

## “The Path of Biblical Prayer”

Date: March 1, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Philippians 4:4-7; 2 Timothy 3:14-16

Occasion: Lent 2, series on discipleship

Theme: Prayer, the Bible

James Harnish begins the second chapter of his companion book, *A Disciple's Path*, by saying: “I came across a shocking statistic (recently). Cardiologists report that only one in seven patients makes the lifestyle changes that could save their lives – stop smoking, lose weight, eat right, get exercise. One in seven!” He says,

“If those are the odds cardiologists face in convincing heart patients to change their behavior, what kinds of odds do we face as disciples of Jesus Christ?”

We are, after all, called to live transformed lives. We are called *not* to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are to live lives that are aligned with the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Not just small, outwardly visible changes, we're talking about radical, pervasive change that goes all the way to the heart.

In the Methodist tradition, the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart. The path of discipleship involves a change in belief and a change in action that results in the transformation of our hearts.

When we become members of the United Methodist church, we promise to support the ministries of the church by our “prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.” Today we will look at the first practice, prayer.

Prayer is the primary ways that we communicate with God. But what is prayer? How would you define it? The primary purpose of prayer is to develop an intimate relationship with God. Prayer is simply talking and listening to God.

It is a time to open ourselves to God, a time to talk with God and share our joys, fears and challenges. And it is a time to listen. As in any human relationship, we must create time for God in order for our relationship with God to deepen.

If you are or ever have been in a committed relationship, think about what would happen if you decided rarely to talk or to spend time with your partner. What if you only spent half an hour a week in conversation with him or her? What would that relationship look like?

Building intimacy in human relationships requires careful attention and intentional discipline. In the same way, prayer is about cultivating a relationship with God, and that also takes time.

So, how might we begin to practice prayer in a way that will make a tangible difference in the way we live? Let's begin by deleting from our minds the idea that prayer is a magic trick by which we manipulate God's power to get what we want done. It doesn't work like that.

In Scripture, the primary purpose of prayer is to enable us to live in an intimate relationship with God, so that we become different people. We become the agents by which God transforms the world. Prayer is not the process by which we get what we want from God.

Instead, prayer becomes the relationship in which God gets what God wants, in and through us. John Wesley expressed this understanding in his covenant prayer, part of which says: "I am no

longer my own, but thine.... Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee.”

When a person joins the United Methodist Church, he or she promises to support the church through their prayers. But do we ever give people any training in how to pray? Maybe we should. So, let’s consider four building blocks of a life of prayer.

I have seen other models, but I recently ran across this acronym while working with one of our cub scouts on his God and Me Award. It fits nicely with the theme of our Lenten journey, “A Disciple’s Path.” The acronym is PATH, P-A-T-H.

**We begin with Praise.** Prayer begins not with who we are, or what we want from God but with who God is and what God wants for us. Praise is the way we remind ourselves of the character of the God to whom we pray.

Praise is where Jesus began when he taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.” It’s the way many of us uttered our earliest childhood prayers, “God is great; God is good.” The character of God is defined.

It’s not enough for God to be great, unless God is also good. An awesome God can be an awful god unless that God is like a loving parent who is ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. We begin by praising our awesome, loving God.

**The next letter is “A,” representing Apology.** Apology, or confession, is the next building block in our prayer life. Apology is the way we face the hard truth about who we are, and where we are in our discipleship. Apology is the way we name the stuff that clutters our souls and gets in the way of a vibrant relationship with God.

It's the way we acknowledge that we are not as perfect as we pretend, not as good as we would like, and not as loving as our dog or cat may think we are. The folks in Alcoholics Anonymous call it a "searching and fearless moral inventory." Confession, or apology, is the recognition of our constant need of God's forgiveness and grace.

**Next is "T", for Thanksgiving.** Thanksgiving is our joyful response to the way God is at work in our lives and the world around us. Creating a gratitude list can be a great antidote to self-pity and a selfish life style. Try it sometime.

Instead of listing all the anxieties, burdens, frustrations and failures of your life, begin with the words, "Thank you Lord for...." And then fill in the blanks. In times when we are surrounded by cynicism, fear, anger and just plain meanness, thanksgiving can make a huge difference – to be grounded in a joyful spirit of thanksgiving.

**Finally is the letter "H," standing for Help.** This is when we ask God for help – for ourselves and for others. Prayers for help are the way we draw the very real concerns of our lives and our world into the presence of God, and invite God to be at work in them, through us.

The problem with a lot of what passes for prayer is that we begin where we should end. We begin with our laundry list of concerns that we bring to God. The PATH model of prayer turns things the other way around, by beginning with praise, which leads to apology, which clears away the stuff that gets in the way of God's spirit. Having experienced God's forgiveness, we respond with thanksgiving. Then, and perhaps only then, are we prepared to bring into God's presence all the real, messy painful stuff of our lives and

our world. But it's this kind of praying that has the power to change our hearts.

For those of you following along in the workbook, this week begin our reading and answering questions in chapter two. James Harnish will spend more time than I have this morning to explore the spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading the Bible in chapter one.

He will answer questions such as these: Is the Bible true? Is the Bible inspired? Should we take the Bible literally or figuratively? And finally, he will offer some tools and suggestions for the people called Methodist to do meaningful Bible study and reflection.

So this week, we will be reading and responding to chapter two. For all of us, the call during Lent is to make the time to spend with God in prayer. I encourage you to use the new model for your guide – P-A-T-H. Praise, Apology, Thanks and Help.

May we find the time. May we make the time, may we discipline ourselves to be a people of prayer. A disciple of Jesus is a man or a woman of prayer. A faithful United Methodist promises to support the body of Christ with their prayers.

May we keep our vows, may we be found faithful. Amen? Let us pray.