

SERMON SERIES: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON TITLE: "We Pray for Our Needs"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 6:7-15, 25-34
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 15, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A new book is being published this month. The author of the book died in Poland in 1942. Renia Spiegel's diary was hidden away in a bank vault for 70 years. Her story was too painful for her family to have it translated into English and brought out in public until now. Very much like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, this diary of Renia Spiegel tells what it was like for her to be a Jewish teenager, hiding for years before she was found and killed by the Nazis. In one of her diary entries, Renia prayed, "Lord God, let us live, I beg you, I want to live! I've experienced so little of life. I don't want to die."¹

Can you imagine what it would be like to live in hiding in an attic or a crawl space under a floor for several years, fearing for your life? Can you imagine how great your basic needs would be for food, water, and sanitation? Can you imagine how lonely you might be or, on the other hand, how crowded you might be—never having any personal space? Can you imagine how hard it would be not to see the sun or the colors of nature? Can you imagine in the 1940s how drafty and cold or how hot and miserable your confinement might be? Can you imagine how much you'd long to stretch your legs and move about freely? Can you imagine how many prayers like Renia's that you would lift to God?

Throughout this month of September, I'm preaching a sermon series called "Teach Us to Pray." That was the request of one of Jesus' disciples in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11. In Luke's Gospel, that's when Jesus immediately taught them The Lord's Prayer. On September 1, we talked about that passage of scripture as an introduction to prayer. On September 8, we went to the Old Testament book of Second Chronicles and read the prayer of King Solomon as we thought about what it means to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Today, we're back in the New Testament, this time finding The Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel. Here in this context, let's ponder the line, "Give us this day our daily bread," and consider how we might pray for our needs.

1—HOW TO PRAY

Let's begin with some practical "how-to" ideas. There are too many verses in Matthew 6 for Walter to have read the whole chapter to us. But if we had read every verse, we would have found that, here in Matthew, Jesus was concerned about people who pray in public just so they can draw attention to themselves. So, in verses five and six, Jesus admonished his listeners not to be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners where they can be seen by others. Rather, said Jesus, we should go into our room, shut the door, and pray in secret.

Of course, Jesus didn't mean that we can't or shouldn't pray together in public. He certainly didn't mean that you should never be willing to lead prayer for your family, a group meeting, or in a worship service. He didn't mean that we shouldn't pray as an example to help others learn how to pray. He just meant that we shouldn't misuse prayer as a means of self-aggrandizement. He also meant that there is great value in our own humble prayers spoken in private concentration, freed from distractions.

Jesus taught the words of The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. You're probably catching on to the fact that there are several different versions of this prayer, but they're all recognizable as the same basic prayer that is useful for us to know and say. In verses seven and eight, Jesus said that it's OK to keep our prayers simple and to the point because God already knows what we need even before we ask him.

Then, in Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus spoke about the additional prayer method of fasting. Fasting isn't the same thing as prayer, but this spiritual discipline has often been done as a complement to prayer. Giving up all food for a time, or giving up some type of food for a time, is how fasting has most often been done. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness. Catholics used to give up meat on Fridays; maybe they still do. Many of us give up some type of food during the 40 days of Lent. I think Mormons fast until after

worship on the first Sunday of the month. Muslims fast during daylight hours of the month of Ramadan. There's something about denying the taste buds and the stomach that helps the brain to focus on God. How much more poignant is the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," when the hunger pangs are rumbling inside us.

Of course, fasting doesn't only alert us to our own need for bread. This spiritual discipline also helps us pray for others who are hungry. Our prayers become much more sympathetic, much more compassionate, and much more real when we understand something about the suffering and needs of our impoverished neighbors nearby and around the world.

2—DON'T WORRY

Becoming aware of our own needs and the needs of others can cause us anxiety. But, in Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus taught that we shouldn't fill our prayers with worry--because God already knows that we need food to eat, beverages to drink, and clothes to wear. God takes care of flowers in the field and birds in the air, said Jesus, so surely God will also take care of us.

Does that mean that we don't have to go to work and earn a living? Does that mean we don't have to clean our house, cook dinner, or mow the lawn? Does that mean that we don't have to go to school, take care of Grandma or the kids, or live according to a budget? You guessed it. We probably still have to do those things. Prayer doesn't take away our need to function. But prayer does help us recognize that we don't do those things all alone. We have a strong and divine partner in every aspect of our lives. So, we can have more confidence that when we do our part, God is going to do God's part too.

I like the story *Where the Red Fern Grows*. I actually only know it from the movie, but it's probably the same in the book. The story is about a boy living in the Ozark Mountains in the early 1900s. Billy's family is very poor. He doesn't even have any shoes. But his dream is to buy a couple of hound dogs to help him hunt raccoons. Billy has to work very hard. He finally saves enough money to place his order. Then he trains his dogs and begins earning money through selling his raccoon pelts. This is his way

of helping his family gain a better life. In one scene, Billy's dogs have chased a raccoon up into a very tall tree, and they can't get the raccoon down. So Billy starts chopping the giant tree with an axe. He chops and chops and chops until he's absolutely exhausted. Then he prays to God, "I've done my part. Now it's your turn to do yours." That's when a big wind starts blowing, the giant tree falls over, and Billy's dogs are able to capture the raccoon.

Prayer doesn't mean that we don't have to plan, prepare, and persevere. On the contrary, prayer is the language of confidence. It's the language of trust. It's the language of faith that our partner God knows and cares about us. If we do our human part, God will divinely provide whatever else we need.

3—WHAT DO WE NEED?

Of course, what we need isn't always what we think we need. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus instructed us that, before we strive after material things, we should "strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness." When we get our spiritual priorities straight, then other things will fall into place. When we put God first, God will take care of our other needs.

When I was in college, I took a class in Developmental Psychology. There, among many other important concepts, we learned about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maybe you remember that. The diagram is a triangle with five layers of things every well-rounded human being needs. The first and bottom layer is physiological needs like food, water, oxygen, digestion, and sleep. The second layer is safety—like not being at risk of violence, falling down, or being financially scammed. The third layer in the middle is love and belonging—which means things like having a family, close friends, a congregation, a community. The fourth layer up is esteem—which is how you feel about yourself, and how you think others perceive you. The fifth and top layer at the point of the triangle is self-actualization, which is more spiritual in nature: being fulfilled and connected to a higher purpose.

I like that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is pictured as a triangle pointing upward. That reminds us that all these very human needs point us to God, who is eager to provide for our needs just like God feeds

the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the field. That assurance of God's loving care sustains our bodies, wraps us in safety, creates in us a sense of community and belonging, gives us great worth, and draws us toward spiritual fulfillment.

Like the people of the Bahamas who have suffered extreme losses of food, shelter, safety, family, friends, places of work and status—there can be times when the only thing left to cling to is that top part of the triangle where we find our meaning and purpose in God. That's why it's so important for us seek God and God's righteousness first and foremost in all our prayers. God didn't put us on this earth just to worry about lack and deprivation. God created us to blossom like the flowers and soar like the birds. So when the most important thing to us is our relationship with God, we can be confident that God hears us praying for all our human needs.

CONCLUSION

In the United Methodist news this week, I read about a hill in Zimbabwe where United Methodist Women have just dedicated a prayer shrine. This holy place was first claimed by a pastor's wife in 1920 when she climbed the hill and prayed out her heart under a Chin'ando tree. She later told other pastors' wives about the power of prayer she gained at that place, and they also made pilgrimages there. For 99 years now, Zimbabwean women have prayed under this tree crying out to God in ways that they would never be able to pray among men. The women would write their prayers on small slips of paper and tie them around the tree. They prayed for fertility to bear children. They prayed that their husbands wouldn't beat them. They prayed for strength to become leaders in their churches and communities. They prayed that their daughters would be able to go to school and become successful in work. Women who today drive cars, serve as teachers and judges, and lead in the United Methodist Church know that they have achieved this level of emancipation, esteem, and success because women before them gained strength at the Chin'ando tree on the hill, where they lifted their prayers to God for every kind of human need they had.² May we too find such power for life when we pray for our needs.

¹*Renia's Diary: A Holocaust Journal.*

²<https://www.umnews.org>