

**The Disciple's Path:
Can We Talk?**

Luke 11:1-4

“Conversation is the currency of change.”

A sermon preached by
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Last November, Carey and I had some free time on a Sunday afternoon, which is fairly unusual. So we decided to take an urban hike. We got the map from the recently completed Unexpected weekend, and we walked around downtown Fort Smith to see all the art that has been done on buildings downtown. There were some new pieces that we wanted to see, and we wanted to see the familiar ones up close. It took us about two hours, but I really came away with an appreciation for the creativity and beauty of many of the pieces of art. What a neat way that is to enliven the urban landscape! And how much more you see when you walk by them and really take them in as opposed to driving by them and just giving them a side glance.

Last week we began a new sermon series on “The Disciple’s Path,” comparing the life of discipleship to a walk down a path. Spiritual growth is slow; it takes time. It doesn’t happen in an instant. Remember, Christian discipleship is not a microwave meal; it’s a crock pot recipe.

The end product of the walk down this path is a relationship with God. We can grow from a shallow acquaintance to a friendship and even into intimacy with God over time. There are practices that we follow to achieve growth; we call them disciplines. (If that sounds curiously like “disciple,” there’s a reason.) We practice the disciplines so that we can open up our lives to God and be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Ultimately discipleship is not our work; it’s God’s work in us.

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and teacher on the spiritual life, once wrote, “Discipleship cannot be realized without discipline. ...The discipline of the Christian disciple is not to master anything, but rather to be mastered by the Spirit. True Christian discipline is the effort to create the space in which the Spirit of Christ can transform us into his image.”¹

So in this walk together over the next few weeks, we are going to talk about five spiritual disciplines that are contained in the vows of membership in the United Methodist Church. These are Prayers,

Presence, Gifts, Service, and Witness. Do you remember agreeing to pursue those disciplines when you joined the church (if you have)? The first one, and our subject today, is prayer.

Prayer is a good thing, right? We like prayer; we believe in prayer. We have the bumper stickers: “Prayer makes a difference. Prayer changes things.” Do we understand prayer? Not so much.

There was an old story about a little Methodist Church years ago when the Methodists were tee-totallers. There was a bar across the street from the church, and every Wednesday night at prayer meeting, the Methodists would pray for the Lord to do something about that bar. One night during a thunderstorm, lightning struck the bar, and it burned to the ground. The bar owner sued the church, contending that it was their prayers that caused the lightning strike. The church contested the lawsuit, claiming that it wasn't their fault. The judge heard the case, and said, “I'm not sure how I will rule on this case, but one thing is clear. The tavernkeeper believes in prayer, and the church people do not.”²

Prayer is not something we do to manipulate God into doing what we want God to do. It is a way we open up our lives to grow in our relationship with God and to learn what God wants us to do. Jim Harnish, in the book that forms the basis of this series, says, “In Scripture, the primary purpose of prayer is to enable us to live in an intimate relationship with God so that we become agents of God's saving purpose in the world. Prayer is not the process by which we get what we want from God, but the relationship in which God gets what God wants in and through us.”³

Prayer is a conversation with God, and conversations can take many forms. Think of the many forms of conversation you might have during the day: with your family and friends, with your boss, with your employee, with your teacher, with your coach, with your hairdresser, with the checker at Wal-Mart. There are many forms of conversation.

Prayers can take many forms as well. Prayers can be written by someone else, even centuries ago, for our use. Prayers can be totally

off-the-cuff. Prayer time can be extended time in a quiet place or momentary bursts in the middle of your daily activities. God hears all of them, no matter the form.

Today I have put several forms of prayer on your bulletin insert, just for you to have and take home and maybe use in your prayer time with God.

The first is the **ACTS pattern of prayer**. It starts with **Adoration**, saying words reflecting the character of God. These are words of praise. The Lord's Prayer (which can also be called the Disciple's Prayer) starts with Adoration: "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.*"⁴

The second act is **Confession**. This can be a time of self-examination. John and Charles Wesley loved to ask themselves hard questions about how they were doing in their walk of faith. Or confession can be us admitting that we have fallen short and have committed sins and are sorry for what we have done that has offended the holiness of God. In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "*Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*"⁵

The third act is **Thanksgiving**. These are simply expressions of gratitude for all our blessings. If you're having a bad day, just try saying to God, "Lord, I am thankful for ..." and fill in the blank. Your mood will pick up quickly. There is no thanksgiving word *per se* in the Lord's Prayer, but it's all over Scripture, like the frequent verse, "*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.*"⁶ Or as Paul says it in Philippians: "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*"⁷

Finally, after all that, there is the prayer of **Supplication** or **Intercession**. This is when we give God the list of what we want for ourselves and others. In the Lord's Prayer, the supplications include, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" and "*Do not bring us to the time of trial.*"⁸ To let God know what we want is not bad, but notice it's the

last thing, not the first. Commonly prayer seems like crawling up on Santa's lap at Christmastime. But it's about so much more.

The second prayer exercise is one many of us have seen before. It uses the fingers of one hand to help remind us of whom to pray for. This is a good form of prayer to use with children or grandchildren. No matter which hand you use, your thumb is closest to you. That reminds us to pray for those who are closest: family and friends, the deep relationships. Then for the pointer finger we pray for those who point the way, the persons in authority over our life. These might include teachers, professors, pastors, or mentors. The tallest finger represents our leaders—the President and Congress, our Governor and Legislature, our Mayor and City Council. We should pray for their wisdom, courage, and guidance in all they do. The fourth finger, the ring finger, is the weakest finger, and it reminds us to pray for those who are weakened by the circumstances of their lives: those who are sick or grieving, the poor and homeless and hungry, those suffering oppression and violence. And finally we get to the smallest finger, the pinky. Last and least, we pray for ourselves: what we need, what we hope for, how we can grow as disciples. Your own five fingers can be a pretty good guide to prayer.

Those two forms of prayer, the ACTS pattern and the Five Finger Prayer, are both mostly verbal. It can be like a one-sided conversation. There is another way to pray that is more about being still before God, listening in the silence for God's voice to speak to us. It's called **Contemplative Prayer**.

One form of contemplative prayer is called the **Jesus Prayer**, and it goes back to the early days of the Christian faith. It's also called the **Breath Prayer**, because the emphasis is not on the words so much as the pattern of breathing that opens up space for God. With each word or phrase—"Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy (or save me)"—you take a deep breath. If you can focus long enough and not get distracted, you can get into a state of deep relaxation and feel the presence of God. When I was in seminary I learned the Greek version

of the Jesus Prayer—“Ho Kyrios, Jesus Christos, Huios Theos, Eleison (or Soteria)”—which even takes you out of your English mindset. Plus each phrase in Greek has four syllables, so you can get in a better pattern of breathing.

Any type of mature prayer life includes Scripture. Scripture is the inspired Word of God. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*”⁹

Wesley encouraged his Methodists to develop the method of daily reading and meditation on Scripture. You can do this by being part of an ongoing Bible study group or by using a devotional book like the Upper Room. Or you can just pick up the Bible and read. The most important step is to pick it up; don’t let your Bible gather dust on your coffee table.

The Benedictine monks developed a method of reading and meditating on Scripture called “*Lectio Divina*” or “Divine Reading.” It involves reading a short passage three times and letting some word or image strike your imagination. Then you pray, asking God to reveal the meaning in the text for you. You can share your feelings with God or write a prayer about the word or image that struck you. Then you just get silent before God and rest in God’s Spirit. Block out the world and create space for God to speak. That’s much easier said than done, I know. But if you can combine the powerful words of Scripture and the loving presence of God, you cannot help but come out of your prayer time different than before.

It should be clear that the discipline of prayer is not about lists, either about what we want or what we want for others. That’s important, but

it's only one part of prayer. Prayer is about relationship, conversation, and intimacy with God.

The purpose of prayer is to move us down the path. I have a friend who is a church consultant. His name is Gil Rendle, and he works all over the nation, mostly now with larger organizations within the denominations like the Council of Bishops, District Superintendents, and annual conferences. He worked with the Arkansas Annual Conference for a couple of years, and I was on that committee, then I was in a group of Superintendents under his tutelage. One of Gil's favorite proverbs that I will never forget is, "Conversation is the currency of change." When there are differing opinions or an organization is stuck in unproductive activity, the most important thing to do is to keep talking to one another. Don't shut off communication. Keep the conversation going, because conversation is the currency of change, and no real change is likely to come about without lots of conversation.

The purpose of discipleship is to change, to grow, to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. As Paul said, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*"¹⁰ The language of transformation is prayer.

I read in a colleague's sermon about a woman named Becky Tirabassi, who gave this witness: "I was the child of an alcoholic. And yes, I was an alcoholic myself. These two things alone created enough for the psychologists to spend years with someone. And yet, an hour a day with God began to unravel, unfold, reveal, and heal the mess that was within me in a very gentle, positive, and renewing way. And my possibilities changed, too. I was no longer destined to live in a little two-mile radius. Hopes and dreams, ideas and goals, plans and problems—all bombarded me so much I had to do something about them. God was giving me ideas to change my world, my home, my church, and myself."

Now listen to Becky's point: "The person God created you to be can be unleashed if you'll just spend time with [God]. Perhaps it's time to go to the school of prayer, to get your education for where [God] wants to take you, by clinging to [God] on a daily basis, hearing [God's] will, and letting [God] change your character and give you your real life's plan."¹¹

God wants to unleash your life. God wants to set you free to be the awesome person God created you to be. For almost all of us, that is going to require some change. We will have to continue the process of transformation. Conversation is the currency of change. Prayer is the way we have a conversation with the One who made us and wants to make us complete. Practice the discipline of prayer, and you will grow in discipleship. You will move on down the path. You will come closer to the image of Christ that God created you to be.

¹ Henri Nouwen, "A Self-Empty Heart: The Disciplines of Spiritual Formation," *Sojourners*, August 20, 1981, 20.

² James A. Harnish and Justin LaRosa, *A Disciple's Path* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 28F.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴ Luke 11:1.

⁵ Luke 11:4.

⁶ Psalm 106:1.

⁷ Philippians 4:6.

⁸ Luke 11:3-4.

⁹ 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

¹⁰ Romans 12:2.

¹¹ From a sermon by Dr. Norman Neaves.