

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Words of Wisdom

Sermon Reflection Notes

The Gospel of Matthew includes Jesus' sermon that is often called the "Sermon on the Mount" where he taught his followers what it means to live as beloved children of God. Included in that sermon, in Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus taught what it means to pray. It does not mean praying to impress other people or praying to reveal how religious we are. Praying simply means having an ongoing conversation with God, sharing the places where we are struggling, sharing our gratitude for the gifts of life, and standing in awe of the amazing grace that touches our lives. And if we listen carefully, we can sometimes hear God's response through the voices of people who stand with us in times of trouble, in the people who love us unconditionally, and in the majesty of creation. It's all prayer – speaking, listening, speaking, listening – daily making time for the conversation.

The wisdom sayings of Proverbs invite us to the same conversation – to seek wisdom and understanding, to make the conversation with God and with each other a priority in our life, and to learn that the promise from God is that the gifts of the conversation will heal us and make us whole. It's a promise we can trust. Thanks be to God!

Scripture

Matthew 6:5-15 and Proverbs 2:1-5 (NRSVUE)

Matthew 6: ⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy. ¹⁰ May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. ¹⁴ "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Proverbs 2: My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, ² making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding, ³ if you indeed cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures— ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

Discussion Questions

1. What is prayer? What is prayer not?
2. What's the point of prayer? Why do it?
3. What do we expect when we pray? Why do we expect that?
What does God promise us with prayer?

4. Anne Lamott gives an example of prayer that may seem very unlike our ideas of prayer. Here is what she says in her book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*

Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to being helped by something, some force, some friends, some *something*. These prayers say, "Dear Some Something. I don't know what I'm doing. I can't see where I'm going. I'm getting more lost, more afraid, more clenched. Help."

One modest tool for letting go in prayer that I've used for twenty-five years is a God box. I've relied on every imaginable container—from a pillbox, to my car's glove box, to decorative boxes friends have given me. The container has to exist in time and space, so you can physically put a note into it, so you can see yourself let go, in time and space.

On a note, I write down the name of the person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed, and I fold the note up, stick it in the box and close it. You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this: "Here. You think you're so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed." Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off the spaceship until I hear back.

The willingness to do such a childish thing comes from the pain of not being able to let go of something. The willingness comes from finding yourself half mad with obsession. We learn through pain that some of the things we thought were castles turn out to be prisons, and we desperately want out, but even though we built them, we can't find the door. Yet maybe if you ask God for help in knowing which direction to face, you'll have a moment of intuition. Maybe you'll see at least one next right step you can take.

The response probably won't be from God, in the sense of hearing a deep grandfatherly voice, or via skywriting, or in the form of an LED-lit airplane aisle at your feet. But the mail will come, or an e-mail, or the phone will ring; unfortunately, it might not be later today, ideally right after lunch, but you will hear back. You will come to know.

When we think we can do it all ourselves—fix, save, buy, or date a nice solution—it's hopeless. We're going to screw things up. We're going to get our tentacles wrapped around things and squirt our squiddy ink all over, so that there is even less visibility, and then we're going to squeeze the very life out of everything.

Or we can summon a child's courage and faith and put a note with a few words into a small box in the hope that we can get our sucking, inky squid tentacles off things.

We do this without a clue about what will happen, how it will all turn out. You may be saying: "It's so awful right now, and I am so pissed off and sad and mental, that against all odds I'm giving up. I'll accept whatever happens."

Maybe after you put a note in the God box, you'll go a little limp, and in that divine limpness you'll be able to breathe again. Then you're halfway home. In many cases, breath is all you need. Breath is holy spirit. Breath is Life. It's oxygen. Breath might get you a little rest. You must be so exhausted.

With a God box, you're finally announcing to the universe that you can't do it, that you have ruined things enough for the time being. Imagine the burlesque look of surprise on the universe's face! The great cosmic double-take; then a fist pump.

This is what gets everyone off the hook, the hook being the single worst place to be. My priest friend Bill Rankin said that through prayer, we take ourselves off the hook and put God on the hook, where God belongs. When you're on the hook, you're thrashing, helpless, furious, like a smaller kid lifted by the seat of his pants by a mean big kid. Jesus, on the literal hook of the cross, says to God, "Help," and God enters into every second of the Passion like a labor nurse.

When you get your hooks out of something, it can roll away, down its own hill, away from you. It can breathe again. It got away from you, and your tight, sweaty grip, and your stagnant dog breath, the torture of watching you do somersaults and listening to you whine "What if?" and "Wait, wait, I have ONE more idea...."

You can go from monkey island, with endless chatter, umbrage, and poop-throwing, to *what is happening right in front of me*. God, what a concept. It means I stop trying to figure it out, because trying to figure it out is exhausting and crazy-making. Doping it out has become the problem.

So when we cry out Help, or whisper it into our chests, we enter the paradox of not going limp and not feeling so hopeless that we can barely walk, and we release ourselves from the absolute craziness of trying to be our own—or other people's—higher powers.

Help.

We can be freed from a damaging insistence on forward thrust, from a commitment to running wildly down a convenient path that might actually be taking us deeper into the dark forest. Praying "Help" means that we ask that Something give us the courage to stop in our tracks, right where we are, and turn our fixation away from the Gordian knot of our problems. We stop the toxic peering and instead turn our eyes to something else: to our feet on the sidewalk, to the middle distance, to the hills, whence our help comes—someplace else, anything else. Maybe this is a shift of only eight degrees, but it can be a miracle.

It may be one of those miracles where your heart sinks, because you think it means you have lost. But in surrender you have won. And if it were me, after a moment, I would say, Thanks.

(Lamott 35-40)

5. What do you think about Anne Lamott's understanding and practices of prayer? Does it fit with the Beatles songs from this week?

Closing Prayer

O God, you are the One who teaches us to pray, even when we are fearful that we do not know how to pray. Teach us, even now, that you know our needs, you love us unconditionally, and you want us simply to be in conversation with you when we need help, when we are amazed by your grace, and when we want to say "Thank You." Forgive our inclination to make prayer so hard and help us to be honest with ourselves, and with you. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray. Amen.

*When you find yourself in times of trouble, pray.
Won't you please, please help me!*

Click on the links to hear these Beatles songs: [Help](#), [Let It Be](#)