

Prayer: Communication with God

A Sermon Preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, October 3rd, 2021

Scripture: Isaiah 56:1-7; Ephesians 6:18

During worship this October and November, we will be invited to consider the ways that prayer is a central part of our lives as people of faith. Over the next several weeks, we will be led to explore a number of questions about prayer: what really *is* prayer, how *do* we pray, and *what* are we doing when we practice it? One simple way of describing what we do when we pray is to say that when we pray, we *communicate with God*. In an age of rapid ‘communication,’ of email and text messages, twitter feeds and Facebook posts, the idea that prayer is communication with God could make prayer sound like a distant or impersonal exchange of information sent from us to God. Interestingly, however, the origin of the word “communication” suggests something more dynamic, personal, and relational. In fact, the origin of the word “communication” is the Latin *communicatio*, which means “sharing” or “imparting” and is also at the root of many other words like community, and communion. Far from cold and impersonal, these words suggest intimacy and relationship, a sharing of gifts and a common life between us and God in which new discoveries are constantly made. Clearly “communication” means much more, then, than just an impersonal exchange of information. In fact, if prayer involves sharing an intimate common life with God, prayer will be highly personal, and it will take on many different shapes and forms as it reflects the richness and complexity of human expression and experience.

While prayer is often an intentional time set apart to speak to God with words or in silence, really prayer can be offered up to God in an endless variety of ways, many of which are not uttered with words (Romans 8:26). Prayer can be expressed through a musical instrument; through pencil on paper (as we saw with Georgia’s drawing) or paint on a canvas; or perhaps prayer can be expressed through the loving attention given in tending a garden. Prayer can be

expressed in those intentional moments when we stop to really look in someone's eyes and recognize them as beloved children of God, a real challenge for many of us in an age where our attention is captive to the technology in our pocket. Prayer can be uttered in a moment of quietness and solitude set apart and prayer can be expressed in a flurry of activity and noise, perhaps in the midst of a busy workday or in those rushed moments when parents try to get the family out of the door in the morning. As our banner for this worship series also depicts, prayer invites and involves the full range of human emotion: joy and sadness; hope and despair; apathy and frustration; love and rage. Prayer is expressed through all these emotions as God invites us to bring our authentic selves in prayer, not an ideal or imagined self.

Beyond being invited to consider *what* prayer is over these next weeks, however, we will also be invited to reflect on and work on our own practices of prayer, the *how* of our prayer lives. *How do we pray?* If we think about it, I assume that many of us here can think of prayer traditions in our lives: sung or spoken prayers before meals, prayers before sleeping, morning prayers to start the day, prayers of blessing on special occasions like birthdays or graduations, prayers at family gatherings, prayers for healing during health crises, or prayers for safety before travelling. And then, of course, there are the prayers of the church gathered together; prayers of thanksgiving and intercession that we speak at worship services; prayers for wisdom and discernment in our ministries and congregational meetings; prayers of blessing that we speak over newly born children thanking God for the promise of their life and our commitment to support them throughout their lives; prayers at weddings as we bless the new partnerships of couples as they publicly declare their commitment to serve each other; and prayers at funerals as we mourn the loss of those we love, commend them to God, and thank God for the gift of their presence in the time that we had with them.

In exploring traditions like these that show us *how* we already pray, over these next weeks we will also be encouraged to reflect on the inspirational source for our prayer lives. Who or what inspires and shapes our prayer lives that makes them distinct? I assume that for many of us we learned to pray from parents, grandparents, or church leaders, but this just begs the question, “where did they learn to pray?” As followers of Jesus, of course, one fundamental source of inspiration for the prayer life of the church through the ages has been scripture itself. From the beginning to the end of Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation—God’s people are portrayed as a praying people. As readers of scripture, we are invited to learn from and model our own prayer lives after the pray-ers of scripture. When we sing, dance, and play instruments to the Lord, we join the Psalmist’s many songs of praise to God the creator and we join Miriam on the banks of the Red Sea (Exodus 15) as she praised God the liberator who freed Israel from slavery. When we bow our heads low in confession, we utter with the Psalmist: “I am sorry for my sin” (Psalm 38:18), and when we practice confession as a congregation, we join Moses on Mount Sinai as he confessed the sins of his people and asked for the Lord’s favour for the future (Exodus 34:8ff). When we pray silently, asking God to remember us and to hear our pleas, we join Hannah as she prayed fervently for a son (1 Samuel 1). And, when we cry out in despair in our times of trial, we join the Psalmist in their cry of “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 13) and “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22)

Sometimes the characters we meet in scripture shape our prayer lives by calling them into question! When the injustices we participate in in our world make our pious prayers of praise or confession ring hollow, we learn from the prophet Jeremiah to be self-critical about our prayers. For a time, Jeremiah refused to pray for the forgiveness of his people, calling instead for the people of God to live authentic lives of prayer shown through “amending our ways and doings,”

and not continuing to “oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood” (Jeremiah 7). When I think of Jeremiah’s refusal to pray for his people, I can’t help but think of what happened this past Thursday as we observed, for the first time as a country, *The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation*. As a people that prays for meaningful reconciliation and justice for our First Nations peoples, Jeremiah’s prophetic critique of hollow prayers calls the church to move beyond apologies and beyond just confessing past sins in order to join concretely in the pursuit of justice for past wrongs. The prophets help us learn that prayer should change us and if it doesn’t, we might want to examine why that is and what we might be holding on to.

As we move into the New Testament, we learn to pray from the teenaged Mary, and elders Simeon, and Anna, who teach us to give praise and thanks for the wondrous salvation of God brought to us in the little babe from Bethlehem (Luke 1:46-55; 2:28-30, 36-38). When we speak the Lord’s prayer together, we join the disciples as they sat down to be taught by Jesus how to pray. When we retreat to a quiet place to pray, we join Jesus as he went off by himself, up a mountain to commune with God (Luke 6:12) so as to get away from all that might cloud his focus. When we pray, we make space to be surprised at what God may say to us, and so we join Peter on the roof as he receives a vision from God that teaches him that God accepts not only the people of Israel, but everyone among the nations who does what is right (Acts 10:9-48). Finally, when we pray, we reach beyond what we can see with our physical eyes and join John in his vision of the prayers of the saints lifted before God and the lamb (Revelation 8:4), a pleasing sacrifice to the author and finisher of our faith. This brief survey of scripture’s “pray-ers” only scratches the surface, but it whets our appetite for the possibilities of this fall series. What wisdom does scripture have for us over these next weeks as we seek to be a praying people and as we seek to make Bloomingdale Mennonite Church a house of prayer?

With this reference to BMC as a house of prayer, we find ourselves coming back to the scripture reading from Isaiah 56 which was read for us earlier. Isaiah's vision of the house of the Lord as a house of prayer for all people is powerful, especially because of how it forces us to grapple, as we already began to do last week, with the way that we often put stumbling blocks and barriers in the way of people that we or our culture have deemed as unwelcome. In the Isaiah passage from today, the two groups of people that are welcomed into the house of the LORD are the "foreigner" and the "eunuch." What might the welcoming of these two figures have to teach us today? In the context of the passage, the foreigner here is quite simply anyone who did not belong to Israel. The eunuch, on the other hand, is in scripture typically a designation for a castrated male who either was or had previously been employed in the service of a royal or imperial court.¹ Biblical scholars often note that the author of Isaiah likely brings up the figures of the stranger and the eunuch in this passage because of significant debates that were going on in the author's own context. This passage likely comes from around the time that Israel had returned home from exile and had begun the difficult work of rebuilding. "How," the Jews of that time wondered, "can we be obedient to God's law as we rebuild?"

Well, during this rebuilding process some of the people, scholars believe, likely turned to the question of how to make sure that the house of God and the people of God could remain pure—a holy people with a house of prayer befitting that people. This was a challenge, especially given that their social environment was still quite diverse, with many laws and customs on offer. There were more people around than just the Jews, of course, and, as we know from Ezra and Nehemiah, there were considerable tensions that arose from the ethnic diversity

¹ Scholars note that there are other possible meanings of "Eunuch" depending on context. In the context of Isaiah, and with reference to being "a dry tree" (Isaiah 56:3), it is clear that the designation refers to a person whose genitalia are not intact or not present.

present among the Jews as well. One strategy for pursuing purity for the people of God was clear: be especially vigilant about keeping out any influence that could corrupt the people or defile the house of God. In this strategy eunuchs and foreigners, as people with potentially mixed allegiances, represented a potential threat to be kept out.² And, as a part of this ‘purity’ strategy, leaders in Israel could even turn to the law to make their case that eunuchs and strangers must be kept out of the assembly of Israel (cf. Deuteronomy 23). All the more remarkable, then, that the author of Isaiah casts a vision of a house of God whose purity is maintained *not principally through exclusion* of these figures, but rather, through *including all peoples* who do “justice, and...what is right...[through keeping] the sabbath...[and through refraining] from doing any evil (Isaiah 56:1-2). It matters not, for the author of Isaiah, whether one is a eunuch or whether one is a foreigner; it *does* matter to the author of Isaiah that those coming to the house of the Lord are willing to “hold fast” to the covenant, a covenant calling everyone to relationships built on justice.

A verse like this should hit home for us today, especially since today is world communion Sunday. On a day like today, Isaiah admonishes us to be a people whose “house of prayer” is truly for all—for all the church around the world, for those in the church we are unfamiliar with and who we might even be afraid of; for those in the church that share a different ethnicity or country of origin than us; for those in the church whose sexual identity is different than ours. If the house of God “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:6-7) we have work to do, as a church. The work of continuing to be invitational; the work of praying, as our verse from Ephesians says, for *all* the saints. In this world of many peoples and many

² Bruggemann notes that becoming a Eunuch might have been a social strategy for some: “compromised faith and identity in order to advance in the alien empire.” For this reason, some scholars speculate that Nehemiah was a eunuch, given that he was a servant in the royal court. See Bruggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, (Westminster John Knox Press): 169-171.

churches, may we, Christ's body, together form a 'house' of prayer for all peoples, making friends with all in the name of the one who first befriended us in our need and who promised to share our sorrows always, until the end of the age.

AMEN.