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Date: December 29, 2019
Sermon Title: "The Best Tool in Our Tool Chest"
Scripture: Matthew 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.

Don Imus died this week, and my brush with his fame was brief and inconsequential. For several years I had a radio show on NBC's FM station on "Religion and Rock 'n' Roll." Every week I would take the subway to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, take the elevator up to my studio, and tape my show, even on topics like today's, "Prayer."

I still have the old reel-to-reel tapes up in my attic. You'd get a kick out of them. Let's say I was going to focus on prayer. Well, I'd pick five or six rock 'n' roll songs whose titles or lyrics fit in. From the Rolling Stones to Dylan to Reggae to Folk. There was plenty to draw from. Some songs were obvious.

Remember?

*Goin' up to the Spirit in the sky
That's where I'm going to go when I die
When I die and they lay me to rest
I'm gonna go to the place that's the best.*

The song that got me the show, my audition tape, was Bill Withers's

*Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend
I'll help you carry on . . .
You just call on me, brother, when you need a hand,
We all need somebody to lean on.*

That's just a secular pop song, a Top 40 version of this one:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear,
What a privilege to carry,
Everything to God in prayer.*

So in my NBC studio, I'm playing Black Sabbath, seriously, and Bob Marley, and linking it all together with Scripture, pastoral advice, mini-sermons so small they wouldn't know I was preaching. Meanwhile, in the very next studio, Imus was doing his thing. A "shock jock," they called him. And I'd like to listen in, meet on the elevators, see his guests.

Imus's lingering impact on my career lasts until today. He always referred to the "Baby Jesus," and not in the most reverent way. So me, I've got to deal with the Christmas story for a full month, every year, and every time I mention "the Baby Jesus," Imus is in my head, and I'm thinking, in yours too. As recently as Tuesday night, Christmas Eve, I found myself using the "Infant Jesus" to move Imus off my page! Or at least out of my head.

My NBC career ended when they hired a new producer. He called me in, said he had to cut my salary because of belt-tightening. I said, "But you're not paying me anything." "O.K.," he said, "then you're fired." But I did have a good three-year run. I got to see all those old "Saturday Night Live" people rehearsing midweek.

Now, back to prayer. There's stuff you can do by yourself to make a difference, change the world, fix a problem. You don't need God directly. You don't need me. You don't need the government.

As you know, I was with Habitat for Humanity International as President and Director of Operations for many years. Habitat's founder was a charismatic Alabama lawyer, Millard Fuller, a tall hyper-energetic visionary. He once told me, "We're going to build a decent house for everybody in the world, then we'll tackle some other problem."

Over the years together, I took many long walks with him, New York City, rural Georgia—I could name 100 places we walked, his talking a mile a minute about some new plan, crisis, fundraising idea, or Bible thought he'd had. But it was hard to talk with him. He was forever stopping, bending over, picking up trash, accumulating assorted garbage, cigarette butts, beer cans . . . it was annoying, humorous, and inspiring to the point where I started bending over and picking up garbage myself while we walked. Two men, out for a walk, planning to change the world, stopping every four or five steps to pick up litter. That was something we could do all by ourselves.

Jesus recognizes the same thing. He recognizes that there are some things that we can do just because they need to get done. And there are some things we need help with. In his most famous declaration of what it takes to get into heaven, Jesus says: "Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, visit the lonely." Four simple steps that any one of us can do, any one or all four, by ourselves, or collectively with others, directly, or by donation.

But some things aren't quite so hands-on or so readily accomplished or that straightforward. On one occasion, the Disciples tried to help a family in distress. Their son was very troubled, and the Disciples failed. They couldn't do a thing. Jesus told them, "Some things can only happen by prayer and fasting."

That's the basic parallel universe in living a Christlike life. Some things you do because you can. It's in your hands. It's up to you. Some things you bring to God. That's where prayer comes in. Prayer is a mystery to a lot of people only because we've made it too complicated. Lots of Christianity has highly formalized written prayers with precise phrasing, theological underpinnings, holy sounding words like this:

"Lord, God of the universe, the Creator of all that was and is and is to be, we do humbly beseech Thee to open wide the storehouse of your blessings and pour down upon us faithful servants such sanctification and vision that we may move mightily to magnify Thy Holy Name and more worthily serve those who cry out to Thee in need. Amen."

Great prayer, but with the clergy sounding like that for centuries, you can see why people are hesitant to pray on their own, or out loud, or in public.

If I were to announce that in about 15 minutes, after the final hymn, I'm going to randomly pick someone to come up here to the altar and offer a closing prayer . . . how many of you would squirm and sweat, waiting for the fickle finger of fate to fall on you? We've made prayer unnecessarily daunting, so let's undaunt it.

That's what today's Scripture is for. Jesus's Disciples had been following Jesus for a while. They observed that he was a man of prayer. They could see firsthand the impact prayer had on Jesus, how it strengthened him, focused him, energized him. They wanted the secret. So they said, "Lord, teach us to pray." This story is told in Matthew and Luke, put the two together and we have Jesus's whole teaching.

First, he tells us not to get caught up in words, length of words, fancy words, repetitive words. Just get to the point. Second, he gives us a model prayer, "The Lord's Prayer," an outline for effective prayer. It's unfortunate that we've turned it into *the* prayer, as though once we've said that, we've got the bases covered. Not really. We've elevated it to "The LORD's Prayer," and that's fine; heck, if it was good enough for Jesus, it should be good enough for us. But it is meant as a sample prayer. A practice swing.

To become a pastor I had to write an "Ordination Paper," laying out my beliefs. Later on, to get my doctoral degree, I had to write a thesis. On each occasion, the committee chairperson gave me a detailed guideline: how to set it up, what to include. They didn't do it for me. But they gave me a path to success.

"The Lord's Prayer" is our path to "prayer" success. And the outline is straightforward. Nice opening: "Our Father, who art in heaven"; tell God what you think of God: "Hallowed be thy name"; tell God what you'll do for God: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"; tell God what you need: "Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil"; say thanks: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory"; end it. "Forever and ever. Amen."

There's your outline. You fill in the blanks. You turn The Lord's Prayer into Your Prayer. To add my own hints for successful prayer, I'll suggest these: One, be specific. Generalities are nice, you can throw some of these in: peace in the world, an end to cancer, no more poverty, stop destroying the planet. All noble, worthwhile prayers. But go deeper.

Alida and nine others from our Church flew to India Friday night, and they'll be driving the treacherous roads of India for nine days. Yes, I want all flights to be

trouble free, all passengers everywhere to arrive safely. But in my prayers, I pray for Emirates Flight 202 from JFK to Dubai, from Dubai to Hyderabad, and then van travel for nine days. And by next Sunday, I'll be praying for Emirates Flight 201 from Hyderabad to Dubai and from Dubai to JFK. Because that's personal, that's on my mind, on my heart; that's where my worries and focus are.

The next tip is to be humble. The very reason you take some concern to God is you've already realized that concern is beyond your immediate direct control. When I was walking with Millard Fuller, he didn't stop, bow his head, close his eyes, and pray, "Dear God, help me to bend over and pick up trash. Amen." Nope, we just did it. Here are two able-bodied men. There's trash. Pick it up.

But a lot of life begs for Divine help. Help, or wisdom or discernment or understanding. Contentious issues, like presidential politics, impeachment, climate change. Overwhelming personal issues like health, career, family. Big decisions like retirement, marriage, moving, relationships, new job. International crises like North Korea, Israel/Palestine, migrants, China.

As every one of us has yelled out from time to time, "Can I get a little help here!?" That's what prayer is. A call for help. For advice, insight, Divine intervention, wisdom, perspective. There really is no mystery to prayer. There is mystery to how prayer is answered, how do we attribute that, credit it, how do we deal with unanswered prayer, differently answered prayer from what we prayed for?

That's a whole other topic. And a crucial one. Absolutely. But today I'm advocating for the "nuts and bolts" of prayer. How prayer works. First and foremost, prayer opens you up. Yes, of course, to God's intervention, God's voice, however that may come. But to start with, prayer all by itself opens you up. To pray, you've got to form words, make sentences, develop ideas; and for that to happen you have to think, at least a bit. Even blurting out is a thought process.

Have you ever done any kind of counseling? Individual counseling, group therapy, career counseling, or life coaching? Even a personal trainer? It's the same process. By virtue of entering into counseling, therapy, coaching, you are opening yourself up.

Last year at this time I couldn't walk. *Couldn't walk*. I went to the doctor; he quickly gave me his secretary's card so she could make an appointment for surgery. He was going to double-replace my already double-knee replacement. To say I was depressed would be a gross understatement. Alida insisted, and many of you insisted that I go to a certain doctor at a certain hospital. And that doctor said, "No, you don't need new artificial knees; you need therapy. Lots of it. And so, I put myself in the hands physical therapists downtown at Preneta. Three

times a week, an hour and a half each time, for 10 weeks. I opened myself up to them. I brought myself into their presence. I explained clearly my dilemma. They wanted to know my needs and expectations. I had to tell them what I'd been doing wrong. I had to change what I was doing wrong. I had to confront my weaknesses and failures and limitations. I had to be honest with them. I had to listen to them. I had to accept the changes and suggestions they made. I had to *want* to be better. I had to put the work in to get better.

You've gotten my point already: that was an absolute parallel to prayer. Do you mind if I repeat some of that parallel? It's a short sermon, so another minute won't hurt.

I said: "I put myself in the hands of the therapists. I brought myself into their presence. I clearly explained my situation. They wanted to know my needs. I told them what I had done wrong. I had to change what I had done wrong. I had to confront my weaknesses, failures, and limitations. I had to be honest. I had to listen. I had to accept the changes and suggestions they made. I had to *want* to be better. I had to put the work in to get better."

That's true of every kind of therapy, counseling, training, coaching you can imagine. And true of prayer. Doing that much means, right off the bat, prayer works. And it takes work. None of this is "one and done."

Have I already mentioned that to become a pastor I had to have a year of therapy? Required. To get my doctorate, I had to have a year of therapy. All of us. There was no assumption that I was weak, or a lesser person, or troubled. The assumption was that I was human. And as a human I could use someone to talk to. That's the starting point of prayer. Opening yourself up, recognizing, "Hey, I could use a little help here." Being willing to talk and listen. On another Sunday we can look at the listening part, being on the receiving end of prayer with God.

Today, my New Year's sermon is to set you off on the right foot. A worthy New Year's resolution would be to pray a little bit every day. Try it. Start it. As Nike forever, and correctly, tells us, "JUST DO IT."

Let me close with a story. Decades ago I attended an "Evangelism" conference in Manhattan, and one of the preachers talked about a "Prayer Covenant." He explained that he often did this with his Church members.

Someone would come to him with a concern, a situation, a predicament, seemingly beyond a simple solution. Not one of those "I can handle this myself" things. More like a "Hey, I could use a little help here" thing. The preacher said he would then invite the Church member to join him in a 30-day "prayer covenant."

Every day, for 30 days, at exactly the same time, not together, but wherever they might be, each in his own place, would stop what he was doing and pray about the troubling matter at hand.

The next week I was back in my Church, and a friend came to me, told me he needed to get a divorce, and proceeded to explain in blunt detail what a horrible woman he was married to. So I said, "Sure, but let's pray about it together." I explained it all to him. Every day, for 30 days, at exactly the same time, no matter where we were, we would stop and pray about the same thing. We'd pray about him, his awful marriage, his horrible wife, and his urgent need for divorce.

He agreed. And we started. A week later he dropped by again. "I just want to be clear," he said, "she's a miserable person, but truth is I'm probably 10 percent at fault. I've done a thing or two that didn't help." "Fair enough," I said, "let's keep praying."

A week later, two weeks into this 30-day prayer covenant, he sat with me again, a bit chagrined. "You know, Reverend, I'll admit, she hasn't had it easy with me. I'm doing the divorce. I just need to be more straight with you. I'm no doubt half the problem." "Thank you," I said, "let's keep praying."

Well, you can guess the rest of the story. After the third week, he sat with me, tears rolling down his face, telling me, and God, what a horrible person he had been, what a poor husband, unkind, impatient, inattentive. "It's my fault," he told me.

You see, the point of the Prayer Covenant Is that you won't lie to God for 30 days. A, either you'll stop praying; there's no sense talking to God if your lying. Or, B, you'll start being truthful in your prayer. Prayer sorts things out. It opens things up. It gets things started. It sorts things out. It helps.

With his "Lord's Prayer," Jesus was giving us a "jumpstart." But just like "jumpstarting" your car, it gets you rolling, but then you have to do the driving. That's when real prayer kicks in.

Happy New Year!

For our final hymn today, let's sing "The Lord's Prayer," No. 307.

*Our Father, which art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from the evil:
for thine is the kingdom, and the power
and the glory, forever,
Amen. Amen.*