

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 11, 2012
Sermon Title: "Time to Learn How to Pray, Boy!"
Scripture: Mathew 6:5-15
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 6:5-15

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

'Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The most fervent prayer I've ever been part of happened suddenly, on a flight over Africa. We were flying from Kinshasa, Zaire, to Kampala, Uganda, and the bottom fell out of the flight. We started dropping fast, one of those sudden losses of altitude where the plane shakes, the lights go out, luggage bins slide open, baggage starts flying around the plane. People start screaming, and there was a whole lot of praying. *A whole lot of praying.* Hail Marys, the Lord's Prayer, some people standing up, shouting to the Lord, some sitting quietly, holding hands. As luck would have it, I was actually reading my Bible, so I just kept on reading.

Prayer is a fascinating phenomenon. It fascinates and intrigues and perplexes the whole world. Every religion does it, every single religion, and I've personally experienced most of them. They all do prayer. There are 6 billion people in the world, atheists claim 10 percent (I doubt it). Which makes me, as a believer, an agnostic about atheism, which is a heck of a sentence. But let's give atheists 10 percent. That leaves 5,400,000,000 people who pray one way or another. Most people pray verbally, with words, maybe silently, maybe out loud, like the folks on my plane; maybe in between, like muttering.

People also like visual, tactile symbols of prayer so that we can feel more as though we are seeing the prayers go off to heaven. That's why Catholics and Episcopalians use all that incense. The Bible says, " Let my prayer be counted as incense before you ..." (Psalm 141:2) and in the Book of Revelation, the Bible describes, " ... golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." In other words, we see that smoke, gently rising up to the heavens as if carrying our prayers to God.

I remember being in Kathmandu in Nepal, and in other Buddhist areas. You'd see prayer flags, briskly flapping in the wind, the wind carrying your prayers to God. And my favorite was a temple in Kathmandu that had these gigantic — I mean gigantic — prayer wheels, huge, huge cylinders with big wooden spokes ... the gigantic cylinders, big as a car, were filled with written prayers, and the worshipers pushed on the wooden spokes, turning the huge cylinders, a human-powered prayer machine, creating a force field of prayers headed off to God.

Everybody prays. The old joke about prayer in public schools is there will be prayer in public schools as long as there are math tests. Everybody prays. One of my favorite rock 'n' roll bands is R.E.M., and one of their most important songs is "Everybody Hurts." When you see the video, it really is one long prayer, because everybody hurts sometimes; everybody cries, everybody needs, everybody fears, everybody wants sometimes. So, sooner or later, everybody prays. You can push your prayer wheel, you can light your incense, you can lift your arms or fold your hands, you can kneel or bow your head, you can pray the rosary. Sooner or later, everybody prays.

At our church, we've turned the seven weeks of Lent over to prayer: what is it, how to do it? What are the rules, guidelines, tips? Next Sunday, we're even having a "Prayer Breakfast"! Everybody wants to know, what is a "Prayer Breakfast"? Are we going to sit around praying for an hour while munching on a bagel? Not quite. It's a real breakfast, with good food; and during breakfast, with your coffee in hand and fellowship around the table, we'll find some ways to pray. Simple ways, creative ways, nothing

embarrassing. No, you're not going to be called upon. Just some real, fresh breakfast and some real, fresh prayer.

Let me tell you how I learned to pray. Right after seminary, I was the associate pastor of a large, thriving Baptist Church up in Haverhill, Massachusetts. I did all the youth work and a bunch of other stuff, but I didn't get to preach much. But when I didn't preach, I got to give the morning pastoral prayer, which in a Baptist Church is a big deal. There were 400 or 500 people in church. Plus we were live on the radio. I'd stand up before a big, impressive, beautiful pulpit and offer my prayer. I worked on the prayer for hours every week, each word carefully crafted. We talk about prayer as "going before the throne of grace," and I wanted each word to be perfect, to sound holy and religious, and I needed to express the needs and concerns and hopes of all my people. It was page after page of carefully scripted prayer, artfully written, much practiced, ready for perfection, meant to dazzle the congregation and impress God.

The senior pastor of the church was a big bear of a man. He'd just come from the Midwest with a down-home Midwest sort of country drawl. On one Sunday morning, as I stood at the massive pulpit, ready to deliver my perfect prayer, he reached over, took away all my pages of prayer, and whispered to me. "Time to learn how to pray, boy! Time to learn how to pray."

There I stood before hundreds of worshipers and what I assumed were millions listening on radio hanging on my every word. It was "time to learn how to pray, boy." That was 1971. I haven't written a prayer since then, in 41 years. That man probably did me the biggest favor of my pastoral career. He taught me, he forced me, he dared me, he made me go one-on-one with God, from the heart, spontaneous, no prep, let the hems and haws have their place, give up the "thees and thous," just God and I, sometimes with you listening in.

I'm not opposed to a prayer wheel. If you want to install some big old prayer wheel out on the green, if you want us to start having incense up here on the altar, if you all want to start bringing rosary beads to church, if next summer you want a field of prayer flags outside, that's all O.K. with me.

But if there's just one lesson I'm trying to get across this Lent, just one lesson, it would be this: at its most basic, prayer is conversation with God. Period. Simple. *Prayer is conversation with God.*

During Lent, I'm doing a seven-week Bible study series on prayer, and the first three weeks have been basic conversational prayer: Adam and Eve

talking with God in the Garden, Cain snapping at God and whining, the Psalmists telling God, "I don't think you're being very helpful," a businessman asking God to increase his business, a king asking God to help him figure things out. Not a fancy word in the bunch, not much theology, most of it real, personal, direct.

Now, that's not all there is to prayer, I understand that. We can all improve our prayer life. That's why the disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray — we need help, we need some guidelines, some tips." So Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer, a terrific formula, some praise, some acknowledgment, a few demands, a resounding finish with hope. Good balance. Prayer can't be all praise, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, life is wonderful, you're wonderful, Amen." But prayer can't be all "Gimme, gimme, gimme" either.

We studied a prayer this week at The Gathering, our weekly Bible Study, called "The Prayer of Jabez." A man named Bruce Wilkinson wrote a book about it a few years ago, so it was wildly popular for a while, especially in business circles, and as a motivational tool. It's a simple prayer: "God, bless me, increase my territory, stay close to me, protect me."

The Bible tells us two things: one, Jabez was an honorable man; two, God answered his prayer. So, good for him. But we all agreed it was a bit self-focused. Somewhere in his prayer life, maybe not that morning, maybe later in the afternoon, maybe the next day, he needed to lift his sights a bit. Maybe he needed to increase his own territory, broaden his own boundaries, expand his own horizons. Maybe something like, "God, increase my territory, help me to be prosperous, sure enough. And, oh, by the way, thank you for all the goodness in my life, and be with the family next door during their sickness, and help us to feed the hungry in Somalia. And now I have to get back to work, thanks to that extra territory you've given me! Amen."

A little balance. My rule of thumb is this: whom do you love? I mean, really love? Whom do you really, really like? Who is your really good friend, one you can't wait to see and to talk to? You've got somebody on your mind right now, maybe two or three? A best friend? A child away at college, a parent, sibling, a loved one? Add God to that list, and talk to God the way you talk to that very select group of people you just conjured up in your mind. Be that free, that open, that honest, that direct.

We don't communicate that way with everybody. With most folks, we hold back, we keep some distance, we are measured, hesitant, cautious. But we have someone, maybe a couple of someones with whom we are completely safe, completely at ease, completely honest. Add God to that list.

Certainly one of the most popular hymns of all is "What a Friend We Have In Jesus," which goes on to say, "all our sins and griefs to bear. What is a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer." That's very much Greenfield Hill Church theology: God as friend to whom you can bring anything. *Anything.*

Now, let's be honest. Prayer is also a mystery. I once heard a preacher say, "Prayer isn't like going to Santa Claus, where you get everything you ask for!" Actually, prayer is very much like Santa Claus. I've sat on Santa's lap, and I didn't get all I asked for. I've sat my kids on Santa's lap. They didn't get all they asked for. And I've watched my grandkids sit on Santa's lap, and they didn't get all they asked for. When we treat God like Santa Claus, we get Santa Claus results. Talk to him once a year, hope for a 50-50 result. I think prayer offers more. Prayer offers us a relationship with God.

For a variety of reasons, I've spent four days of this past week at my favorite coffee house up on the Yale campus. Of course, the place is full of Yale students, and you can learn a lot by observing. The first day, this young man, 19 or 20 years old, comes in, sits down, and is quickly smitten by a young woman of 19 or 20. He sits at his table way across the room from the woman. He's got his laptop, his textbook, but try as he might, he can't take his eyes off her. He doesn't get any work done. He just stares. The next day, to his amazement, she's back at the coffeehouse, and he finds a table as close as he can to her, next to me, almost shoulder to shoulder. Never says a word to her, but he doesn't move away, either. He's zeroed in. The third day, after a couple of painful, arduous hours, he gets out of his chair, wearing his Yale sweatshirt, sweat pouring down his face, and he walks the two feet to her chair where she's sitting, wearing *her* Yale sweatshirt, and he says to her, "Do you go to college near here?" Maybe not the best line I've ever heard ... but two hours later they were still talking. On the fourth day, they walked into my coffeehouse hand in hand. They had the beginning of a relationship, friendship, or who knows what, but they had a beginning, something to build on.

That's prayer. It's not always smooth, it can be awkward, some fits and starts, some risk, some disappointment, but when it comes together, it's sweet. All I'm suggesting is start the conversation. You don't need a good line, and you might end up hand in hand.