

“On Praying Attention in an Age of Distraction”
A Sermon by Rev. David J. Wood
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Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” **2** So he said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, may your name be revered as holy.
May your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, **6** for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. **10** For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. **11** Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for [e] a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? **12** Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? **13** If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit [f] to those who ask him!”

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Have you ever had that experience when you’re driving, of coming to a stop sign, checking for traffic and then venturing out only to encounter a car that was coming from your left or right that you simply did not see?

It wasn’t that they were going too fast – they were simply there, in their lane, traveling at an appropriate speed – but you did not see them.

Why? If, when that happens, I was self critical enough to review what I did or failed to do...I would have to admit, that I did not come to a *complete* stop.

Yes, I slowed down, maybe even to crawl speed, but I failed to truly *stop*...and because of that, I was *blind* to the car, coming from either the right or the left.

It remained hidden from my view behind the corner of the windshield where it meets the door panel. The partition is just a few inches wide...but when I do not stop, the oncoming car remains tucked in behind it and, thus, completely hidden in my *blind spot*. Only when we stop – only then – do we have the ability to see what we would otherwise be blind to.

There are consequences, and not just when we're driving, when we no longer can afford to pause, to come to a full stop...  
we lose out capacity to see, to observe, regard, take in what is around us...

I think that is one way to think of the nature of *prayer*.

The philosopher, Byung-Chul Han in his book, *The Burnout Society*, writes,

*What is distinctive about the human-animal is that we are capable of the singular, immersive focus known as contemplation.*

He continues,

*We owe the cultural achievements of humanity – which include philosophy – **to deep, contemplative attention.** Culture presumes an environment in which deep attention is possible.*

*If all contemplative elements are driven out of life,  
it ends in deadly hyper-activity.  
The human being suffocates among its own doings.*

*Contemplation is not passive openness.  
Instead, it is an act of resistance to crowding, intrusive stimuli.*

Prayer is, at its core, the practice of CONTEMPLATION.

Elsewhere, Han writes,

*What is necessary is a revitalization of contemplation, because it opens up spaces for breathing.  
...whoever runs out of breath is without spirit." (from *The Scent of Time*, by Byung Chul Han)*

There is an inevitable connection between breathlessness & prayerlessness...

Is it possible that our difficulty with contemplative practice – and prayer as a contemplative practice – is that we are losing our capacity to say “no” to the constant flow of stimuli that emanates from our technological devices?

Given the multitude of demands for our attention these days...the practice of contemplation becomes an act of resistance...an exercise of agency and of freedom.

An aside: One practical thing all of us can do to minimize the “arresting” of our attention by our technological devices is to turn off everything that beeps, buzzes, vibrates, dings, rings, pops up on our screen, or flashes. For instance, I found that changing the setting on my computer so that I do not get some kind of a signal every time a new email or text comes in has greatly diminished the capacity of my phone or computer to “arrest” my attention.

The theologian Jacques Ellul wrote about prayer being an act of resistance:

*Precisely because our technological society is given over entirely to action,  
the person who retires to his room to pray is the true radical.*

Given the importance of prayer...and our difficulty with it...

I could not be more grateful for the Disciples plea to Jesus: “Teach us to pray!”

His response was to give them what we have come to call “The Lord’s Prayer.” I have always thought that was a mis-naming of that prayer. It should be called, “The Disciples Prayer.” Jesus intended for it to be *our* prayer.

So, what do we learn from Jesus’ response?

There is so much embedded in this prayer. So much so, that I find myself praying between the lines...

Before I speak to the content, I don’t want us to miss the fact that the prayer itself is *short*. The brevity of this prayer should be a constant reminder that praying often is much more important than praying lengthy prayers!

Moving to the content of the prayer, notice that it begins with God...First and foremost, prayer is about God...not making God present...but recognizing/acknowledging/receiving God’s presence. Prayer begins with God...not with us.

The pastoral theologian, Eugene Peterson, writes that prayer is less about us addressing God and more about us responding to God who is already there, addressing us.

Prayer, he said, is answering speech. In other words, prayer is our way of answering the God who is always there...awaiting us... It is opening ourselves up to the God who is there...before we speak...knows us before we make ourselves known....

Reflecting on his own practice of prayer, the poet, Christian Wiman, writes, “Prayer is how I subject myself to the possibility of God.”

There is an unmistakable intimacy to the prayer Jesus taught us. Addressing God as “Father” is virtually unknown in the Old Testament. There is something bold about this form of direct address. It is not imposing a gender identity on God...it is naming the existence of a uniquely intimate relationship to God. It names us no less than it name God: if God is our “father,” our parent, then we are God’s children.

To pray, “Your Kingdom come” is to situate ourselves between what is what ought to be; between the world we *have* and the world we *long for*. Prayer is how we learn to face the world as it is without losing our longing for what we long and hope for the world to become. In that way, prayer is opens our horizons beyond the moment—enabling us to be “in” the moment without being consumed by it.

The Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, developed his theology in the amidst some of a darkest moment of the 20th Century. He witness the rise of and devastating consequences of Nazi Germany. Barth once wrote: “To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

A well known activist was marching in a protest against the Vietnam war. A bystander called out to him, “Do you really think your protest will change the world?” He replied, “I don’t know...but I know it’s the only way I can keep the world from changing me.”

Prayer allows us to be fully attentive to the moment without being swallowed by it.

You will notice that there is a decisive shift in the middle of this prayer... a shift from directing *our* attention to God, to directing *God's* attention to *us*.

Note that the attention is not to "me" (singular) but to "us" (plural). And the plural language reminds us that whenever we pray, we pray in solidarity with all who pray. There is an unmistakable communal quality to prayer. Prayer may be solitary...but never isolated. We don't pray well when we *only* pray alone....

- This way of praying invokes a community within which...with whom...and for whom I pray.
- Sometimes...we pray *for* (and not just *with*) each other...especially when we for whatever reason we feel unable to pray...
- Whenever someone asked Eugene Peterson how to learn to pray, he would respond: "Be at church at 9am on Sunday morning. That's where you learn how to pray." Church is where we learn to pray...and there we don't just say our prayers...we sing them as well.

In prayer, in calling upon God to attend to us, we confess our contingency, our dependency...

- FEED us;
- Forgive us;
- Save us...

All of this cuts against the grain of self-sufficiency. This dependency is true for *all* us *all* the time...it speaks to all the ways we share vulnerability as human beings: our shared vulnerability to hunger, to sin, to evil. This reminder levels the praying field. No room for condescension in prayer.

Don't miss the importance of the conjunction, "and."

"Give us this day, our daily bread AND forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Our need for *forgiveness* and deliverance as ever present as our need for *bread*. It is the recognition of our shared vulnerability that speaks of our shared need forgiveness...and to be forgiving. Notice that there is direct guidance in this prayer as to how often we should pray. To ask God for "daily" bread speaks to the *dailiness* of prayer. The prayer itself assumes that it is a daily practice.

In so many ways, this prayer teaches us how to pray. My reflections have only begun to plumb its depths. There is no better way to begin praying than to pray this prayer. It's that simple and that profound.

In the verses that follow in our reading from Luke, Jesus images God as the neighbor who responds to a neighbor's need; to the parent who responds the needs of his or her child. If we as neighbors and parents know how to be responsive to need, how much more so God?

And the one thing Jesus says that God gives freely and abundantly to his children: the Holy Spirit...the very breath of God.

The New Testament scholar, Kenneth Bailey, tells about his experience of lecturing in Riga, the capital city of Latvia. It was right after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall.

His audience was largely made up of students between 25-35...so they had been educated in the communist system, indoctrinated into atheism....he was curious.

He asked one of the young women how she came to the christian faith.

"Was there a church in your village?"

"No," she said, "the communists shut them all down."

"Did some saintly grandmother instruct you into the ways of God?"

"No," she replied, "all the members of my family were avowed atheists."

Pressing further, he asked, "Did you have secret home bible studies – or was there an underground church in your area?"

"No," she said, "none of that."

"So," Bailey said, finally, "what happened? How did you come to faith?"

She went on to explain:

"At funerals, we were allowed to recite the Lord's Prayer.

As a young child, I heard those words, which were strange to me.

I had no idea who we were talking to, what the words meant, where they came from or why we were reciting them. When freedom came at last to our country, I had the opportunity to search for their meaning. When you are in total darkness, the tiniest point of light is very bright."

"For me," she concluded, "the Lord's Prayer was that tiny point of light.

By the time I found its meaning, I was a Christian."

Who among us does not need that tiny point of light? Amen.