

WHY WE PRAY

1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I want to let you in on a trick of the pastoral trade. Whenever we don't know what to say about some difficult issue or we haven't spent enough time researching it or we just flat out want to avoid it we say something like this:

I realize that [issue x] is very important and relevant to what I'm speaking about, but I'm afraid I just don't have time to get into that right now. That will have to be for another sermon at another time.

"Another sermon at another time" is this wonderfully remote hypothetical sermon that may or may not ever materialize. 😊

I did this a few months ago. It was a sermon called "Who Gets to Speak for God." I was talking about who spoke for God in Scripture and who speaks for God today and how we establish credentials.

I talked about my degrees and my writing CV and my official minister's ID cards. I may even have brought them up to the pulpit with me. It was intended to be a kind of a humorous way into talking about how actually we *all* get to speak for God and how nobody has special access, etc.

At the end of this part of my sermon where I was presenting my credentials, I included the following section. In brackets:

(In all seriousness, I think it's interesting that these are the sorts of things that people look to for credentials in church... and that these are the justifications that I naturally gravitate towards. I recall very few questions when I was doing my interviews with Mennonite Church Canada about my prayer life, for example... But *that's another sermon for another time.*)

Well, today is another sermon for another time. ☺

I want to talk about prayer today. There are a number of themes that could come out of our Scripture reading from 1 Timothy today, and I had planned on exploring a few of them.

But honestly, I didn't get much further than verse one this week.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone...

It's about as simple and comprehensive a call to prayer as you could imagine. Paul is telling his young protégé, Timothy, to live a life of prayer.

But prayer is kind of complicated, isn't it? I have so many conversations with people who find it hard to pray.

I've observed that prayer for many Christians is like reading the Bible. It's something that we think is really, *really* important. And it's something that many mostly avoid.

And to be honest, I sometimes find it hard to pray. I'm much more comfortable pointing to degrees and resumes and ID cards than to my prayer life as evidence for my credentials.

Prayer doesn't always feel useful and pastors are supposed to be useful.

When I was younger, I would rise early each morning to pray. I would fill notebooks with my prayers. Looking back at these prayers now, they seem naïve, idealistic, and very selfish.

But still. I prayed. Regularly. Enthusiastically.

Now, when part of my job description is praying—publicly, privately—I sometimes find it more difficult. I have many more impressive words and categories to employ, a head full of knowledge of the history of prayer, the prayer lives of the saints, the theology of prayer.

I have people regularly imploring me to pray for them and for people they love. And I do, of course. I consider it an honour when people share their prayer requests with me.

I am convinced that prayer *is* a crucial part of how God works in and through us for the salvation of the world. And yet the questions abound.

Does prayer work? How can we tell?

Is God influence-able? Is God reactive? Does God need prayer?

How can God listen to so many different (often wildly contradictory) prayers at once?

Is prayer about getting God to do stuff for us in the observable world—heal people, land us jobs, etc.— or is it a mostly subjective experience, a poetic way of talking about “paying attention to your life” or “living in the moment” or “sending positive energy?”

Is prayer about changing God or changing us? Or both?

And then, of course, there are more personal questions. “Why does God seem so remote and absent sometimes?” “Why doesn’t God help my friend, my spouse, my parent who is in such desperate need?”

Behind so many theoretical questions about whether or not prayer works or how it works, there are often very personal and painful stories of prayers that seem to go unanswered.

Prayer can be simple, as natural as breathing. I know that for some of you this is true.

But prayer can also be complicated. I know that for some of you this is also true.

I’m guessing that for many of us, both can be and have been true during different seasons of our lives.

Well, I have discovered that all of the questions above (and many more) can very easily degenerate into very elaborate excuses for not praying.

And so, as I stalled at verse one of 1 Timothy 2 on Wednesday afternoon, I decided that I would set aside all of the questions I've just rehearsed, and just pray.

Paul says to Timothy, "pray for everyone." Which sounds like a big job. But my afternoon schedule was uncluttered, so I thought I would give it a try.

I wrote about the experience on my blog, but I'll give the condensed version here.

I simply sat in my chair, closed my eyes, and began to pray for people. Initially, it felt a little silly. I was essentially rattling through a mental rolodex of people in my life, checking them off my prayer list, barely even slowing down long enough to think seriously about what might be going on in their lives. It felt more mechanical than spiritual. But I decided to just keep going.

I prayed for as many people as I could think of, from those closest to me to those on the outer reaches of the circles of my awareness. I prayed for my wife and my kids and my parents and siblings and for nieces and nephews and grandparents and extended family. I prayed for friends and friends' kids.

I prayed for you. I prayed for our church. I prayed for people in the hospital and those who were struggling in other ways.

I prayed for pastoral colleagues. I prayed for people I had encountered online, people who had taken time to write to me, people I had never actually met but who had entered my orbit through a kind word or a gentle reproach.

I prayed for people in need, people whose paths I have crossed, however briefly, over the years. I prayed for those walking through the depths of death's dark valley and those who are preparing for this descent.

I prayed for those whose experience of God is one of intimacy and delight. I prayed for refugees and indigenous neighbours and the many lonely, rejected, and forgotten souls I have encountered over the years. I prayed for those whose faith is both an inspiration and a shining example to emulate.

And a funny thing happened as I was praying for everyone. I began to notice that it felt less mechanical and more natural. It became something like a source of genuine joy. People would come to mind and I would visualize them, see their faces, recall a meal, a hug, an agonized conversation over coffee, a letter, an online exchange, a tear, a shoulder, a riotous good time.

I would wonder what they were doing at that very moment. I would give thanks for them. I would think about a trial they were currently facing or about their kids or about a trip they had recently taken. I would think about a conversation we had recently had or about a shared experience from the past, or a sorrow we had walked through together.

I would think about what the future might hold for them and when and how God might allow our paths to cross again. I would think about how good it was that they were a part of my life and that I was a part of theirs.

And through it all, I was reminded of the simple yet profound gift of living life intertwined with other lives.

The afternoon I spent praying for everyone didn't answer all of the questions I mentioned earlier.

I don't know if my prayers changed anything for anyone. I don't know what God made of them, or what role they might play in the ongoing drama of God's bigger story.

But I am convinced that it was a "useful" afternoon.

And even though I don't have airtight answers to these questions, I continue to pray.

I pray because the alternative—*not* praying—seems a more hopeless option.

I pray because I believe God has answered my prayers in the past and continues, however mysteriously, to answer my own and those of others in the present. While in Germany recently, I heard the story of my friend who was literally on the operating table waiting for back surgery, when then surgeon came in and told him to go home because his back looked fine. His family and friends had been praying for his healing.

Praise God!

I pray because I need to be trained in the language of worship and relationship. There are many other forms that prayer takes besides petition. Praise, gratitude, lament, adoration, anger—because not everyone gets sent home from the operating room table. My soul needs these to offer these things to God.

I pray because Jesus prayed and because he taught his followers how to pray.

I pray because prayer is, in some ways, an act of defiance—a daring declaration of hope in the promise of God, and a “reminder” of sorts: Do not forget your people! We need you! Help us!

I pray because prayer is a way of declaring an alternative reality—to God, to ourselves, and to others.

And I pray, of course, because I need to be changed and motivated and emboldened to participate more fully in God’s story. We all do!

If God’s perceived inactivity makes us angry or confused does this lead us to a deeper commitment to bring light and life to places of darkness and death, or does it make us jaded and cynical?

Does it make us love life and love others more, or does it make us bitter and complacent?

Ultimately, we are not responsible for how God acts in the world. We are, however, responsible for how we act in the world.

Prayer trains us to live and to love in the world according to the pattern of Jesus—who, it must be noted, knew a thing or two about not getting the answers he prayed for (Gethsmane).

I want to close with a story.

As many of you recall, Dave Goertzen passed away last year. He was a pillar of this church.

I recall a visit with Dave a year and a half or so before he died. I enjoyed visiting Dave. He had seen many hard things during his 90+ years: Poverty, lack of educational opportunities, hard labour, and, of course, plenty of death. But he retained a dry sense of humour and a ready smile.

Dave didn't hear very well, so I always felt like I was yelling at him when I visited. We talked about the weather, about his family, about the past. We talked about road trips that he has taken, about what the farmers' fields are like this year, about what he made back when he could still do wood work.

He often asked about my kids. Occasionally, we would talk about "religious" things, but not very often.

But we always prayed before I leave. One day, after I prayed, this dear old man looked at me and asked, "Is everything going ok for you?" I don't remember what I said in response, but it was probably kind of wordy.

As the end of it all, Dave smiled and said, "You know, I pray for you every day. I don't always know what to say, but I pray for you and for your wife and your kids." And then he gave me a big hug.

I think of this moment often when I think about prayer.

Maybe at the end of it all, this is what prayer is. We cling to God. We cling to each other. We cling to God on behalf of each other.

We don't always know what we're doing or what we're supposed to say, but we know that whatever prayer is and whatever it might accomplish in this world, that it depends far more upon God than it does on us. Which is a very good thing.

Last year I reread portions of Richard Foster's classic work, *Prayer*. One thing that struck me again and again about this mysterious discipline is the simplicity of it all.

We pray because we have need. We pray because we are profoundly limited. We pray because there is so much that we cannot do for ourselves. We pray because we care about stuff. A lot of stuff. We pray because we have a hunger for love and for relationship.

And we pray to a God who is not a genie in a bottle who is bound to leap to our summons, but to the radically free Creator of the Universe who shapes us both by the experience of his presence and his absence.

We pray, in the end, because we long for our wills and our lives to merge with God's will and the life and the love that God holds before the world.

Amen.

