

Pray Continually
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I want to just say as I start out that I realize that the 49er game starts right in the middle of my talk this morning
It is scheduled for 10:15, so we do have the doors barred in case of a mass exodus at that time -

The good thing about being forced to stay here in church is that today launches us into a three week series on prayer

And so by being here, instead of watching the first part of the game, you can learn how to pray better, and then for the second half of the game you can know how to pray effectively that the 49ers will win.

So it's all meant to be folks, so stay right where you are.

In order to kick off our prayer series appropriately I am having people hand out some white flowers.

I want everyone to take a white flower out of the basket as it is passed and bring it home with you.

This white flower is a prayer request that you have, that you are going to pray about over the next few weeks or months or years. One woman in a church where this was done kept her red flower for 35 years before putting it in the vase and taking a red one- it was for the conversion of her husband - it took 35 years but he did come to know Christ.

When your prayer is answered, (and it may be answered in a different way than what you thought) you bring your white flower back and put it in this vase. When you put it in the vase you take a red flower out to remember that God answers prayer.

There will always be more white flowers available, if you want to do it again – (but just one at a time) - and this vase will continually be displayed up here in the sanctuary where you can see it.

This witness will encourage us all as the red flowered bouquet gradually is peppered with white, that God does answer prayer.

I. PRAYER IS FOR EVERYTHING AND PRAYER CHANGES THINGS

Is that clear...I want you to know and be reminded that prayer changes things every time you walk in here and see this bouquet of prayer. I want you to be encouraged...

I have seen the phrase that says “Prayer doesn’t change things...God does.” Of course...
But ...

Prayer is the vehicle that God has set up, that opens the door for him to work in our lives and in the lives of others.
Some people say, “Why should I pray? God is going to do what he is going to do anyway so it doesn’t matter.”

That is not what the scripture teaches.
The scripture teaches us that God has set up this arrangement called prayer because it is through our prayers that God has chosen to work

MORE THINGS ARE WROUGHT BY PRAYER THAN THIS WORLD REALIZES

It isn’t that God can’t do it without our praying – God can do whatever he wants; BUT... he chooses to work through our prayers because he wants us to be involved with him...in this partnership called prayer

God wants us to develop a relationship with him...God wants us to ask him, and when he answers us, we are then encouraged to ask again right?...and all of this builds our faith and increases our dependence and hope in a God who really does care about us...and who really does listen

Now I used to worry about the appropriateness of certain prayers. I'd think, "Why should I pray about my problems and concerns when there is so many other people out there with bigger problems than me."

Lots of people think that way.

Yet after reviewing the prayers contained in the Bible, I have stopped worrying about praying appropriately...there's all kinds of stuff in the Bible that seems really inappropriate...

The Bible actually records with approval all sorts of "selfish" prayers: an infertile woman who wants a baby, a widow who needs more cooking oil, a soldier who begs for victory in a battle, or praying for rain during a drought, or asking for a few more years of life to be tacked onto a death sentence.

Paul himself prays about safe travels, prosperous work, relief from a physical ailment and boldness in his preaching. James urges prayers for wisdom and physical healing.

You see...if I decide on my own what is appropriate to pray for and what isn't I may actually block potential intimacy with God by devising a test for appropriateness and filtering out prayers that may not meet the criteria I have set up. Who am I to decide what is appropriate or not?

Jesus teaches quite plainly that nothing is too trivial or "selfish" to bring to God in prayer.

In fact, **everything about you – your thoughts, your motives, your choices, your moods attracts God's interest.**

In prayer, quite frankly, anything goes.

There are no stipulations.

Actually that's the way it is with close friends or lovers.

With people you work with you share only certain things.

But close friends or lovers share everything together...because of the relationship.

Let God be God and let him figure out if and how and at what time he will answer us.

If we are praying for something inappropriate let him take of that. But as that old hymn What A Friend We Have In Jesus says, **“What a privilege to carry EVERYTHING to God in prayer.”**

Not just some things. Its all OK in prayer. Anything goes. Scripture lets us know that over and over.

The more we bring to God the more we will find God faithful to either answer our prayers, or show us a better way through our prayers....every time you bring something to God in prayer you are creating an opportunity to grow closer to Jesus and trust him more.

II. PRAYER IS FOR EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY

Getting prayer out of the box of “praying before meals” or “praying before we go to bed” and allowing prayer to become integral to every day and every moment may be a new idea for you...

Does anyone remember the scripture that we read this morning?
“PRAY CONTINUALLY” ...

We kept it real short

Why? Because I want you to walk out of here, not only thinking about the 49ers but also remembering this scripture

1 Thessalonians-----

Another translation puts it....**PRAY WITHOUT CEASING**

That means we are supposed to be in prayer all the time

Now when Nate read this, no one stood up and protested

You all sat there and perhaps agreed with this statement but no one stood up and said

“Hey...I can’t do that!”

Or “How in the world can I possibly pull that off?”

I can’t pray all the time

I have a life!

Its verses like this that can make Christians chronically guilty because we know we can’t, but we feel like we should...be pulling this off

And it isn't just this one verse...scripture also says

“Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

But there is a way to do this that is actually quite life-giving and not burdensome at all.

As I said, sometimes we have a tendency to compartmentalize prayer. We pray at church, at bedtime, at dinner, or in the morning we have our devotionals, and say a brief prayer, or we go down our prayer list... That is good to do...

And by saying what I am going to say, I do not mean to imply that we do not need to spend significant time in prayer alone with God, sometimes fasting and even at times going away to pray.

That time is significant...Jesus spent long hours in prayer and as we mature in our faith...we are called to do that too;

But this scripture today is not about those intense times of prayer...This scripture is about praying *all the time* in the midst of our lives, in the midst of our daily routine – developing a rhythm of prayer that we easily move into no matter where we are or what we are doing.

Scripture tells us this: “**In Him (God), we live and move and have our being.**” Another scripture, “**He is not far from any of us.**”

Prayer, says Yancey, means keeping company with God who is already present...a call to a Godward orientation

So God is very close.. Closer than our breath we are told in scripture....

I shared with the parenting class that we had last month during our Tuesdays Together program of a child's experience of God that I read about long ago and have never forgotten because it was so profound.

It happened to a little girl who was in her backyard watching the ants build an ant hill, and scurry around back and forth to make this happen.

And suddenly this child, as she watched these ants working so hard, she had an “AHA” moment where she realized that she was so big, and so close, that the ants couldn’t see her.

And she rushed in to tell her Mom. “Mom” she said, “I am so big, and so close that the ants can’t see me!”

And the Mom was kind of preoccupied and responded, “Well that’s nice dear.”

But years later as an adult she related this story to a pastor and said, “The reason that I was so excited then, was because I realized, even as a child, although I couldn’t express it well, that Someone else was watching me too...that Someone was so big, and so close, that I couldn’t see him.”

And she said, “That experience that I had as a child has continued to inform me, all through my life...I have learned to lean into the presence of God that is holding me, and that is so very close already.”

I think this awareness of God’s closeness, and as the scripture tells us “In Him we live and move and have our being” – pulls us into prayer.

Its not like we need to be shouting at the heavens to bring God down
Its not like by our own efforts we get a disgruntled God to pay attention to us

Rather, God is already here – that’s the message of Jesus - eagerly awaiting our response to him.

And I say “response” because when we have the desire to pray, or the inkling to pray, it means that God has already spoken to us first...

Our prayers are always a response to him who has already taken the initiative to call us first...

Prayer is like answering your cell phone. God has already called...we are answering that Call...

If we really believe in God’s closeness, and in his eager anticipation of our response stemming from his longing to be in relationship with us... then we will be easily drawn into prayer

But most of us don't see God in that kind of positive light...

I read that other day that most people, when surveyed, believe that God is either silently angry at them, or disgusted with them (which is kind of the same thing, in a way)

It reminded me of a quote from Nancy Mairs who said, **"Who one believes God to be is most accurately revealed not in any credo (statement of belief) but in the way one speaks to God (or does not speak to him) when no one else is listening."**

Now if I believe that God is angry or disgusted with me, am I going to approach God in prayer, easily and readily, throughout the day? Absolutely not...

It would be like approaching an angry police officer already writing me a ticket, or a critical great aunt who can only see what's wrong with me and going and asking her for something?!?
...that's kind of scary and off-putting? I tend to avoid asking cranky, angry people for things – I don't even want to be with them

The truth about God is actually the opposite...of the policeman or the critical aunt

God is not only close, but friendly, and God cares deeply about me – to the point of giving his life for me – in Jesus
And the fact that God has created prayer for me so that I can be involved with him in the transformation of the world ought get me so excited, and make my heart sing
Prayer is also a very humble act on the part of God to get me involved with him

When I have that perspective

Then praying isn't that difficult...it becomes a relationship with the One who is closer than my very breath, who knows how many hairs are on my head, who calls me by name as his child, ...if that's who God is for me through Jesus Christ...then I can easily approach him and

Then...

Prayer becomes a rhythm, a tuning in to that presence that is already with me, whom I love

Prayer becomes...

A way of life, where I am always aware that I can lean into the One who is so big and so close that I can't see him

How does this translate into real life experience?

Well, when I am standing in line at the grocery store at 5 pm
And I see an exhausted parent struggling with an exhausted child
because one has gone from school to daycare, and the other has had a
hard long day at work, I can offer up a prayer...

*Please Lord, bring peace to that family...bless that child, bless that
parent...invade their lives with your presence. Bring people around them
who will help them...*

I don't know those people...but I lean into the Presence who is there for
me and who is also there for them, those people I don't know, ...when I
pray for them I am doing what we call "intercessory prayer" which
means I am interceding for them and the truth is...I may be the only one
who has ever prayed for them...it's a huge calling and we can do *this
anywhere, anytime* for anyone as the Holy Spirit leads us...

Or when I hear a siren from an ambulance or fire truck
I can easily lean into the One that I know is there and say
*"Lord, whatever the situation, whatever the pain, the emergency, the
trauma, be present to heal, and restore and bring order. Lord, have mercy.
Be present Lord Jesus"*

When we are aware of God's closeness, and we understand that he is
friendly, prayer becomes much easier and God becomes approachable.
And that's when prayer becomes integrated into every moment of every
day

Anne Lamot has a great little new book out called "**HELP, THANKS,
WOW**"

Each of these words describes three different types of prayer...that we
can naturally lean into any time of day wherever we are...

The HELP prayer we just talked about...right...be with that struggling family...intercessory prayer...HELP this person...HELP that person...or the prayer of petition...HELP me

The THANK YOU prayer is one that can come up when we recognize the gift that life is...no matter what we are doing we can lean into God's friendly benevolent presence and say "Thank you for my life right now, that you are here with me, that I am not alone" ...for the blessings of relationships, of good things...etc. THANK YOU prayers we can do all day long...as we live our lives

And then **The WOW prayer**...Where we live the mist is beautiful in San Mateo in the AM and the sun strikes it and those are WOW prayers for me on those mornings

The awe of creation, the awe of human kindness and resilience, the awe of forgiveness and grace, the awe of the present moment – those are the WOW prayers....integrated in my day

At any time we can look up and say WOW...you are amazing God. I am awed by your splendor, the beauty of creation, the simple joy of being in relationships with others and how you made that so wonderful...

WOW God. You are awesome. WOW God..what a beautiful day...

Praying continually or constantly is a rhythm of the soul.

It is our constant awareness that we are being held, and sustained by a presence that is so close, and so big that we can't see him, but we can learn to lean into him and become more aware of his reality...step by step...moment by moment, of every day

III. PRAYER IS FOR EVERYONE

I don't want anyone to leave here thinking that prayer is simply for spiritual giants...or certain people who have reached a certain spiritual level and use certain words that sound good.

I don't care who you are, or what you've done, or what you think...God wants you and calls you to be in conversation with him

Try it...talk to him...he is so close and so available
We can all grow in our ability to pray...which essentially means be in conversation with God...

I have found that often prayers are answered more quickly and readily for the most desperate situations, where people are raw and honest and show up in weakness. For me...it is an irony. As a professional pastor person...often the answer to my prayers come when I am feeling the least spiritual and the least on top of my game.

So what I am trying to say is that your prayers...however they sound and whatever words you use...when they come from the heart, God hears them and goes to work on your behalf.

It is not about how well you think you pray...rather, it has everything to do with a God who is alive, who listens and responds to the cries of the heart.

This past week I had an answer to prayer that was very moving to me. I have asked permission from those involved, to share this with you, but I have also disguised this story a bit to keep confidentiality.

It happened that I got some information about someone who had been hospitalized for a serious condition.

It was so serious that I felt I needed to go to the hospital right away, even though I was back up in San Mateo after already being down at the church for the day.

So by the time I got back down to the hospital I was pretty wiped out. It had been a long day at church already.

It was a life and death kind of thing and it involved a young woman who had pretty much decided that life was too hard to live.

She also made it plain to me that she did not believe in God, and had little use for the church. When asked if she wanted to pray with me for her situation she said "no". Please don't!

Fine I thought. So instead I gathered the family members together in the hall and we prayed a simple prayer for her situation.

Together, we simply asked that God would become real for her, and that he would work in and through this situation to bring her to himself.

Now, I wasn't feeling particularly spiritual, connected to God, or even all that hopeful as we prayed. But we asked for God to intervene...Then I went back home.

However that night, something amazing happened. A nurse who knew Jesus ministered to this young woman and she asked Jesus into her heart that very night.

She then shared this news with her family members the next day. I couldn't believe it when they told me.

It was an answer to a prayer prayed in a hallway, outside the room of for someone who said "I don't want to pray." ..."I don't believe in God"... hours before.

All things are possible through prayer and prayer is for everyone
No matter how broken, skeptical, or shy you are
God welcomes your prayers today. Anyone can pray from the heart, and
God is closer to you and more available to you today than you have any
idea.

God is more interested in you, and the details of your life than you can
even begin to fathom...

What a privilege to carry **EVERYTHING** to God in prayer...

And the scripture for today? **PRAY CONTINUALLY**

Lets start that process right now...Let Us Pray

