

Thanks

November 15, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Psalm 100

Colossians 3:12-17

So last week I told you a story about some of my early, most humiliating moments learning how to pray in public. About how I would get up in front of the congregation to offer the pastoral prayer and, WHAMO, it was like everything in my brain turned into a dark, mushy goo and I completely lost the ability to form coherent words, much less beautiful prayers.

Today I'd like to back up even further and tell you about my first prayer. Not a first experience *leading* prayer, but the first time I can ever remember praying.

I think I was maybe in about 3rd or 4th grade, so 8 or maybe 9 years old. At that time, my family wasn't involved in church. Both of my parents were relatively agnostic – they didn't entirely reject the idea of God, but they both had so much spiritual baggage that faith was not a topic that ever came up in our house. And we never prayed. Ever.

That year for Christmas I had gotten in my Christmas stocking, a tiny little plastic toy troll doll magnet. It was maybe an inch or so tall, and the hair stood maybe another inch high. And I loved that little troll.

So my dad, who has always been suuuper into model rockets, had a fantastic idea one day that he wanted to launch a rocket from our front yard. And this rocket would have inside it a troll doll that was tied to a tiny little parachute. The idea was that the rocket would launch, then once it was in the air, the nose cone would pop off, the troll doll would pop out, and it would parachute safely back down to the ground.

What could possibly go wrong, right?

So we loaded up the rocket with my little favorite toy, we set up the launch pad in the front yard, 3-2-1-blastoff. The rocket shot up into the sky, the nose cone popped off, the troll popped out, the parachute expanded, all was going exactly according to plan. We watched the troll peacefully parachute down, down, down toward the ground, landing on top of a power line next to the funeral home across the street.

And I. Was. Crushed. For several days, I can remember praying to God, "God, if you are really real, *please* help me get my troll doll back. God, if you give my troll back to me, I promise I will believe in you."

After a couple of days the wind blew the little parachute with the troll off of the powerline. Unfortunately, it landed in the alleyway and got squished by a car. But a man who worked at the funeral home noticed it and picked it up and kept the little broken toy safe, until my dad approached him, asking if he had seen it. My dad glued the troll back together again, and it once again became one of my favorite little toys, now with a chip taken out of it, a lasting scar that stood as a lasting testament to the little troll's greatest adventure – and my first adventure with prayer.

And the words that were on my heart – the heart of this little, mostly agnostic 8-year-old girl who had zero language of the faith and had only ever before prayed one prayer in my entire life – that first, greatest prayer of “Help” – the words on my heart now were none other than “Thank you, God.” Plus, “I wish I'd prayed to get my troll back in one piece. I'll be more specific next time.”

Last week we started a short, 3-week series on prayer, titled “Help, Thanks, Wow” – based on a book by the same title by Anne Lamott. And in her book, Lamott notes that of all of the prayers that we pray in our lifetimes – whether they be pre-scripted, pre-printed prayers; or prayers like the Lord's Prayer that we commit to memory and speak without even having to think about them, or the prayers of the Psalms like we read this morning, or public prayers, or prayers that roll off of our tongues in the heat of the moment or that sit quietly stirring on our hearts – prayers too deep even for words themselves – of all of these prayers that we pray, there are what she calls “three best great prayers.” Three simple words that all of our attempts to call out to God boil down to. “Help,” which we talked about last week, “Thanks,” and “Wow.”

And last week when we talked about our prayers for help, we discovered that these simple, yet heart-felt prayers are so deeply, powerfully important because these are the prayers that remind us that we are not God – and that somebody else is. When we come to the recognition that we are not called to, nor are we created for nor even capable of carrying the whole world on our shoulders, no matter how much we might try to do just that. And our prayers for help are not only our recognition and admission of our own limitations, but more importantly, they are our invitation for God to come and get involved in our lives – in every part of our lives, both the beauty and the messiness of them. It is from there that faith is born, and it is also from there that gratitude is born.

And that is what leads us into our prayer for today. A prayer of gratitude, or more simply, “Thanks.”

We might also call this a prayer of noticing, or of recognition. Where “Help” is our call for God to get involved in our “stuff,” “Thanks” is that prayer that we pray in those moments when we open our eyes and see that God is, in fact, doing *just that*. That God is active and involved in *us*, in both the big and the small ways.

And no prayer of thanks is too small. Sometimes we poke fun at ourselves or other people; maybe even getting frustrated with others for those “Thank you, God, for a good parking space” prayers, when there are so many other, weightier matters in the world that maybe we should focus on instead, but the truth is, these tiny, simple, dare I say “petty” little prayers are in fact, important. Not because the parking space was important, but because in our offering of thanks for the littlest of all things – including the parking space or the troll doll or the favorite song that comes on the radio or the fact that we finally found our house keys – when we offer a word of thanks for these small, seemingly insignificant moments, we are practicing gratitude, just like a young musician starts by practicing scales. We are laying the groundwork for what comes next. We are training ourselves to see and notice the gift of God’s grace – God’s presence – God’s fingerprints upon our lives – we are training ourselves to hear the quiet whisper of God’s voice in the everyday. So that one day, when it *does* matter, and the stakes are much higher, and the presence of God is less evident, we will then be able to see and notice and recognize the face of God accompanying us through even life’s most difficult and painful moments.

And goodness knows, these moments come at us every day. Sometimes, all day, every day. Maybe for most of us, we pray this prayer most often in those moments when we “dodge a bullet” – when it turns out that the flashing lights in our rearview mirror were meant for the person in front of us and not for us. Or we wake up and realize that the nightmare was just a dream. Or the report card in the mail comes and that grade hovering just on the brink of not-quite-good-enough miraculously shows that we passed. And we breathe out that sigh, “Oh, thank God.”

Or the more intense moments – the prayer of thanks that is said, as Lamott writes, *“with a heaving exhalation of breath, the expulsion of bellows – THANK you, whooooooosh. The constables found my passport. The brakes held. The proliferation of white blood cells was about allergies, not leukemia; the pediatrician canceled the appointment with the head of oncology and instead recommended Benadryl. Oh my God: thanks.”*

She continues: *“Gratitude runs the gamut from shaking your head and saying, ‘Thanks, wow, I appreciate it so much,’ for your continued health, or a good day at work, or the first blooms of the daisies in the public park, to saying, ‘Thanks, that’s a relief,’ when it’s not the transmission, or an abscess, or an audit notice from the IRS. ‘Thanks’ can be the recognition that you have been blessed mildly, or with a feeling as intense as despair at the miracle of having been spared. You say Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou: My wife is going to live. We get to stay in this house. They found my son: he’s in jail, but he’s alive; we know where he is and he’s safe for the night.”*

These echoes of thanksgiving and gratitude flow out of us so naturally, we don’t have to think about it. But there are times in life when gratitude – when thankfulness – when a prayer of thanksgiving becomes hard work. A conscious choice. Those moments when we are not spared from the pain of life, but find that instead we must walk through the

storm. These are those times when life throws us “curveballs.” And it is in those moments or seasons of life that the prayer “Thanks” is maybe the furthest thing from our tongue, yet is maybe one of the most important prayers that we could pray.

A cancer diagnosis. Losing a beloved family member or a lifelong friend. A family member comes out and tells us that they have been going to AA meetings – and we didn’t even know they had a drinking problem. We find ourselves suddenly in the middle of a pandemic, and we are lonely and isolated and desperately in need of a hug. We had a job we loved one week and the next thing we know we find ourselves laid off. Our best friend’s kid comes down with a life-threatening illness and we feel helpless. Our spouse wakes up one day after 20 years of marriage and announces that they are moving out. A best friend suddenly stops talking to us.

It is precisely for these moments – the times of grief and sadness and pain – the brutal seasons of life – that our Psalm today was written. Not for the beautiful moments when thanksgiving flows off of our tongues naturally, but the brutal moments – the moments in which thankfulness is a choice that we make.

In the midst of the struggle, the Psalmist is telling us,
Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

So when it is hard, when it is the last thing we feel like doing, *Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

And when we do this, when we enter the courts of God, when we step into the presence of God, when we actively seek God’s hand working in our lives, then we will discover that as brutal as life can be, God is still always here, holding us, strengthening us, forming us, shaping us, molding us, teaching us, weeping with us, giving us a strong foundation and a strength and resilience that is not our own.

And that is where our prayers of thanks take on a whole new power. It is no longer “thank you for this parking space,” although some days that may be the most we can muster. It becomes “thank you, God, for making a way. Thank you for seeing me through. Thank you for the beauty of the sun shining on this dreary day. Thank you for that warm smile from that stranger that shone light into the darkness. Thank you for the unexpected mercies today that are helping me to keep my head above water. Thank you for the knowledge that hope comes with the morning, and that hope won’t always be overcome by darkness and grief.

So friends, last week our prayer activity for the week was to make a “God box.” And over the course of the week, to write down our prayers for help on a slip of paper, and drop that paper into the box, releasing our hold on the things that are worrying us, the things that we just can’t let go of. And inviting God in. Trusting that God has the power

to hold us and all of our concerns and worries and fears, and letting God take back control of what is God's in the first place.

This week, our exercise is going to be one of gratitude. Maybe we're getting into the zone early for Thanksgiving, but this is a practice that I think we should do all the time, not just at Thanksgiving. Every night for at least the next week, when you sit down at the dinner table, *in addition to* praying a prayer before you eat, each person around the table names before God three things that you are grateful for. It doesn't matter what those things are. Maybe they are big, and maybe they are small. Maybe they roll right off your tongue if it's been a good day, or maybe you have to search hard for them. Small moments of gratitude, little glimpses of the fingerprints of God upon the world.

And in that simple act of gratitude, it is my prayer that we will see the darkness lift somewhat, and an awareness of God's abiding presence take hold.