

Praying with Legs

I began my ministry in 1992 at a church in Detroit called Zion United Methodist Church. For those of you who remember Amanda Gudme, she had been a member there but had left before I got there because and I quote “those people were really mean!” I was told by my District Superintendent that I was being sent there because of my years of being a youth pastor and they wanted youth to grow their church. When we pastors graduate from seminary, we think we know everything and we will be the answer to all things that need to be fixed in the church we are appointed to. I could not have been more wrong. I got there for my introduction and the DS asked who would like to show me around the church. Not one person volunteered. That should have been a red flag to me.

Also, I knew that they wanted me to bring youth in, because that is what I was told. However, when I arrived I realized that this congregation was about 15 people, and they were all in their 70s and 80s. And I realized that I didn't know what I was doing.

I was depressed. I felt hopeless and at one point, considered leaving the ministry after only six months as serving as their pastor. The only thing that helped me get through those two years of hell, was an exercise I would do at home when I was all alone.

I would put on the contemporary Christian music that I had listened to when I first answered the call into ordained ministry. I would put myself in that place, in Wilmore, Kentucky, where I finally said yes to God, so that I could remember how that felt. How I felt, and how I had sensed God's presence in a powerful and mighty way.

Fast forward, 30 years and I am serving at Central United Methodist church and trying to be a cheer leader and innovative thinker in the midst of a pandemic with no end in sight. I was exhausted, I was in tears a lot, especially after zoom worship when we were literally locked in our homes. So I tried the trick I had used during my time at Zion United Methodist Church.

I got out my Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Imperials, Russ Taff music and played it full blast into my head phones, but it just wasn't working like it did before. I was exhausted, and felt I wasn't being truly effective in my ministry here. And so, I asked our staff pastor parish committee and then the ministry team if I could take a renewal leave to get my soul back together.

So starting on Easter Sunday after worship and for eight weeks, I took a renewal leave. I am thankful that the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church encourages their clergy to take up to three months of renewal leave. And you can choose what you want to do with that time. Rest, write a book, reconnect with family etc. The point is that I made the schedule. So there was a lot of sleeping in, and cross stitching. I was excited when my family wanted to do an activity and I didn't need to look at my calendar to see if I could fit it in. And I also took a Civil Rights tour of the South to feed my soul and remind me of what I am called to do, as a leader in the church and as a follower of Jesus.

Time away showed me that I need to shape a part of each day to vacate and make space for the holy. I need to search out for those thin spaces in the day to day, where I become more aware of God's presence.

I believe it is so important for each of us to make sure that we are creating spaces, for renewal leaves, for vacation, even if it is a staycation, even as you change diapers, or drive to work, or care for someone, or try to save the world, or just make it through one day.

For us to be any good at what we do; for us to protect ourselves from burnout; for us to find a balance in life, for us to not think too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves; for us to stay on the beam when the foundations are shaking, for us to stay on the path and stay centered, we have to find this prayer time, the time to make time, space – quiet, stillness, openness. We have to pray. As Martin Luther wrote: To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

When I talk about prayer, I mean whatever helps you align yourself to God; what is true and good and holy. For me it is to quiet myself by the water, whether it's on the riverwalk here in Detroit or by the Ocean. There is no one way to pray and it is not about the words. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit interprets our sighs and our groans.

But just as we should align our car tires if we want to drive straight, so too should we align our lives with the spirit of the living God so that we can stay on the path of Jesus.

We need to put ourselves in that space of beauty and vulnerability, of risk and openness. To be still and know that I am God as the psalmist puts it. Prayer is not about changing God's mind, it is about renewing your mind so that you can be aware.

A lot of us in this church are activists. Our history as a church is grounded on social action. It is who we are. But what makes us unique as church and different than a non profit social action network or good cause, is that we are grounded by the holy power that comes from God through prayer.

Think about this. You and I presume to have the ear of the Creator of the Universe; we assume that we can connect to a power that listens and gives a damn and responds and is present when we call upon her name and see his power.

Prayer has been central to Jews and Christians from the earliest times: from I Chronicles 16:11 “Turn to God, to God's strength, and seek God's presence constantly. Psalm 4:1 Answer me when I call; God of my justice! Give me relief from my distress! Jeremiah 29:12, Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you!.

Jesus was so busy that he would sneak out sometimes and go off into the mountains to pray and to clear his mind and re-connect with the God he called “abba”, “Daddy.” And you and I claim such intimacy: God as “mommy” or “daddy.”

Prayer is a mystery. Sometimes I pray for things that don't work out and my heart is broken.

I get mad when someone says they prayed for the tornado to miss their house – which it did, but their neighbor's house got destroyed.

I can get angry when some judge our faithfulness because our prayer didn't come true.

I am beyond exasperated when after another mass shooting, some politician sends “thoughts and prayers” but then do nothing.

I get it when Ann Weems writes a prayer entitled, “I'm not going to pray for peace anymore. I pray that all the God talk will take bones and stand up. Amen.

It reminds me of what Frederick Douglass once said: I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs. What you pray for, you better be ready to work for.

The thing about the prayers of Jesus that we have is that they are so real – he prayed: please remove this cup from me, but not my will, but thy will be done.” This was his prayer on the eve of his crucifixion. He didn’t want to die, he wanted a miracle – to be saved from what he was going to face. His prayer gave him the strength to push off into the current that was going to take him to his death.

That example of Jesus praying helps me when I am praying through a difficult time. I may not get what I want but I hope I am part of something redemptive.

I may not get what I want – but that doesn’t mean that God isn’t present. Soren Kierkegaard wrote “Prayer does not change God but it does change the one who prays.”

Jesus told his disciples to pray for anything in his name and it would be given. That is a high level prayer, because sometimes you don’t get what you want, the cancer is not healed, life is not restored, and we learn the hard way that prayer is not a wish list or some magical incantation.

But I do trust that my deepest needs, and deepest sighs and deepest longings will be responded to if I cultivate the patience to receive it. God won’t give you a snake if you really need a fish. A door will be opened. A trust is developed that “you can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need.”

Prayer makes you aware.

Praying for the hungry and oppressed at least makes me more mindful. My praying may move me to do something.

When we share our joys and concerns and pray together as a community of faith, we are lifting up names of beloved children of God into the light of God’s love and there is great power in that.

It is hard to stay angry at the person you are praying for.

Jesus gave his disciples a very simple yet radical prayer of realignment. We call it the Lord’s prayer. Jesus reminded them that God was holy and not to be boxed in. God is God, we are not. That puts things in perspective.

Jesus told them to pray for God’s kingdom to come – but just in the by and by, but in the here and now – each moment we can be close to God. And we know what the kingdom of God looks like: the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly will be lifted up. There will be a great leveling – the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty! Wow!

Jesus told them to ask for enough for each day – not more, not less – sufficient. And what we pray for ourselves we must help others achieve too – sufficiency.

So there is a social call for justice and equity – everyone with food, everyone with health, everyone with education, a living wage, everyone with a job.

Jesus told them to check themselves and not strut their own stuff – to be aware of our own brokenness and sinfulness and to forgive others. None of us has the truth. This drives us to a level of compassion for others and ourselves that re-arranges everything.

Jesus reminded the disciples not to ask for trouble or to get ahead of themselves thinking that they could, by their own power, right every wrong – I think that was the temptation or trial Jesus was talking about. The temptation to think it is all up to me, or us, or we are the only ones with the truth.

Because the evil one wants us to become a tribe; isolated, judgmental, and ultimately ineffective.

This is a prayer of humility and community. It is that spirit of Ubuntu – I am because we are and we are because I am.” We can’t do much alone.

Prayer was important for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Religious studies professor Lewis Baldwin said that one aspect of his life has often been overlooked: the role of prayer. He said, “Dr. King’s personal devotional life was very, very important in giving him the courage and the determination to fight for justice. King would take “personal prayer retreats” and shut himself in a hotel room or pastor’s study to pray, meditate and plan his next sermon or civil rights activities.

But public prayer was important to him also because he understood prayer in that context as a form of creative energy. It was a way of motivating, affirming, reaffirming, empowering people in the context of the struggle for equal rights. Prayer was King’s secret weapon in the civil rights movement, a key to its success as people found the strength to continue despite arrests and killings.

Dr. King was able to intersect into the civil rights movement Christians, Muslims, Jews, Protestants, Catholics and they all sang together and prayed together. Dr. King taught us about the importance of prayer, not only as a part of our own personal devotional life but also prayer must be a part of any movement for social action.

So as we move forward, let us align ourselves to God.

We are in the midst of a redevelopment of our property and our ministries. But I know that change brings anxiety. Pray for our building team and our CDC, pray for me and the nominating committee – trust that God is about to do a new thing. Be open, breathe deeply, look for ways that God’s justice, love, mercy and compassion are being lived out in your life and in our collective lives.

Remember nothing is good or bad until God gets through with it – we do our part, but you and I are not in control of the results – that is such a freeing thought!

Your prayers don’t cause God to act. Rather, praying causes you to be aware of God in action and may cause you to act because you are now aware.

Your prayers do not bring God to any place where God is not already present. Rather in prayer, you bring yourself to the place where God already is – right here, right now.

Thy will be done. Let us live in radical prayer! Amen.