

Second Reformed Church, Pella Iowa
Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, preaching
1 Thessalonians 5:16-28, Luke 18:1-18
The Baptismal Life: Prayer

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For almost 30 years now, Sophie and I have had a routine. Sophie makes meals. I clean up after. And then sometimes Sophie cleans up my cleaning up. But I am a pretty accomplished dishwasher and a very tactical loader of the dishwasher.

It was probably about 20 years ago I was on retreat in the Poconos of Pennsylvania, a retreat on prayer. It was good, but I can't remember anything said there except this: one night the wife of the main presenter was talking about her own prayer life. She told about being a mother with a hectic life and feeling like a failure, such an un-improving amateur at prayer. But then she shared how often her best prayers were when she was washing dishes, her hands in the warm soapy water. Each dish or glass or fork would be a different prayer. As long as she held and scrubbed that item her prayer was for that person or place.

Lord, I pray for my son. I know there is stress at work and give him patience with his kids.

God I don't know much about Afghanistan, except it is scary and people are dying there and that you love them. Keep the troops safe. Bring them home soon. Give courage to the peacemakers. Keep the children safe.

God, I have much to thank you for today: my coffee time with Susan, the warm weather, the good news on the insurance, Sandy's new friend, the cardinal at the feeder.

As someone who has washed his fair share of dishes, those words and that routine stayed with me. And while not always, when I am mindful and remember, I try to do likewise when I'm washing dishes.

We continue in our series of sermons on the baptismal life—what does it mean for us to live into, to be faithful to the promises that were made to us and for us at our baptisms? How do we grow as a follower of Jesus? If you've been here, you know we have been talking about creating a kind of *Rule for Life*—not rules, but a rule—a pattern, a template, a trellis of values and activities that best guide and form us as followers of Jesus Christ. *Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths, where the good lies. And walk in them and find rest for your souls.*

As we look at those things that shape our life, certainly for Christians prayer should be included. Yet I have become reluctant to preach about prayer because almost every sermon I've ever heard or preached about prayer makes almost everyone, including the preacher, feel inadequate. Not so long ago, I saw amazing statistics that something like 80% of ministers consider themselves failure at prayers. FYI—I was not polled for that survey.

When talking with some of you about your disincentives for prayer, you mentioned “perfectionism”—that unless you do it just right, unless you have 30 minutes of undisturbed silence, unless you can be as eloquent as an angel—you can't pray.

Prayer is hard. Prayer doesn't come naturally. That is why I think we've come to appreciate the adage, "*Pray as you can, not as you can't.*" If you have ways of praying that work for you, keep doing them. We often cite Ann La Mott's famous words on prayers too for their humility and honesty. "I have two basic prayers. "Help me! Help me! Help me!" and "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Jesus' parable about prayer, the widow and the unjust judge is a bit jarring. But remember it is a parable. The point of parable is the final impact. It is not an allegory where thing and character represents something. In a parable the sum is greater than the parts, or as Eugene Peterson calls parables, "They are time bombs cleverly disguised as stories."

So the unjust judge—the one who neither fears God nor respects people—this heartless judge does not represent God. The point of Jesus' story is not that if we pester and bamboozle God enough with our prayers, we'll finally get our way. God is not like a corrupt senator that we have to lobby, plead and bribe. Is this parable telling us that when our prayers reach a certain threshold, perhaps 25,000 hits, then God responds? Of course, not. The point of the story is the widow's persistence and desperation. She has no other recourse. No cards to play. No strings to pull. She realizes how utterly dependent she is. So often, we see prayer as the last resort, for the widow it is her first choice.

Prayer is the most important action we can take. Prayer is not just words, not platitudes, not just hot air, not impractical. Prayer is doing. Prayer is practical. Prayer, first and foremost is how we participate in what God is doing to renew to the world. Prayer is truly results-oriented. If we want to make things happen, pray. If we want to share and be in sync with God's action in the world, we do that by praying. If you want to use your time wisely, don't try to fix it, pray about it. If you are concerned and anxious about something and you wonder what action you need to take, the answer is pray. Jesus' parable is saying, "Don't just go do something. Pray!"

We heard Paul's counsel, "Rejoice always and pray without ceasing. Rejoice always? Pray without ceasing? Is it just me or does Paul's advice also infuriate you? "Really, Paul? Always?? Without ceasing??" I'm back to feeling like a failure. Once I get over my annoyance with Paul, I realize he isn't trying to load us with false emotion or feelings of failure because we don't pray without ceasing.

Instead Paul is telling us be aware and attuned to God as you go through your day. Be in conversation with Christ, lean on the Holy Spirit in all your activities. Prayers don't have to begin with "Dear God" and end with "Amen." It can be an ongoing exchange with the God that travels with us and live in us. Prayer is listening as much as talking. Prayer is silent as much as verbal.

One form of prayer that I've dabbled with, with only moderate success, is known as the "Jesus prayer." Breathe in and say silently, "Lord Jesus Christ." Breathe out and say "Have mercy on me." I can sustain it in fits and starts for a while. But like all things, it is by practicing that we come more comfortable. For some, this prayer becomes like an almost constant prayer, the soundtrack of our soul.

We want and need prayer to be part of our rule for life, part of our daily routines.

Yet because prayer is difficult, I find my best intentions slip away. What works for a while, stops working after a while. In these sermons, we're trying to give "handles," practical ways to live our baptismal life, so let me share a few, things that might strengthen or reawaken prayer, many of these ideas came from you.

Find a book of written prayers. Read a prayer aloud every morning. Maybe read it twice. Let the words of others become your very own words.

Write out your own prayers in a prayer journal. Some of us find it easier to write than speak. Write a paragraph or page each day. Maybe try a private prayer blog on your computer.

We all do well with routines, holy habits:

A prayer place: associate a certain place in your home. When you go there, you settle in and know what you are going to do. Maybe light a candle. As Jesus said, "When you go into your room and close your door."

Or what if you resolve to use our prayer room three days a week? Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 11 AM you quietly slip down the hall and into the prayer room, close the door and pray for a little while. Figure out your own way to use our Prayer Room

Posture: My dad made me this prayer kneeler. My kids love to come into my study and point out that the velvet doesn't look very worn. But I do find the posture of kneeling helps me focus, keeps my mind from wandering for a while. You don't need a kneeler—kneel at your bedside.

Hands held upward in receptivity and reverence. Probably won't work for prayers without ceasing, but for a few moments of focused prayer?

A rule for life. Growing into our vows. Growing as followers of Jesus.

Stand at the crossroad and look.

Ask for the ancient paths

Where the good lies and walk in it

And here you find rest for your souls.