**Encounter Weekend: Aaron White Hillside Community Church**

24/7 Prayer Canada February 2022

*Learning to Abide*

**Made to Pray**

Does prayer “work”? It depends very much on what we mean by “work”. Do we get everything we want or ask for? No. But is this the point and purpose of prayer?

An even bigger question: Is this the point and purpose of *us*?

We will be talking later about the essential interconnection between prayer and mission, prayer and justice, and how our relationship with God leads us radically and beautifully into those places. But today we want to go back to the beginning. Today is about *abiding prayer*: the starting point and ending point of prayer - there was no lament, no intercession in the Garden, nor will there be in glory. So it is good for us to practice abiding in prayer now.

We were *made* to abide in prayer. **Genesis 1:27**. In the image of God we were made, made to be in friendship with God. We know this because when things go wrong the first and primary thing to be broken was this intimate friendship - **Gen 3:8-10**. Leads to the breaking of all other relationships as well.

The rest of Scripture could be described as God restoring this relationship to an even greater fullness, to its original intent and purpose. God is reconciling his beloved creation to himself. Incredibly, this friendship blesses us, and blesses God!

‘**Exodus 24:1** - *Then the Lord said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel.”*...This scared them. God was on the mountain and they knew it because of the smoke, the fire, the earthquakes. They had seen God in the signs of the Exodus, the parting of the sea, the pillar of fire and smoke - they didn’t exactly feel confident approaching God on his holy mountain. Ever feel that way? I don’t deserve to pray? Or I don’t deserve to come close to God? So they take some serious preparations before they go up the mountain.

*“Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.”* (Exodus 24:9-11)

God *wants* them to be close to Him, though they keep turning and running away. This is the story of the Hebrew Scriptures. Maybe shown most starkly in Hosea, where God presents himself as a spurned but faithful lover, one who, though wounded, continually woos his beloved back:

*1 “Come, let us return to the Lord.*

*He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us;*

*he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.*

*2 After two days he will revive us;*

*on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.*

*3 Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him.*

*As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains,*

*like the spring rains that water the earth.”* (**Hosea 6:1-3**)

“Come let us return unto the Lord” - if there is a phrase that poetically sums up the Hebrew Scriptures it may be this. And God *wants* them to return and stay. Wants *us* to return and stay. As close as possible.

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”* (**Rev 21:1-4**)

Sometimes we have the idea that we have to convince God to listen, have to get the formula right, or to have attained a certain level of holiness. Holiness matters, but holiness is the fruit of relationship with God, not the prerequisite to relationship with God. As we grow in friendship with God, in fellowship with God, in union with God, we will be made holy. We become like that which we worship, which we commune with.

*“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”* (**2 Pet 1:3-4**)

So does prayer work? Prayer works every time I come genuinely seeking the Lord. I don’t always get an answer, but I always get an audience. Because in prayer I am living out my created purpose, what God wills and wants for me. The first part of abiding prayer then is trusting that God does want this for me and learning to receive His love, his invitation to come and return to Him.

***Reflection Questions***

* What is your experience of prayer?
* Does it “work”?
* Has it been mostly formal, intimate, or a mix of both?
* Do you ever feel like you can’t or shouldn’t pray?
* Does prayer sometimes become like a grocery list of wants and needs?
* Do you want to grow deeper in prayer?

**Prayer Practice: Praying the Bible together:**

A. After inviting the Holy Spirit to guide you, have someone read Eph 3:12-19 out loud and slowly. Be silent for a minute, and then have a second person read it again, out loud and slowly.

B. Is there one word or phrase that you have noticed more than others during the readings? Let each person share this word or phrase they noticed. Take a few moments to ponder what God might be saying to you or to the group, but at this point don’t try to analyse the word or phrase.

C. Have someone read the passage out loud again. And rest in silence for a minute afterward.

D. Speak out in prayer what you sense God is saying to you. Tell Him how you feel encouraged or challenged by what He is saying.

E. Share one way you might be able to live out what you have heard from this passage today. Notice if there are common threads coming through as people share. Turn this into a prayer if you want, or simply rest in silence together.

**Prayer Resource**

*(Lectio 365 Resource: https://www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional)*

**A Good Father**

**Luke 11** - When you Pray, Say “Father” The Lord’s Prayer (Aisha)

**“*What we think about God is the most important thing about us”*.** (AW Tozer)

I believe that Jesus understood this and knew that this was a part of his mandate here on earth. To show us The Father.

*“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”* (**Colossians 1:15)**

*“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.”* **(John 14:7-11)**

Jesus said that when he spoke it was the authority of the Father speaking through him, so when one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, it was as if God The Father was taking this opportunity to not just teach them to pray but to tell them of the one they were speaking to. The Father through Jesus wanted them to know Him, so that they would always turn to Him in prayer.

“When you pray, say Father”

Why Father? This was a new way to address YHWH. Jesus knew this name, this title carried a lot of weight and meant many things to each one who heard it. He wasn’t ignorant to the many experiences humanity had with fathers in a broken world or what emotions surfaced when one heard the title ‘Father’.

And he said to them, “When you pray, say:

“**Father**, hallowed be your name. (HOLY)

Your kingdom come. (SOVEREIGN)

3 Give us each day our daily bread,(PROVIDER)

4 and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. (THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGE) And lead us not into temptation.” (THE SHEPHERD, GUARDIAN OF OUR SOUL)

Looking at the Lord’s Prayer, the many names of God are declared but he wants us to first know Him as Father. Many times we don’t pray or have a lack of prayer in our lives because we don’t know our Heavenly Father. In our last session we learned that God wants us to come and return to Him, that it is His desire for us to come close. But to be close and intimate with someone means we need to know them, know their heart towards us and trust that they are safe. Why would we pray to a god whom we perceive to be absent, never pleased, or unwilling to answer? So Jesus told a parable to teach us the heart of our Heavenly Father, the one we pray to.

***5*** *And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves,****6*** *for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’;* ***7*** *and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’?* ***8*** *I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence[c] he will rise and give him whatever he needs.* ***9*** *And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.****10*** *For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (***Luke 11:5-10)**

**What does The Father want us to know about Him?**

1. He knows that He is the one who has what we need, He is the friend we can run to.

2. He knows we have nothing.

3. He hears and answers our persistent, unashamed prayers.

4. Though there are times of delay, we are not praying in vain.

5. EVERYONE who asks, receives

And to emphasize The Father’s willing, responsive and generous heart towards us He ends the teaching on prayer with this:

*“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?* *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 to those who ask him!” (***Luke 11:11-13)**

Even if you’ve had the best experience with a father here on earth and never suffered any bad experiences with a parent, compared to the heart of the Heavenly Father it’s as if our experience is evil because He is that good. And even more than our needs and desires, He gives His Holy Spirit to those who ask. He gives us Himself!

*“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.”* (**John 3:34)**

*“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,”* (**2 Peter 1:3)**

The Father invites us into communion with Him through prayer. He knows we need Him and He wants to journey with us in this life through every season. He also knows that if you don’t know His heart towards you, you won’t come close and prayer will be scarce in your life. Allow Him to reveal His Father’s Heart towards you for knowing this will anchor your prayer life.

**Reflection Questions:**

* What is your image of God?
* Does that help you or hinder you from praying?
* What are some images people hold of God that may prevent prayer?

**Prayer Practice: Names of God Prayer Practice**

A. Using a pen and paper, notebook or on a device, make a list of the Names of God that you know. Try not to just write down names you’ve heard in Church or Sunday School. Write the Names of God that you KNOW, that you have seen tangibly in your life (e.g. You know God as Provider because your student loan was paid off in a way you weren’t expecting).

B. After you have made your list, take some time to thank God for being The Father who Provides, The Father who Heals, etc. According to the names you have written down

C. Now as a child before your heavenly Father, ask yourself this question: “Is there something I’m afraid to ask God for because I don’t think He will answer?” Or is there something you have been asking God for but haven’t seen Him answer yet? Ask The Father to reveal His Heart of love to you in this area.

**Prayer Resource**

*(Unanswered Prayer Course:* [*https://unanswered.prayercourse.org/)*](https://unanswered.prayercourse.org/))

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**Abide in Me**

*Abiding* means *cultivating union and friendship with God*. Putting it simply this means talking with God (prayer) with the understanding that He talks back to us. *“You are my friends. If you talk to me, I will talk to you, and you will bear fruit that is everlasting”.* (**John 15:14-16, paraphrased)**

What does Abiding look like:

● Talking to God (**John 15:7**) - intentionally making space to talk with God. Not disconnecting.

● Confessing His promises (**John 15:9**) - confessing the truth of scripture and allowing it to take root in your heart.

● Responding to what you have heard Him speak to you (**John 14:23**) - Go where your best prayers take you. We can’t have a mission without prayer.

God has invited us to connect with Him and when we do the reward is that our heart and lives come alive.

The whole “Farewell Discourse” in **John 14-17** is about learning to abide in God, through Christ. Jesus invites his followers not just to a life of mission and striving, but into his relationship with the Father and the promised Holy Spirit. This is the place of peace (instead of fear); of security (instead of insecurity); of hope (instead of despair); of abundance (as opposed to scarcity); of life (instead of death). This is the difference between being orphans and being parented.

**Prayer Practice Exercise**

Prayer Walk (20 mins) Read **John 15:7.**

* + As you walk and pray, consider the following questions:
  + What does abiding in prayer look like for you?
  + What are the obstacles?
  + When have you known the love of God?
  + When or how have you been *confident* in the love of God?
  + How does that change your prayer life, and your life in general?

Read **John 15:7** again. What are you asking the Father for?

(GOHOP Prayer Walking resource)

**Justice and Prayer**

Justice and prayer are fundamentally interconnected within God’s created purpose for humanity. We were made for intimacy with God; and we were made to do good.

We see this in Genesis 1-3. Humans are created to fellowship with God. They walk with Him in the cool of the day, and the great disaster of sin is broken relationship with God (and subsequently with each other and with creation). Prayer calls us back into the practice of intimacy, the walking with God in the cool of the day. It is not simply a functional tool for intercession, mission or justice. I recall sitting in Room #504 of the Empress Hotel, overlooking Main and Hastings, asking God if I was wasting my time in prayer when there was so much visible pain on the streets below me. “Yes,” came the response, “waste your time on Me. I am worth wasting your time on.” This is why when people ask me if prayer works I say, “Yes, every time. I don’t always get an answer, but I always get an audience.” We were *made* to pray. Intimate communion with God will endure in glory beyond all our tears, injustices, mourning and intercession.

But here and now, within this veil of sorrow and trial, our prayerful connection with the Lord is meant to lead us into doing good.

Genesis 1 supports this. In the beginning *“the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.”* These descriptions - “without form”, “void”, “darkness” - are not good things. Every time they appear in Scripture (usually through the phrase ***Tohu Wa-bohu****,* which translates as void, emptiness, darkness, confusion, vanity, waste), they are shown to be destructive and in need of correction and redemption. God’s act of creation has the purpose, in part, of shaping the form, filling the void, lighting the darkness. And we are key actors within that purpose.

This is emphasized all throughout Scripture, not least in **Ephesians 2:10**: *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*

“Child of God” is a familial term, but also a vocational term. Children grow up to participate in the work of their parents. Everywhere we see void, darkness, chaos in our world - whether it be racism, abuse, homelessness, displacement, addiction, trafficking, loneliness - we know that we were created to address these things as children of the Father. Think of how the mission of the Church is described in the New Testament: bringing the ministry of reconciliation; shining light in darkness; rescuing people from death; setting the lonely in families; casting out demons; healing sickness; and overcoming the devil - the champion of ***tohu wa bohu*** - with the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimonies.

The integration of prayer and justice is why we were made. So there is the greatest danger when they are separated.

When prayer is separated from justice it runs the risk of becoming entirely internalized, self-absorbed, individualistic, and concerned solely with our own personal development. Prayer - indeed faith - becomes an excuse to not do anything, (which is why the phrase “thoughts and prayers” needs to be retired - it is heard now as a deflection from responsibility).

Genuine prayer leads us always more deeply into the heart of the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. Which means that genuine prayer is going to lead us always more deeply into the things that God cares about. If prayer does not lead us into justice, then perhaps we are not truly communing with God.

*“The road to union with God is not a one-way street ending solely with God; on the return journey it leads back to one’s neighbour, the stranger, one’s enemy, and toward all creation. He who unites himself to God undertakes to consider how he should unite himself to all and takes no rest until that union has been accomplished.”* (Matthew the Poor)

Justice separated from prayer is equally troubling for Christians. It tends to lead to unchecked anger, judgment, polarizing, and labeling. We try to recruit God to our political side and demonize our opposition. This creates echo chambers where we only talk with people who already agree with us, and then wonder how the other side could be so stupid, ignorant, bigoted and monstrous. It is so much easier to mock, unfriend and de-platform than it is to lovingly engage in relationships with others and in actual conversations about injustice.

*“Without contemplation, without the secret, silent pursuit of truth, our action loses itself in the world and becomes dangerous,”* (Thomas Merton)

*“Prayer is the opposite of an adaptation to the world, and the opposite of the kinds of works this world demands.”* (Jacques Ellul)

In our haste to act we must remember that justice is utterly on God’s heart, and He is the One to best direct our way. Authentic prayer will never make us *less* invested in justice. Prayer should reveal our hearts in this. If prayer does not lead us into justice, we should ask if we have really been in communion with the God of the Bible. But prayer also reveals that justice as a *concept* is not what we were created to love. As children of God our primary relational and vocational responsibility is loving obedience to God, faith in his commands, and compassion for his people, especially for the poor. When we fall in love with our *idea* of justice the cause can become more important than the people involved, and we also feel free to dismiss others as enemies. When we fall in love with the God of Justice, however, we will become united with his love for the oppressed, and we will learn to see even our enemies as precious children of God whom we are invited to love.

May we learn to pray and to do good, and so grow into our created purpose in the world.

**Benediction (From Northumbria Community)**

*Christ, as a light*

*illumine and guide me.*

*Christ, as a shield*

*overshadow me.*

*Christ under me;*

*Christ over me;*

*Christ beside me*

*on my left and my right.*

*This day be within and without me,*

*lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.*

*Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;*

*in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.*

*This day be within and without me,*

*lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.*

*Christ as a light;*

*Christ as a shield;*

*Christ beside me*

*on my left and my right.*

**Blessing**

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,

wherever He may send you.

May He guide you through the wilderness,

protect you through the storm.

May He bring you home rejoicing

at the wonders He has shown you.

May He bring you home rejoicing

once again into our doors.