

Our scripture today led me to reflect on the great work we are doing as a community. I also believe it also has a call for us. This call may be different for each person, or God may be calling us as a community in a common direction. Let's take a look again at the scripture. I will read it three times. Wash over you, highlighted word or phrase, call for your life.

Are any of you in trouble? Then pray. Are any of you in good spirits? Then sing a hymn of praise. Are any of you sick? Then call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over those who are sick and anoint them with oil in the name of Christ. And this prayer offered in faith will make them well, and Christ will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. So confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

In our community there are many times during the week that we pray. We pray when we write our prayers in our prayer book and when the pastoral care team gathers a prayer list. We pray on Sunday mornings with words and with silence and at the beginning of our meetings when we gather and offer devotionals. We pray through movement, breath and intention during yoga as well as under the piano during worship. We pray during Centering Prayer workshops and we pray with our bodies when we use body prayers. We pray when we hug, offer the peace of Christ and hold each other's hands. We pray when we sing. We pray together in community and we also pray individually. Our community is deepening our relationship with God through engaging more and more intentionally in the spiritual practice of prayer.

I think we're headed in the right direction. This was highlighted at the Centering Prayer workshop last weekend when we had over 20 people attend. Many from our community as well as a number that drove all the way from Coquitlam to participate in this practice. People in our community are yearning for opportunities to deepen our spiritual lives. It is my vision that Lynn Valley United becomes a place where people know they can come to heal and transform through spiritual practice. It is my vision that our congregation will hold such a strong and steady spiritual presence, vibration, that people will be magnetically drawn to this place. I have seen evidence of this happening. I honestly cannot count the number of times people have told me, in one way or another, they feel "pulled" to this place, that they have been nudged by a presence greater than themselves to walk through our doors. I believe it is the fruits of our practice that are laying the foundation for new people to emerge. God is responding in big ways to small movements in her direction.

In addition to looking at *when* we pray, it is also important to look at how we pray. Let me begin by saying that any time we pray, any time we desire connection with God we are moving closer to God. There is not a wrong way to pray. However, I do

believe that there are ways we can structure our prayers that will support us to transform and enable us to move more easily closer to God.

Take a moment to think about the content of your prayers. What do you pray for? What do you say to God? When do you pray? The content of your prayers can be used as a clue to see how you understand God, God's will and the relationship you have to each. It might be confusing to think about how we can pray again and again for something, but it doesn't work out that way. If this were a scientific experiment, we might deduce that prayer does not work. Being as we live in a society that is largely influenced by a scientific based ideology it is no wonder that people have stopped praying. So why hold out? Why keep praying? Is this simply a way that the church is hanging onto old traditions for the sake of tradition? I think absolutely not. I think when we pray for things in the physical world to happen in our way, whether it is for a parking spot, a good grade on an exam, or even a friend to be cured from illness, we can easily become dismayed. We quickly find that our will is not always God's will. Can you imagine what would happen if God really answered every prayer? With the level of consciousness currently operating in society this would be a frightening reality full of self-indulgence. For those of you who are movie goers- think Bruce Almighty.

On the other hand, there are miraculous accounts of healing through prayer. Many examples are found in scriptures and many more recent examples can also be found. But it never seems consistent. How do *you* explain this? There is not one right answer. This is a real question. Are the scriptures inaccurate? Were the accounts coincidence? Are the people that claim faith healings crazy? What is this mystery of prayer? Can we influence the will of God? What about the ever popular idea of "law of attraction"? Is this similar? How you understand the mystery of prayer will influence how you engage in the practice. For me, there are mysterious parts about prayer I do not understand. What I do know is that prayer has the power to change and transform us. I know this because it is in our scripture, I have been taught about this from spiritual teachers and I have been fortunate to have opportunities to practice prayer in community and be transformed and healed by this practice.

Thomas Keating writes: "The fundamental purpose of prayer, including prayer of petition, is not to get something from God, or to change God, but to change ourselves. When we have changed, God can give us everything we want, because our will, will be one with God's, and we will want only what God wants." (*Heart of the World p.63*) I think this is key in understanding prayer. When our will is inline with God's will, prayers will be answered. We pray to change ourselves. It aligns our will with God's will.

Caroline Myss describes three different stages of prayer. In the first stage she describes people as being "Stuffologists". Asking for 'stuff' from God. "Please bring me more stuff, take care of my stuff, don't take my stuff". Included in this category are prayers for what we want, "please let my business succeed, bring me, give me etc". When you find yourself praying in this way, I invite you to also pray saying,

“God, help me surrender to your will”. I think surrender is a key step in the process of transformation and healing. Surrender takes trust. We cannot know God’s plan. Sometimes there are things in life that cause us great pain. Sometimes we want to control and grasp. We can use prayer as simply another attempt to control. When we do this, we are out of line with God’s will. Anytime we are out of line with God’s will, we will experience discomfort. When we pray to God we must always include an allowing, a desire that our will is inline with the highest good of all and with God’s will.

The second stage Caroline teaches are prayers to guide our inner lives. Caroline says, “people will naturally evolve -- like it or not -- to a place where they have to begin to approach life from within their own being. Introspection and self-examination become the priorities, and prayers mature to requests for directives to understand the nature of one's soul.” Summing it up, in this second stage, we want to understand our souls and become closer to God, we ask God to help with this process.

The third stage Caroline describes is transcendent. Prayers without requests. Simply a desire and capacity to enter into a state beyond request, needs or demands. Centering prayer can help us move towards this goal. To simply be with God. In this place, everything else falls away because the experience of God is far greater than anything we can imagine or desire. This is similar to the experience of Awe Blair was talking about a couple Sundays ago. The experience of having your breath taken away.

Take a moment to reflect again on God’s call to you, spoken through our scripture. As our community deepens our practice of prayer, the only possibility is deeper relationship with God, with deeper relationship with God, the only possibility is transformed lives, with transformed lives the only possibility is a transformed community. Amen.