

**“Prayer: The Great Giving-Over”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
June 22, 2014**

As you heard Rosina talking about prayer with our children, I want to begin with a story about prayer this morning. Prayer, of course, is something that we tend to do quite regularly—at least on Sunday mornings—and some of us engage in the practice of prayer throughout the week.

Some years ago in my ministry, we had a prayer group that met on the Cumberland and White County line in Tennessee. This is a rural area in Tennessee—Cumberland County being where Crossville is. Cumberland and White Counties, among many other counties in Tennessee (and I suspect North Carolina too), were counties that were just ravaged by the methamphetamine scourge—methamphetamine being a terrible, toxic drug that many people were using and continue to use and it really destroys life. There is nothing fun about methamphetamine.

Our church, along with two or three other churches decided we were going to get together in a very public way and pray at the county line, in a parking lot at a convenience store. We would get together once a month for one hour and we would pray for all the people whose lives were destroyed by methamphetamine. We would pray for kind of a resurgence of faith in the county. We prayed for the children who were often left alone because the parents wound up in drug rehab. or in prison, so we would gather together and pray. We got together in a circle and prayed.

After about two months of doing this prayer circle at the county line, I began to get a couple of phone calls. The phone calls were surprising. They were from church members — my own church members. The phone calls came with questions like: Why are we doing this? What are we trying to accomplish by these prayer circles? What do we think is going to happen because of these prayer circles? It began a discussion about prayer, and similar phone calls were received in regards to the congregational prayer time in our worship service. Much like we do here, I would walk down the aisles and solicit prayer concerns from people, and the phone calls came in. People were wondering why we were doing this and what we thought was going to happen if we did this prayer time.

What I determined and what I learned from these phone calls from wider discussions is that, in fact, at least among some folks there is great anxiety about prayer. There are deep questions about prayer: What is it that we are doing when we pray? What do we expect to happen when we engage God in prayer? I have been interested in this anxiety about prayer for some time.

We find ourselves with the Psalms. The two Psalms that were read today are really about prayer. The Psalms are the prayers of Israel. They were Psalms written and shared in ancient worship services, lifted up by the Israelites at their worship services. The Psalms address God, of course. The Psalms deal with all kinds of issues. There are Psalms of prayer, Psalms of praise, Psalms of petition, Psalms asking God for forgiveness, and so on and so forth. There are even Psalms of vengeance where they ask God to punish their enemies. These are Psalms that make many people very anxious about the content, but the Psalms are the Psalms and the prayers of the community. It is what Israelites did when they got together. They had people in their community write these Psalms, write these prayers, and they shared them together as a community. They allow for us to think about what it is that we are doing when we pray and, in fact, they probably allow for us to struggle with where these prayers are going. Are they simply prayers that we share together? Are they prayers that go up to God or do they stay here on earth? Do they stay in our souls? What happens to these prayers?

I want to enter into this by just looking at a few of the scripture verses from our Psalms, starting with Psalm 86, just this first verse. The prayer is like this, and I always imagine that the Israelites are praying with some energy. They are people of deep faith. They find themselves like us, struggling

with issues in their faith community and in their world, so they are praying to God with great vigor, so that prayer in Psalm 86 goes like this: “Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy”. The prayer in this case is a voice of dependence. It is a prayer which has in its element a confessional nature to it, and it is demanding of God, asking God to pay attention, listen to me because I am hurting and poor and needy. It is acknowledging in its own words that this pray-er, the psalmist, is dependent on God.

There is an acknowledgement when we pray that we are dependent on God. That is why we engage in prayer. It is a kind of confession of “Here I am God. I am in need of you”. Prayer is an acknowledgement to God and to ourselves that we need God, so when we pray, we are saying to God “I need you, God, in my life, and I am willing to enter into this practice of prayer in a way that acknowledges that I need you in my life”. It is a very confessional act when we pray.

The second verse of Psalm 86 is a different voice of prayer and, again, you hear the vigor, the energy in the pray-er: “Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you, O God. Save your servant who trusts in you”. So, this prayer is about admitting and, sort of giving ourselves over, saying that we place our trust in God. We know that God provides for us what we need in our lives. So, when we are praying, it is an act of trusting that God is in our lives and placing our trust in God. We live in a world where placing our trust in anything is a risky endeavor, but in praying, in the Psalm here, we are saying “We trust you, O God, with our lives. We trust you to give us the wisdom that we need to live, so we are praying and saying we trust you, O God”.

Now, when we place our trust in God, it requires a couple of different things from us. When we place our trust in God, one of the things it requires is for us to be deep listeners for God’s wisdom—for us to be deep listeners, paying attention to how God is moving in our lives, how God is moving in our world, and what God is trying to say to us. We have to listen very closely because we have placed our trust in God, and listening very closely is difficult.

The second thing that we need to do along with deep listening is that we need to relinquish what we want. We need to relinquish those things in our lives which get in the way of God’s wisdom and guidance entering in. Henri Nouwen, a great, great spiritual leader in faith and Christianity, says that most of us go throughout our days with our fists clenched. That is to say that we go through our days with anxiety. We are not really open to anything. We are just trying to get through our day. Henri Nouwen says that we must open our fists, open ourselves up, relinquish trying to hold on and control everything in our daily lives and open ourselves up to God, trust that God has something in store for our lives. I think that is important as we think about our individual faith journeys and we think about our life and faith journey as a church. Let us open up with the expectation that God has something in store for our lives, and that is to place trust that God has not abandoned us.

Third, in Psalm 86, towards that 11th verse, there is a new voice of prayer, so we have heard the voice of dependence and the voice of trust. Here is a different voice about prayer. It is the voice of commitment. Listen to Psalm 86: “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Give me an undivided heart to revere your name”. The psalmist here is making the commitment, asking God to “Teach me your way. I am going to give my life over to you and make a commitment to live differently”, making a commitment to faith, giving our lives over to this God of Jesus Christ. It is a voice of commitment when we pray. Think about the act of praying. We tend to talk about walking the walk and talking the talk. Some of us are good at talking the talk; others of us are better at walking the walk, but in prayer we are doing both at the same time. When we pray, we are engaging our God, and we are engaging in an act of faith. So, when we pray we are walking the walk and talking the talk at the same time, so we are making the commitment to our faith through prayer.

Fourth, and last, is Psalm 85 which is what I read this morning. These verses, these phrases from Psalm 85 are well known. Psalm 85 says: “Restore us again, O God, of our salvation. Will you not revive us again so that we can rejoice in you again”. There is, in this prayer, in this Psalm, the voice of remembrance, thinking back of when there was a powerful relationship with God. There is an

acknowledgement that God has been lacking in our lives or that we have been lacking in our faith, and there is this longing for God to intervene. "Revive us again, O God. Restore us again. Fill us up with your faith". We are longing for that relationship with God, and through this prayer, there is a calling out to God "Help me find life again and be restored to a deep faith", so there is a voice of remembrance, a longing for God. It is an acknowledgement that God is good, that God has been good to us, and it is a confession that we have wandered from God and we want to reconnect with God. So, in some respects, Psalm 85 is really a prayer of desperation. We all get to that point where we need God to be present in our lives and we really have to call out because we have not felt God's presence closely enough. It is a prayer of desperation to restore us again, revive us again, and come back into our lives.

All of that is to say that prayer, while it is an act of mystery, is an act that we do not have control over. It is one of the most important things that we do in our lives. It is one of the most important things we do when we gather together on Sunday morning. The power of prayer (not just when we are alone and praying) is that most of the time we do it as a community of faith. We do it when we gather together, and it is a public act. It is something we do in public, together, and remember when we tell folks we are going to church, we are making a claim of where we center our lives: I am going to church today to pray with other people because I need God in my life, and I need my life centered in God, in Jesus Christ. Prayer is a tremendous act of faith that we do. It is an act of walking the walk and talking the talk at the same time. It is an act of unclenching our fists. When we, in a sense, turn ourselves and our lives over to God (even if it is just for a moment), for that moment we try to let God in and, of course, God seeks to get into our lives.

So, we give thanks today for the Psalms, for our prayers, for our prayer lives together, and wherever people gather in prayer, our belief is that God is, in fact, there with us, so we give thanks for the power of prayer and all of its mystery, for the power of prayer as it shapes our lives, and for the power of prayer as it shapes our lives together. We give thanks to God, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.