, converse with God about what is happening to us at that moment or what has happened to us in the past that has come to the forefront of our thinking. Each of us has been to that prayer place. When a loved one is in surgery or in a procedure that raises a lot of concern, we likely sit in the waiting room doing a mental prayer. Or when we are confronted with a difficult problem in our families, we likely will quietly close our eyes and ask for patience and wisdom. Whatever the situation we find ourselves in, this type of mental prayer is the path we choose. Perhaps this is what was meant by using the term our "middle voice."

For me, as a minister, this is a frequent visit. Before a service begins or before I begin a sermon, or many other experiences, my mind is always laying the outcome at the feet of the Lord in quiet mental prayer. I don't think I'm the only one who travels that road. Our mental prayers begin with a thought or a feeling that we seek to express in some way whether it's borrowed words or our own. Many times, there isn't even the need to use words at all. I remember reading these words about this type of prayer: "It is the heart's love that holds the ear of God." I truly believe that is true.

The third way I think we communicate with God could be called the 'prayer of life.' This type of prayer is the prayer of our good deeds, a kind of hidden prayer. It is the kindness and loving actions that are held lovingly in the

heart of the recipient of our deeds that speaks for us to God. Undoubtedly there is a strong message of compassion that is sent directly to the Lord on our behalf. The 'prayer of life' is one way of prayer that we haven't given much thought to, but one that is important for those we care for and for our relationship with God.

All of our prayers have one thing in common, and that is the simple but powerful act of asking. All prayers imply asking God for something –a blessing, a need, a forgiveness – whatever it is, this is the content of our prayers. I remember seeing these words as I researched for this message. "Prayer is to the soul what breathing is to the body. Neither can continue or flourish without the other." With that in mind, we must not make prayer more complicated than it needs to be, but we must keep it as important as it ought to be.

Today I've chosen to move our Prayers and Praise portion of the service to the end of this message. I wanted us to spend some time together in the ways of prayer that are the center of this sermon. We will spend some time in both vocal prayer and meditative or quiet prayer. It is my hope that each of us will experience an inner peace and comfort by spending this time doing what we all need to do more often. Let us move into prayer time together.