

1 We're nearing the end of our journey through the book of Acts today, remembering that it was in prayer that God first poured out the Holy Spirit on the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, igniting a new passion, power, and purpose for the church. We're still praying together as Christ's Church, and we're still growing in our understanding of what it means to act out the Good News of God's forgiving love in this world. We're sacred agents for Jesus, sharing the Good News of Jesus in deed and word, out loud for the world to see and hear.

2 If I asked you what prayer was, there's a good chance you might say that prayer is a conversation with God. I even said that earlier this morning. That's a good answer. It's simple and appealing. But if we look more closely, the way we pray reveals some more nuanced understandings of the nature and purpose of prayer. For example, although we say prayer is a conversation with God, how many other conversations do you have with your eyes closed? More significantly, isn't it much more typical for our prayers to be monologues rather than dialogues, one-sided oration during which God attentively listens to what we have to say? Why is that? Monologues in the dark seems like a strange way to have a conversation, doesn't it?

We have to remember that ours is an uneven relationship with God, not a relationship between equals. God is the infinite one, the invisible one, the one who never sleeps, never gets tired, and never stops loving us. Perhaps that's why the images of God as a patient and loving father, or a benevolent king, are such appealing ones. So maybe it's ok that we end up doing most of the talking in prayer, sort of like a child who comes home from school and tells mom or dad all about their day. We can even be grateful that God's people have always done a great deal of talking in their prayer, because without those prayers recorded in the Scriptures, the Bible would be so much poorer. Prayer is a conversation with God, but as much as we like to call Jesus our friend, our relationship with God in prayer more commonly resembles the relationship between a parent and a child.

There's another thing about prayer that seems to set it apart from a conversation between friends. Have you noticed how often we use prayer to ask God for things? There's nothing wrong with going to God with our petitions. Jesus taught us to do just that. On the other hand, have you ever been in a relationship with a friend or a child who only comes to

you when they need money. If we really want to draw close to the heart of God, we need to see prayer as more like a regularly scheduled visit rather than an occasional SOS text message asking for a funds transfer.

We know from our journey through Acts how important prayer was to the early church, how often the church prayed together, and how often the church prayed for boldness to proclaim the Gospel. You can't read Acts without being impressed with the single mindedness with which the Church devoted themselves to their mission, and the way prayer played a role in that devotion. But the church has never been perfect, and even Paul lost his perspective from time to time. In our first reading, it was a type of prayer born out of annoyance that landed Paul in prison. In our next reading, it's prayer that apparently gets him out again. I'm picking up the story in Acts 16:25.

{Read Acts 16:25-34 (NLT)}.

3 Has prayer ever gotten you into trouble? One of the most dangerous prayers you can ever pray is to ask God to melt you down and remake you. You know, that whole "refiner's fire" theme that runs throughout the Scriptures? I've prayed that prayer, and I can tell you, God loves to answer it, but it's not an easy ride.

But that's not what landed Paul in prison. Paul had already had his refiners fire moment back on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. I love this story from Acts 16 because, at the beginning at least, it's one of the few accounts that actually portray Paul as being a mere mortal. Can you imagine what it would be like to have someone following you wherever you go, shouting out things about you like a crazy person? After days of this, it was Paul's exasperation, not his spirit-filled compassion, that lead Paul to invoke the name of Jesus and drive the demon out of the woman's life. Entirely understandable, but also entirely human. Is it any wonder that things turned bad for Paul and Silas immediately after that? There's a difference between asking God for what we need and asking God to make life convenient for us, and it seems to me that maybe Paul picked a fight that he didn't need to fight.

What are you praying for these days? Can you see the difference between what you need and what you want? Are you praying for what God wants? If you don't know, maybe it would help to invest a little more time getting to know God. Dust off that Bible, ask God to speak to you, and then listen. It's amazing how clearly God can speak when you have God's

Word in your eyes and your heart. In fact, God can speak even more clearly when we gather around God's Word with each other, in small groups and in worship together.

4 So Paul found himself in prison, and not for the first time. Yes, we know the end of the story, that God redeemed Paul's misfortune and blessed his jailer. I still think Paul didn't need to be in that particular prison, just like Peter didn't have to get out of the boat in the middle of the lake with Jesus- that was really Peter's idea. I wonder how many painful situations, metaphorical prisons, we land ourselves in that we could have avoided.

There's the prison of addiction, the one where we check ourselves in and, day by day, we forge the iron manacles and chains that hold us captive. There's the prison of unforgiveness, the one where we build up stone walls between us and the ones who wronged us, refusing to let the light of Christ's love heal the hurt. There's the prison of consumerism, the one where our hearts become consumed with filling our prison cells with things, until one day we look up and realize that our things have covered the windows and the doors that lead to our relationships with God and other people. There's the prison of despair, the one where we close our eyes to all that's right and beautiful in this life, choosing instead to let the brokenness of the world weigh us down until even standing becomes an insurmountable task. What are the prisons you visit? What prison are you in now? The good news is that you don't have to stay there. Midnight miracles still happen, and they can happen for you.

5 We don't really know what Paul and Silas were praying when it happened, the earthquake that set them free and brought salvation to the jailer and his household. We only know that they were praying and singing to God and that the other prisoners were listening to them. Were they praying for deliverance? Maybe. Were they praying for their jailer? I like to think so. What's interesting to me about this scene is that they were praying and singing to God together.

Megan Hill writes extensively on the many benefits that praying together has over praying alone. For example, praying together levels life's playing field, reminding us that in God's eyes we are all equally needy, equally useful, and equally capable of prayer.¹ Not all of us are as comfortable as the pastor in standing up in church and praying out loud, but in

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-praying-together-levels-us/>

God's eyes, we, and our prayers, are equal. Even when only one person in a group is praying out loud, all people are praying together.² Prayer is an active thing, an engagement of the heart and mind that united us by God's Spirit, even when our tongues aren't moving! Praying together also teaches us about prayer and about God. We learn from each other's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences when we share our voices in prayer.³ Jesus even taught that there's value added when we ask for something together in prayer, saying, "If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you."⁴

What about singing. Paul and Silas were praying *and singing*. Have you ever experienced an ability to speak to God, or to hear from God, in singing that you haven't in speaking? I have, many times. It's no accident that the psalms, some of the most prayerful of all the Scriptures, were originally sung, and not as solos but together. When we sing together we can also be praying together, nourishing that most basic of all parts of being a disciple: knowing and being known by Jesus.

6 Praying ourselves through and out of the dark valleys of life, including the prisons of our own making, is something that comes pretty naturally to most of us. That's why we love to pray Psalm 23 so much. That image of the Good Shepherd is so comforting, protecting us from the ravenous wolves and providing for our needs. Keep praying to the Good Shepherd, because we do need him. But how about praying ourselves into danger? Even Jesus asked that God would spare him the cup of suffering in the crucifixion.⁵ And yet, to the cross Jesus went, willingly and selflessly. Before that, Jesus told us that as his disciples we are to pick up our crosses and follow him,⁶ praying ourselves out of selfishness and into the selfless love that seeks out ways to share the forgiving love of God with others.

Your challenge this week is to pray. By all means, if you're in a prison, do pray for God to deliver you. But don't stop there. Pray also that God will lead you into situations

² <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/10-things-you-should-know-about-corporate-prayer.html>

³ Ibid

⁴ Matthew 18:19, New Living Translation, 2nd Ed.

⁵ Matthew 26:39

⁶ Matthew 16:24

where you can share Jesus, even if they're painful ones. You might be surprised to discover that, like Paul and Silas, God's answer to your problem is also the invitation and means to bless someone else.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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