**Prayer is Powerful**

**Narrative Lectionary - Epiphany 4**

**February 3, 2019**

Matthew 6: 7-21 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This month is Black History Month, a time to remember African-Canadian history, the struggles and the haunting legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is also a time to honour the rich traditions and culture of African Canadians. As I was planning for this weeks service, Black history month and the theme of prayer, I came across an [article](http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/spirituality-among-african-nova-scotians-a-key-to-survival-in-canadian-society) about Spirituality among Black Nova Scotians. There was a strong faith, spirituality, and prayer life within the community, which sustained them through the challenges. The article provides some history of Black people arriving in Nova Scotia. The first arrivals were at the end of the American Revolution in 1783, when Britain told Blacks coming to Canada they would receive large land grants, justice, education and equal status to the White Loyalists. A majority came to the Maritimes, but the British reneged on the promises, and those who did receive land were placed in isolated communities on barren lots. This failure of the British, served to create two related African Nova Scotian experiences:

First, the pushing of the Black Loyalists to the periphery socially and economically was the beginning of over two centuries of racism, exploitation and oppression by the White Loyalists

Second, the racist and discriminatory practices inflicted on the early members of the community forced the emergence of a distinctive Black culture, which was essential to sustain the strength and tenacity of the African Nova Scotian community and to ensure survival in a hostile and demeaning environment.

Part of that distinctive culture was their strong faith and spirituality that included a practice of prayer. God was with them in the struggles they experienced.

In the article, It is important to note that black women who experience abuse and oppression feel it on two levels, as a woman and as a person of colour. I read of the experience of black women and how prayer and their relationship with God helped them. Many experienced abuse, feeling trapped in a horrible situation, and victimized. Through their spiritualitypraying through the experience gave them strength and hope to endure and get out of the situation. Prayer can help us get through challenging oppressive times. I imagine you can identify times when prayer helped you through a tough time.

The strength of these black women who drew on their faith and the power of prayer to support them through difficult times can inspire us. Many immigrants including our own families over the years, have come to this country to escape hardship. They came with their faith and prayer to sustain them, which is a tradition that we inherited and carry on. I was once at a workshop where we were asked if we knew the stories of our ancestors who came to Canada and were they stories of struggle or oppression. I knew that my great grandfather was a dairyman who came to homestead near Unity, SK in 1904. My great grandmother, came from money so married below her class. When she arrived here later, I was told she had to adjust to sweeping out a sod house and learn how to bake bread, as one who did not so much as clean her own hankies back in England. Do you know your familys’ history? Often when we learn about our ancestors, our own histories, we too will can find challenges and oppression. God is with us in so many ways as we struggle. When we feel alone and abandoned, prayer and God can feel like our only friend, which can also connect us to a faith community.

This week we began our evening book study Practices for Refounding God’s People which gives some history about how society and the church has changed over the years. A main premise of the book is the failure of what the authors describe as the modern idea, that “consists of the belief that all life can be lived well without the need for God’s agency”. In the group we were discussing God’s Agency - what is that? God’s Agency is not the language I would use, but we often ask: how is God active in the world and in your life? Do we no longer think God acts in our life? Modern thinking tends to believe that the future lies in our own hands, human agency. That we are in control of our own lives. Some in our book study group remembered that a few years ago there was a campaign that was indicative of this - a sign on a bus in Toronto (and other places) that said “There is probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life”. The United Church responded with a similar sign that said something like: “There Definitely is a God, so don’t worry and enjoy life”. As the group discussed God’s activity in our lives, the conversation led to our understanding of how God works in our life and prayer. Acknowledging that many of us in the group shared the belief in a God who doesn’t controls things from above, we talked about how we experience and understand God’s presence and action in our lives. While we might question or not believe that God makes things happen in our lives, or even intervenes through prayer, we also acknowledged that prayer is an important and powerful part of our life and faith. We also affirmed and had stories that prayer makes a difference. What stories and experiences do you have of prayer in your life? If God is in and with us, rather than just above us, that loving energy that is God flows through us and interconnects with everyone and everything. When we are open, and pray, it can make a difference and it can be hard to explain it. We know too that there are things that happen that we have no control over, or that our prayers did not seem to make a difference and there is mystery in that and we know God is still with us. Sometimes things turn out differently than what we expect or desire, and if we are open to the bigger picture or other meaning a new perspective may open up for us. Some pray for healing rather than a cure for illness, knowing that healing comes in many forms. This is all part of the mystery of our faith and the challenge of prayer.

Jesus understood that we can be challenged with prayer, and sometimes may not know what or how to pray. Matthew tells us that Jesus shared with the community how to pray. He not only offered words, but guidance in the discipline of prayer. Too many people were making a big public show of not only praying in public but also giving of alms, (money for the poor) and fasting. Jesus is clear that God is more pleased when we are private about these activities. They are between you and God. No one else needs to know that you are praying, fasting or giving alms.

With regard to prayer, Jesus tells the community, to keep it simple, because God already knows what you need. Then Jesus gave them words to use, which has evolved into the Lord’s Prayer. It is interesting that this became a corporate prayer used in Christian churches, because it was intended for personal private use. In looking at the prayer, one might see that it is about building relationship with God. The prayer provides a remarkably streamlined outline of what prayers are to include: addressing the sacred and holy; seeking God’s will and the kingdom or shalom community, ensuring all have bread, forgiveness, and release from debt, and deliverance from trials, temptations and evil. The verses following the prayer outline, expand upon and interprets the prayer:

“if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

 ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by God who is in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you.

 ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Sometimes we might ignore these passages after the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus invites us to generous forgiveness, fast discreetly, and resist collecting too much stuff. If you were following the sentencing hearing for Jaskerat Singh Sidhu, the driver of the semi that hit the Humbolt Broncos’ bus, you would have heard some generous forgiveness from some of the family members. One parent, acknowledging that we are all victims, and recognizing the suffering that the driver is also going through offered forgiveness. The wife of the coach offered forgiveness, knowing the importance of receiving forgiveness when she has done wrong. Some are working towards forgiveness knowing that their child who was killed would want that. It is a tough journey and not all can come to that place of forgiveness at this point and that is OK. Their pain is real.

Jesus also challenges us not to store up too much stuff. I find myself challenged by this. I look at my closets and all the shirts I have that I don’t wear, and think its time to clear some out. In the fall and over Christmas we bought a number of smart lights and plugs. I then reflect on this passage and realize that I have fallen into the trap of consumerism. It is a good question to consider, where and what are my treasures? Are they connected to what I value in my heart? All of these reflections of Jesus, points to prayer being about relationship and involves action and devotion.

While it the Lord ’s Prayer is a personal prayer, it has a corporate nature. It is not about me, it is about us. It is not give me my daily bread, it is give us our daily bread. So God does not just care about feeding me, but feeding everyone. And as I say it, I am owning that call to feed others as well. Prayer is not passive. In the prayer Jesus taught, it calls us to care for others, to forgive others, not just their sins, but the word Jesus used was debt. In addition to sin it was also about economic justice. We are to forgive debt and sin, so it doesn’t burden people. It is a prayer that can have much power in our lives and give us hope, as prayer can in general.

What do we treasure in our lives? How do we treasure our community? Is our heart focused on love and community or how we can do better at work, make more money, or get the next best tech? As we move through these times in the church and all that goes on in our lives, may be draw on simple prayer to sustain us. For the following month, I have decided to offer different times for our prayer service, Tuesday at noon, Wednesday at 8am and Thursday at 4:00pm. What are your prayers for our community of faith, our life, our world?

As we remember Black History Month and the significance of prayer in black people’s lives as they struggled, as we learn about the struggles in our histories, and how prayer helped our ancestors, may we acknowledge what treasures they had in their hearts. As we consider our understandings of God and prayer and the changes that we may have gone through in our thinking and faith, may we know that God is and can be a powerful force in our lives. May we remember that prayer is about relationship and our connection with God and others. May we see how prayer is a very different treasure than storing up material goods. This is the message for us in verse 21. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”.