

“Sporadic, Inarticulate, Helpless”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 5:1-16
February 3, 2019
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

In the summer between fourth and fifth grade I met a guy who could say the alphabet backwards very rapidly. I was extremely impressed. Being an overachieving nerd unburdened by such frivolities as “organized activities” or a “social life,” I got to work. It took me a few weeks of dedicated practice, but before school started up again I was able to recite my ZYXs just as quickly as my ABCs.
ZYXWVUTSRQPONMLKJIHGFEDCBA!

Jesus handed his hillside congregation a recipe for prayer and the church quickly formalized it and now we say it every week — often more than once — and I have to admit that there are so many times when I feel like I’m *reciting* it rather than *praying* it.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, one earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.*

Look at me, storing up treasures in heaven!

Jesus’s instructions are not abstract. On a typical day, adult Jewish males were expected to pray morning and evening, thrice in the direction of Jerusalem, and as the appetizer and dessert to every meal. That’s a lot of opportunity for misguided prayer. That’s a lot of praying time to fill.

First he picks on the Gentiles. It may be hard to imagine, but there were non-Jewish citizens running around praying to the gods and goddesses of your favorite stories — Jupiter and Neptune and the like. Jesus says the Gentiles are “heap[ing] up empty phrases” and we hear that cutting two ways. They are, of course, praying to all these deities instead of to the God of Israel. And they seem to be making a big deal out of rambling on and on in some way that Jesus finds uneconomical. God knows what you need — don’t pray to hear your own voice.

And you may not have had this experience, but I am having flashbacks to prayers that went: “Father God, we just pray, that you would just bless us with your sanctification, Father God, and just guide us and just bless little Betsy and just protect little Johnny and just smite anyone who disagrees with us, and just, Father God, your love is inconceivable and just blows our minds. Father God. Amen. Just.”

Jesus is taking on the Gentiles for the authenticity of their prayers, and after giving the Lord’s Prayer starter set, he takes on those who desperately need someone to see how pious they are as they fast. He says that they have gotten what they were after — the interest of their audience — instead of what they ought to be seeking from God.

For thousands of years humanity has been seeking the profound and the holy and for thousands of years we have struggled to pray. I know that some of you would gladly show up here weekly and scrub the toilets if it meant you never, ever had to offer a prayer out loud in public. Private prayer can be

just as scary. How should we do it? What do we say? What if we — we, in Birmingham in 2019 — what if we are the ones who break prayer?

I find help here from Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner. Buechner is one of the most eloquent preachers, poets, and writers of the last hundred years of Christian scholarship. He's 92 now, and still writing. I love reading Buechner's work. His essays are like deep prayers. He's written and said some of the best groupings of words I've ever encountered. For example:

“It is as impossible for [humanity] to demonstrate the existence of God as it would be for even Sherlock Holmes to demonstrate the existence of Arthur Conan Doyle.”

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.”

“You can kiss your family and friends good-bye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you.”

“The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you.”

Fred Buechner is one of the most spiritually in-tune people in American Christianity. When asked about his prayer life, he describes it as meager, not organized, with no schedule and no theory of prayer. He says it is “mostly blubbering” and continues, “I pray for people I love, and people who are sick. I can't pray for the world, with the world on the brink of chaos. I don't know how to pray for peace. I can't lift up this whole circus. My prayer is sporadic and random and inarticulate and helpless.”¹

I find that honesty deeply comforting. And it reminds me of Jonathan Miller, Rabbi Emeritus at Temple Emanu-el in Five Points, speaking to a group of hospital chaplains and noting, “You Christians always say, ‘I'll be praying for you.’ It's a marvelous, fantastic thing to say. I hope you mean it.”

Jesus is on the hillside speaking to his disciples and the gathered riffraff in need of healing below them. He started by telling every last one of them that they were blessed and calling them salt and light. I seriously doubt his next move is going to be offering them a seminar on how to be expert pray-ers. In fact, he seems wildly suspicious of those who would fancy themselves really good pray-ers, with their empty phrases and distorted faces.

Instead, he offers an invitation to authenticity and to an orientation toward relationship with the one to whom we pray. He asks his listeners to present their prayers in humility, with talking to God as the focus, shrugging off how it looks or sounds to anyone else.

A call to be genuine and to have integrity in prayer, mere hours before the spectacle of the NFL's bacchanal to the almighty dollar which I, of course, will be watching (mostly due to concerns that Tom Brady is an agent of Beelzebub.)

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNURp2aNojA&t=15s>

I remember Super Bowl XLII very well — and not just because the New York Football Giants defeated Babylon that night, 17-14. There was also a very strange ad during the game. It had a neat message, but mostly got attention for being kind of disturbing.

It was a commercial for a job search website, and we saw a woman sitting at her desk, clearly miserable at her job, as her slimy boss laughed from his office. Then all of a sudden her beating heart burst out of her chest and onto her keyboard. The heart leapt up, squishily danced off the desk, stormed into the evil boss's office, and produced a little sign that read "I quit!" The heart marched triumphantly out of the building, and we got the slogan — "Follow your heart!"

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

In this invitation to a heart oriented toward God and understanding that God wants nothing more than a relationship with us that moves us to march out the door following our God-seeking hearts, Jesus offers the model that has become the Lord's Prayer. "Pray then in this way:"

He tells us to speak to this God we cannot see and to recognize that God is the one who knows us and loves us so well as to be our parent and yet is so different from us as to have a name that is hallowed. Jesus reminds us that we do not live in neutral space — there is kingdom transformation to be done here. He tells us to ask for bread for our community — manna in the wilderness — in reliance on God's providence. He tells us to seek forgiveness and release from all that hinders relationship. He tells us to ask for deliverance and to be guided away from anything that would lead us away from God.

Jesus offers this model and the model is the victim of its perfection and so we simply copy and paste because who can improve on Jesus's prayer? And that is wonderful — pray it. Pray this prayer in whatever form you have learned it — whether you use "debts" or "trespasses" or "sins," whether you add a fancy ending or not, whether you address God as "Mother" or "Father" or "Creator" or "You who I can't figure out what to call." Pray it with intent, with gusto, with reverence, and with joy.

But also keep this prayer as a tool when you find your prayers random and helpless, or stuck in your throat, or unspeakable, or scary. Eloquence does not equal authenticity. The only valid question about any prayer you utter or offer is "Does it lead me to encounter God?" That encounter may be peaceful or filled with rage. You may get there through mindful breathing or kicking and screaming. It may be full of deep thanksgiving or a slew of cuss words. It may leave you saying, "I am overcome with grace!" or "Where did you go, God?" or simply, "I don't know."

"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." Pray. Just do it. There are no small prayers. You can't break it. No prayer is superfluous or wasteful. No prayer goes to the great spam folder in the sky. Pray to find comfort. Pray to feel heard. Pray to demand being heard. Pray to vent. Pray to bless. Pray to be brave enough to receive a blessing.

As we pray — be it contemplative or corporate, in silence or shouts, with words or movement, in poetry, song, art, muttering, or laughing — God exults in our prayers. This is the God who goes to the lost, the God who seeks us when we hide, the God who makes covenant with us and invites us to dinner, the God who tears open to sky to cry out "beloved," the God who yearns for nothing more than to grant us heart-shaped treasures as we are wrapped in a love so complex and holy as to fill volumes

and as simple and true as A...B...C.
Amen.