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Psalm 19:14-20:1-5 (NRSV)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.
The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
May he send you help from the sanctuary
and give you support from Zion.
May he remember all your offerings
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. Selah
May he grant you your heart's desire
and fulfill all your plans.
May we shout for joy over your victory
and in the name of our God set up our banners.
May the Lord fulfill all your petitions.

Matthew 6:5-13 (The Message)

“And when you come before God, don’t turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for fifteen minutes of fame! Do you think God sits in a box seat?

“Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

“The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They’re full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don’t fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what’s best—
as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You’re in charge!

A friend of mine tells a story of prayer that has stayed with me in the decades since I originally heard it. He was at his church one morning and realized after the service he had set down and misplaced his new glasses. (SLIDE)

Announcing this problem to the folks who remained in the church lobby after worship, several folks began searching trying to help him find his glasses. One

woman stayed put. “I don’t feel like helping this morning,” she said, “but I’ll pray that you find them.” She immediately bowed her head and closed her eyes.

Sometimes we think about prayer as a list of requests to God, like giving someone a shopping list before they head out the door - “does anyone need anything while I’m at the store?” Perhaps this was what the woman was thinking about the glasses.

But my friend was bothered in that moment. Was it not possible to pray while helping with the search? A few minutes later the glasses had fortunately been found. On his way out the door the woman pulled him aside - you never thanked me for my prayers, but I see they helped you find your glasses.

That really didn’t sit well with this friend, despite being glad to find his glasses. And he began to question what prayer meant at that very moment.

Doug Miller suggested using words from The Message translation this week for our Matthew reading. As was read, it shifts Jesus’ words to that of a theater goer - do you think I sit in a box seat waiting for a big performance? Perhaps prayer is less about trying to get God to do something we want God to do, and more about getting ourselves to come into alignment with what God hopes we can become.

It is also true that the way we experience the world (SLIDE) shapes our understanding of prayer. My own prayers were very different before I had experienced significant trauma in my life. Before the loss of loved ones or friends, before our stillborn daughter, it was much easier for me to see prayer requests as blessings for the righteous. It was easy to tell myself that God would answer any of my prayers in due time if I was simply living a righteous life. I didn’t always comprehend the full picture of God’s answers, but as long as nothing traumatic ever happened, I could go on thinking that prayers would eventually be answered for those who trusted God.

Passages like this one that we read today from the Psalms only more deeply enforced that belief. Here the Psalmist promises that God’s answer to our prayers is coming soon; answering in times of trouble, regarding you with favor... even offering you your heart’s desire.

It's only natural then, with that train of thought, to think that when our prayers go unanswered that we must not be living the right way, or that we have lost favor with a God who rewards those who live righteously. But I also am noticing this week that despite our Psalmist's prayers that answers are coming soon, there is this humble preamble (SLIDE) - often borrowed by clergy before they preach - *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.* What a wonderfully humble place to begin any prayer.

I'm convinced that transactional prayer isn't part of a healthy faith journey. We don't just jump through hoops to get rewards.

Time and time again, despite our human inability to fully comprehend what this means, scripture invites us to be present with God. To seek God. To rest in God. To dwell in God. The tricky part is figuring out what it means to actually do that. Is being present with God about finding the right posture or readiness? Could it be about our place in the world, or the circumstances that surround us?

This morning I want us to imagine that the spiritual discipline of prayer and meditation are ways we might become more fully present with God.

Knowing we were moving into this series, I picked up this book, *Spiritual Practices for the Brain*, (SLIDE) written by author and wellness instructor, Anne Kertz Kernion. In its pages, Kertz Kernion points out that it is a misconception that prayer promises to reward us or fulfill any request. What it does, similar to a healthy meditation practice, is that it centers us and provides us with space to breathe in an increasingly hectic world. She points out that scientists are discovering what the ancient saints already knew; that taking time to notice our breathing and breath, provides us with an opportunity to slow down enough to more fully experience the world. When we focus on our breathing, we slow down enough to notice what is happening in the immediate, in the here and now.

She writes,

If we take a few deep breaths when stressful situations occur, we reduce our tension and slow the release of stress hormones such as cortisol. A few mindful breaths also lead to healthier attitudes, increased concentration, healthier immune systems, increased heart rate variability, and more positive emotions. This practice also reduces mind wandering, emotional reactivity, and symptoms associated with anxiety, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and attention deficit disorder. That's a lot of positives from a simple practice like paying attention to our breath.

I don't want to suggest that prayer is simply an exercise that centers us - it is much more than that - but wow, what a gift and a reminder of the need for our physical bodies to be mindfully centered from time to time. Just take a breath and notice.

It's also helpful for persons among us - myself included - who have a hard time slowing down. For years I wished I could build quiet meditation into my weekly practice. For a brief moment during seminary, I helped to lead a meditation group with college students during one of my internships. But at each gathering, during those moments of silence, my mind would quickly wander (SLIDE) to the tasks I still needed to complete in my day, or a new idea for a project, or perhaps something I had forgotten to take care of the day before. Rather than centering me, meditation felt like the creation of a list of things I should have been doing instead.

A few years later, while lamenting my inability to find a meaningful meditation ritual in my life, my spiritual director at that time, looked me in the eye and said, "You know Ben, meditation isn't for everyone. Stop trying to force yourself to do something that isn't life-giving." It was a bit of a blow, but also a very helpful piece of guidance. And what she suggested instead looked a lot more like mindfulness practices - pausing enough to breathe and remember, to reorient amid a busy schedule, rather than setting aside 15 minutes or a half hour to sit in silence. That fall, while kicking off another year as a campus minister at Penn State, I stamped the words Breathe and Peace into this keychain ring, which has stayed in my pocket as a reminder I move about the world.

This week as we gathered to plan the service, Ken Litwiller reminded us that there is a helpful acronym that uses the letters of ACTS to outline that prayers fit nicely into four categories -

A – Adoration: Praising God for who God is; character and greatness, rather than just what God does.

C – Confession: Admitting your wrongs, asking for forgiveness, and clearing any barriers between you and God.

T – Thanksgiving: Expressing gratitude for specific blessings, daily provisions, and gifts in our lives.

S – Supplication: Bringing our personal needs, struggles, and requests for others to God

This allows us to expand from the old shopping list method, to something that is much broader and inclusive of our full lived experience.

Author Anne Lamott's bestselling book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, (SLIDE) suggests perhaps a simpler path, that all of our prayers fit into one of those three categories - prayers for help, prayers of thanks, and prayers of wow where we are in awe of something supernatural. Lamott reminds us that when we remember those three categories, it provides us with space to experience the divine in our life in more meaningful ways. I find that quite helpful.

But the weightiest thing on my mind about prayer right now, perhaps the biggest challenge for us as a community, is what we do with seemingly unanswerable prayers. (SLIDE) When we're faced with situations and circumstances that feel completely beyond our capacity, or the capacity of our community or context, even the ability to breathe and center ourselves amid chaos... When a beloved friend prematurely loses a child or loved one, when a financial situation feels like a burden we will never recover from, when a life circumstance rips us away from our expected pathway and sends us hurtling into the unknown... when we have those prayer requests that we cannot even begin to raise our hand on a Sunday morning to be able to share publicly... Those really are the hardest kinds of prayers. And the longer they go unanswered, the more distant we can feel from God's divine presence.

In speaking with so many of you over the past few months, I've learned that even

in our families and most connected partnerships, these difficult circumstances that we experience from time to time, can send us in wildly different directions when it comes to prayer. The trauma that we experience together can make one partner or family member lean more into prayer, while the other feels like prayer begins to feel nonsensical or insignificant.

There have been times in my life where I feel like I simply cannot pray. In those times I've been grateful for family, friends, and our church community for being willing to pray when I cannot find the words.

While sharing the weightiness of some of the most challenging and helpless prayers with my spiritual director, she nodded knowingly, and said, "Do you want to know my spiritual practice when things feel impossible?" She told me that she had purchased a stack of magician flash paper (SLIDE) - you know the kind that almost instantaneously combusts, leaving behind barely a trace of anything. She shared that she keeps a stack of this flammable paper on her desk, and at the end of the week she writes down all those things that her clients have shared that feel insurmountable or impossible, and she places them all in a bowl. She takes it outside, and strikes a match, and almost instantly, all of those weighty and heavy impossible things go up in a flash, in a bright and brilliant light. A reminder - at least to her - to not be afraid to say, I'm helpless in these needs. I need to let go to be able to lift them up to God.

This practice has stayed with me as a powerful symbol, a reminder to breathe, and perhaps an opportunity to become more fully present with God. There is even a reference to burnt offerings in our Psalm passage from this morning. So I invite us all to share in this practice here this morning.

In your pews are post-it notes and writing utensils. We don't have flash paper, but we've got a way to write down our heaviest burdens. As Doug encouraged, and as we move toward the communion table together, I invite you to write down those prayers - the things that weigh on you the most. Whether they be deeply personal, or broadly societal, whether they feel possibly solvable, or physically impossible, write it down on the paper. You don't need to share these with anyone - that isn't the point this morning - but in naming it on paper, perhaps an opportunity to be more present with God.

As you come forward to the communion table, bring your prayer with you - whether you keep it unfolded, fold it once, or crumble it into a tight little ball - and drop it into this bowl on the table. After our service this morning, all are invited out to the parking lot, where we will toss a match and lift up these heaviest and most intimate of our prayers, to watch them be consumed by fire. Fire shows up a lot throughout scripture, often as a powerful symbol of God's presence and purification. So today we'll practice prayer and meditation, with a dash of cleansing fire.

In this act of releasing our prayers to the fire, we find a physical expression of what it means to trust. We acknowledge that some burdens are too heavy for us to carry alone, and we hand them over to the one who holds all things. This is not a passive giving up, but an active leaning into the grace that Anne Kertz Kernion spoke of—a mindful breath that allows us to slow down, notice our helplessness, and rest in the divine presence.

So come, then, to this table, where another physical symbol of God's love awaits us. In the bread and the cup, we find the ultimate reminder that we are nourished, forgiven, and held in community. As you step forward, drop your written prayers into the bowl as an act of release, and receive the bread and the cup as an act of being filled. Let us enter into this time of communion, present to God and to one another.