

Words We Are Given
Matthew 10:1-4, 18-20

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United Church of Christ
5th Sunday in Lent – March 18, 2018

I.

Good Morning this 5th Sunday in Lent, the “springtime of the soul.” We enter Lent hearing the stories of Jesus in the desert wilderness, in a season of resistance. He models resisting temptation by a Voice of Challenge, who offers him bread, power, and a chance to prove himself as Messiah. Jesus resists.

This week we saw students leading our country in a resistance movement against idolatrous gun laws. I don’t know if you felt this way too, but I was moved to tears, both by their profound protest and also by the tragedies that have created a need for children and youth to protest. These young people are making a difference in our world, and I bet that in their lifetimes, they will change the gun laws in our country. As the prophet Isaiah says, “a little child shall lead them.”

Our sermon series during Lent is about resisting temptations in our prayer life. This morning we are talking about the Formulaic Temptation– the temptation to treat prayer as a rote formula with no life in it.

II.

So I want to say right away that sometimes using a formula for prayer can be positive. Familiar prayers can be comforting when we are distressed, angry, or heartbroken. Jesus himself taught his disciples the Lord’s Prayer–and part of his own Jewish faith likely would have included reciting certain prayers. The Lord’s Prayer, praying with prayer beads and reading scripture can be healing. Turning to the poetry of Psalms can give us the words when we can’t find language to match our pain. Memorizing a prayer or a passage that speaks to you can help support you in times of trouble. These are all formulas that can be useful tools for prayer.

When we are first learning to create a prayer practice, it can help to have a routine–if not a specific prayer that helps us spiral inward. As Pastor Ben has mentioned, it might even be just one word that we use to center ourselves in prayer– a word like “mercy” or “open”– to repeat internally for several minutes. And it can be helpful to

look at models of saints who have gone before us to see how they prayed. Through their guidance we might pick up some best practices.

At the same time, there is a danger in thinking that “saying your prayers” is the same as “praying.” That’s where the Formulaic Temptation comes in: when prayer becomes thoughtless routine rather than relationship with God; when we believe prayer doesn’t count because we didn’t say certain words; when we say the prayer we memorized, but we aren’t really praying the words. When we go through the motions but just don’t have our heart in it. Or when a formula becomes the only way we know how to talk to God. There’s a difference between the words we have been given to say as a formula, and the words that the spirit provides when we sit in prayer, and that’s the heart of our scripture reading this morning.

III.

Pat Lynch, who’s written about evangelism in the Catholic Church, says, “Not once did Jesus make his disciples pray. He just kept on praying until they could contain their hunger no longer and asked him to teach them to pray.” So many times in his life, Jesus went up a mountain or in a boat or away from the crowds to pray. He modeled a contemplative prayer practice for them– and when asked, he offered the Lord’s Prayer as an example. He didn’t say with his words or actions that the Lord’s Prayer is the only prayer we can offer. In fact, in our scripture reading today, Jesus says, “do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time.” He seems to encourage us not to worry about how to do it, or making sure we “get it right” with the exact words– but to trust that the Spirit will provide us with the words to say.

Prayer is not about having thought-through the “perfect” words to say to God, as if God doesn’t already know the stirrings of your heart. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is a Baptist minister in North Carolina who works with The Poor People’s Campaign, and is an anti-racism activist. He says, “Truth is, God is not glorified when we try to live...as perfect people. Communities that strive for perfection are always weeding out the imperfect people–until there is no one left.” We aren’t looking for perfection in our church community, and we aren’t aiming to offer perfect prayers to God. We want to lift up honest, uncensored prayers– and trust that the words will flow because the Holy Spirit will coax them out of us. And no matter what our prayer sounds like, we trust that God is holding us and our prayer with Love. When we are tempted to use formulaic prayer as a crutch that keeps us from authentic relationship with God, we might want to ask ourselves–what will actually help me know God better? Will it help me to know God better if I talk with God like a close Friend? Or if I look for

signs of holiness around me and savor them? Or if I listen more intently to children? Or read the Bible?

However, noticing the pitfalls of formulaic prayer does not mean that prayer should be without any form at all. Some preachers use this exact scripture to say that they don't need to prepare sermons, they will just wait for the Spirit to move them. I'd say - we at least need an outline to preach from, or to pray from. In my work with children, I see that healthy boundaries allow for freedom and creativity within the container of a household or classroom. I was recently given the image of a river - what helps make a river healthy are its banks - it will flow well from one place to another when its boundaries are clear. If you take the banks away, the water just leaks around without direction, a marsh. Or if you place too many banks around a river - if you place banks on all sides - it becomes a stagnant swamp, a place where water rots. The form of prayer ought to be like the banks of a healthy river, where boundaries allow for movement and freedom and creativity within.

The great theologian and civil rights activist, Howard Thurman, in his book Meditations of the Heart has another image to add to our river and swamp analogy. Dr. Thurman writes about being like a reservoir. He argues that a reservoir has healthy boundaries, with a place for water to flow in and a place for it to flow out. And it has a deep holding space. He asks, "Are you a reservoir? Are you a resource which may be drawn upon in times of others' needs and your own as well? Have you developed a method for keeping your inlet and your outlet in good working order so that the cup which you give is never empty? As a reservoir, you are a trustee of all the gifts God has shared with you. You know they are not your own." Maybe Dr. Thurman's image of a reservoir is even better than a flowing river. Prayer is a way to collect the resources we need into a spiritual reservoir. So to support the spiritual health of our reservoir, we need form without making the formula itself into our prayer.

We've been talking about formula in terms of individual prayer. But there's also the reservoir that is held in community. We collectively hold a safe container every Sunday when we pray together as the church. And this deep reservoir that God co-creates with us, can help sustain our community. Here in worship, we usually follow a familiar form. Pastor Ben and I strive to be conscientious stewards of our liturgy every Sunday. We tend to the structure and explore ways for the Spirit to flow wild and free within the boundaries of liturgy. But there can be a temptation for church people, whether pastors or laypeople, to make our worship overly formulaic. Worship works best when we can be flexible within the form of liturgy.

This week I heard our own church member, Emma Steyn, offer her senior project at Credo High School. The title of her project was, "Trying to look graceful while suspended high in the air." Emma spent several months learning how to do aerial poses using long silks that hang from a high ceiling or circus tent. She showed photographs of herself suspended in the air, with her arms and legs wrapped around the silks; one especially beautiful pose was called The Gazelle. She said that practicing aerial silks allowed her to grow in strength and flexibility. It seems like a courageous physical feat to be able to use fabric to suspend one's body in the air. But perhaps Emma's fabric is like scaffolding, the same way that the structure of familiar prayer can hold us up. Perhaps our church will continue to grow in strength and flexibility—supported not by silks but by prayer—that we might experience the dynamic movement of the Spirit in our worship life. Because we want to be ready when God's life-giving, healing, justice-making message shines through, and to be ready means to hold the form while allowing for freedom to flow within it.

IV.

So we've explored individual prayer. We've thought about communal prayer in worship. Now if we go to the next circle out, we might consider Christianity itself as a prayer. Jesus lived and preached and healed in a time when Roman imperialism reigned. Today's Bible passage got me thinking, I wonder what about "empire" is formulaic? In other words, is there a formula employed by imperialism to create and retain power for itself? I think so—the use of distraction, fear, restricting movement and information, the oppression of the vulnerable, and creating division.

But if the "empire" is formulaic, perhaps the prophetic Christian tradition cannot truly be confined to formula. Christianity is about a desire to bring forth God's kingdom as preached by Jesus. A kingdom where the mountains are made low, the rich sent empty away, tables of corruption overturned, God's holy presence affirmed. It's about caring for each other as a prayer. And there's no exact formula for that—the life and teachings of Jesus are our form, but the wild and vital Spirit of Christianity cannot be contained. We have inherited the prophetic Christian tradition of following Jesus while holding an openness for God's kingdom to find its expression in us, our church, the world, in new and unexpected ways. Because when you're subverting the forces of empire, when you're walking out of school to stand up for what is right, when you're visiting someone in the hospital, when you're participating in God's vision of the kingdom, you're going to need form without being formulaic. You're going to need the words given from Spirit. You're going to need a sustaining reservoir that is deeper than what you can create on your own. You're going to need scaffolding that lets you fly. Amen.