

We just heard Jason leading the children in blessing the youth who will be heading to the beach in Daytona next week for their summer mission trip. I absolutely love the beach! When I was younger, as often as I could I used to spend all day at the beach, just soaking in the sun, napping, and swimming. That's one of my absolute favorite things to do. But then something changed in the past few years to make going to the beach a bit less relaxing. I had kids. Now going to the beach is quite a bit more...involved. If I want to go to the beach as a dad, there's a lot more required of me. I need to make sure we pack up the sun screen, the beach toys, chairs, towels, a big canopy tent thing so the kids don't have to be in the sun the whole time. It's a much different story going to the beach as a dad.

Last year at the end of a long beach day with the kids I was heading back to the house, loaded down like a pack mule with all our beach gear. I was tired and moving slowly when a guy headed toward the beach came by. He saw me and my struggle, gave me a knowing and sympathetic nod, shook his head and said, "Daddy gotta do!" It felt good to be acknowledged for all my efforts! As a dad, if you want to go to the beach, there are some things you just gotta do. Non-negotiable things that simply come with the territory.

As a Christian, it's the same way. If you want to follow Jesus, there are some things you just have to do. Non-negotiable things that simply come with the territory. Prayer is one of them. Martin Luther said, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." As you know we're in the midst of a series on measures related to our church mission. How do we know when we're succeeding in becoming more like Jesus? Today's measure is: **Am I praying for my friends and enemies this week?** One of those things is much easier than the other. But we'll get to both shortly.

Two points for today: First, **Disciples pray.** It's just part of what we do as followers of Jesus. If we want to become more like Jesus, we'll spend time in prayer. We need to pray. Just as much as we need to breath to live. Disciples pray. Second, **Prayer changes things.** If you've spent time in our prayer chapel, may have noticed the wooden piece of art in the window with this inscription. It's beautiful and it's true. Prayer changes things.

We'll see them both points illustrated right away in today's scripture from Acts 16. First a little background. Paul and Silas are going from village to village preaching the gospel when all the sudden a slave woman comes across their path. She's got great fortune-telling abilities which her owners have exploited for their own profit. She begins following Paul around and shouting, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!" You would think Paul might be happy to have his own version of John the Baptist preparing the way for him, but instead he gets annoyed with her. I love this – a little moment of humanity from Paul here. Paul, "very much annoyed" scripture says, turned to her and cast out a spirit from her. Well, her masters sure didn't approve of this little exorcism because they could no longer make money from her. So they had Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and thrown in jail. That's where we pick up the story.

### **READ ACTS 16:25-34**

Acts 16:25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. [Let me interject right there – that's exactly how you would react to being unjustly imprisoned, right? Singing and prayer? Yeah, me too.] 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake,

so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

That's the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

Disciples pray. It's what we do. It comes with the territory. We see Paul doing this in prison. Regardless of his situation his instinct, his natural, default behavior is to pray and sing worship songs. As followers of Jesus, no matter how good or how bad things get, that's what we do. Disciples pray.

Why do we pray? It connects us to God, draws us closer, strengthens our relationship. Jesus often withdrew to lonely places just to be in God's presence. Notice that's an end in and of itself. We don't just pray to get things, to bring our list of needs to God. Rather, we pray because that's how we meet with God. Phillip Yancey calls prayer a spiritual privilege – the opportunity to communicate with the Creator of the universe.<sup>1</sup> Prayer is how God reminds us who we are and what God has made us to become. We pray to connect to God, to listen for God's voice, direction, and affirmation. We pray because that's what Jesus did. And if he needed to pray, how much more do we?

And so our measure asks: Am I praying for my friends and enemies this week? Let's take the easy part first – praying for my friends. We all want to do this. In fact we probably all wish we could do it more often. But sometimes we get bogged down with excuses. *I don't have enough time to pray.* How much time do you think it takes God to hear/acknowledge a prayer need? *I don't know whole situation.* Well, God does. *I don't know how to pray or what to say.* Fortunately the bible tells us that at times like these the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. Besides that, sometimes some of our most powerful prayers are also the simplest. Luther said the fewer the words the better the prayer. Jesus told a parable in which he praised the simple prayer: "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner."<sup>2</sup>

There's great freedom in simple prayers. One of simplest prayers you can pray for your friends – their name. Wait, does that really count? Yes! At least that's what Ken Carter says. You may remember Ken having preached here a couple years ago. He wrote a book called *Pray for Me: The Power in Praying for Others*. He encourages us to lift up those names before God. Intercessory prayer is thinking of someone in God's presence.<sup>3</sup> This is why we sometimes pray in worship on Sunday by offering names aloud to God. God knows more than we ever will about every situation, and God hears our prayers.

So when someone pops into your head randomly, I encourage you to think of that as the Holy Spirit prompting you to pray. Offer a simple prayer: *Lord, I lift them and their life before you.* Just think about them as you're in God's presence. Then tell the person 'I remembered you in prayer today.' It's one of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/prayer>

<sup>2</sup> Luke 18:9-14

<sup>3</sup> Ken Carter's *Pray for Me*, p.73. It's Rowan Williams' definition.

most impactful things you can do for someone. I know I'm always humbled and honored when someone tells me they prayed for me. Disciples pray. It's what we do. It comes with the territory. Am I praying for my friends this week?

Ok, now let's look at the harder one. Am I praying for my enemies this week? Where do we start with that? Here's where we don't start – some of you may remember the country song came out a few years back called "Pray for You." A guy's life falls apart, his woman leaves him (you know, typical country song) and he goes to church and hears the preacher say, "Don't hate, just pray for those who hurt you." So he prays. He prays that her brakes go out going down a hill. Not exactly the kind of prayer God has in mind! Jesus in the sermon on Mount from Matt 5:43 says: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

As Pastor Vern and I were thinking about our text from Acts this week we wondered where in the bible we could find an example of someone praying for their enemies. The obvious one is Jesus on the cross praying "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." But were there any other examples? Vern came across this one, also from Acts. It's the story of the Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He's preaching the gospel and it's making people really mad at him. Listen to what happens next.

#### **READ Acts 7:54-8:1**

Acts 7: 54 When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. 8: 1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

Stephen reiterates our first point today: Disciples pray. That's what we do. And Stephen, like Jesus, manages to pray for his enemies even as they are in the very process of killing him. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

But this text also illustrates our second point today: Prayer changes things. Did you notice the connection between this text and the one I read earlier from Acts? As the crowd began to stone Stephen, they took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul, who approved of their killing Stephen.

Saul, as you may remember, is also known as Paul – the same guy who was thrown in jail in Acts 16 for casting out the demon from the slave girl. Saul at the time Stephen was killed was known for zealously persecuting the church. He was against Christianity, and he had Christian leaders thrown in jail. That is, until he encountered the risen Lord Jesus and he was transformed into the most successful missionary of all time.

Disciples pray. Stephen prayed for his enemies even as they killed him. I wonder, did Stephen pray for Saul? Saul was there. Stephen must have seen him. If people were casting their coats at his feet Saul

must've had a front row seat. When Stephen prayed forgive them, was he thinking of Saul? Could Stephen's prayer have contributed to changing Saul from persecutor to evangelist?

We don't know for sure, but we do know that prayer changes things.

Fast forward back to Acts 16. Paul and Silas' prayer and worship resulted in an earthquake that freed them from jail! Their prayers also resulted in new disciples from a most unlikely source – the jailer, who was about to kill himself but Paul prevented it. If anyone could be considered Paul's enemy, it'd have to be this guy – the one holding him unjustly in prison, perhaps even the very same one who beat and flogged Paul earlier. And yet Paul is able to put aside all that injustice and see the jailer as God sees him – as God's beloved child. Paul leads the jailer and his family to the Lord, baptizes them, and they celebrate together with a meal. The oppressed and the oppressor at the same table, united through Jesus. Paul doesn't see an enemy, only a child of God, a brother in Christ. Prayer changes things.

Our measure asks – Am I praying for my enemies this week? Who are our enemies? I'm keenly aware that we in the United States have some very real enemies in this world. I'm grateful to all service men and women who put themselves in harm's way to keep us safe from our enemies. I don't take that lightly or for granted. At the same time, most of us in this church don't encounter people on a weekly basis who want to end our lives. Thank God.

Do any of you (or anyone you know if you don't want to admit it) have trouble with road rage? I saw a Louis CK bit recently where he talks about the things we shout so freely in the car: *What in the world???* *Are you kidding me? What's your problem? Are you really gonna do that? COME ON! What, are you blind??!!* And that's just the PG version for here at church! We say things in the car that we'd never say to someone's face! Something about 2000 pounds of steel and glass and suddenly the person in the other car is no longer a human being. Could we consider them enemies?

How about people of a particular political party? Someone you serve with on a board or committee? Or more broadly people who think differently than you? You see the same phenomena on facebook as with the road rage stuff – people freely post vitriolic things there that they'd never say in a face to face human conversation. By the way, when Jesus says pray for them, I don't think he means praying that they'll see things your way.

What about your neighbor whose yard is always a mess or whose dog seems to prefer your yard to his own? Is he your enemy? Or how about the kid at school who is bullying your kid or pressuring them to do things you don't want them to do? Or maybe that kid's parents? Are they enemies? What about coworkers? Colleagues? Your boss? Family members? Your ex? The person who sits a couple rows over in church? Oooh, is it getting warmer in here?

Who are your enemies? Who are the people who make your blood boil? The people you spend time ranting about to your friends? Who are the people who you'd be glad to never have to interact with again? Those are your enemies. We've all got them. And that's who God calls us to love. That's who God calls us to pray for.

This is why if you're a Christian that should be good news to everyone you know – whether they're Christian or not. If you're spending time in prayer for people who are your enemies you can't help but start to see everyone in a different light. If you see people as God sees them – as beloved children – you

respond to them with kindness rather than hatred. That's a better way to live in this world. And it's good news for everyone.

Some of you may have seen the blog going around facebook this week by Christena Cleveland about dismantling racism.<sup>4</sup> It was a powerful piece in its entirety, but one paragraph in particular caught my attention. She talks about teaching a class on racial reconciliation to a bunch of kids who basically didn't want to be there. If you've ever tried to teach someone who doesn't want to learn you know how frustrating that can be. But these kids weren't just apathetic, they were downright hostile.

Christena says, "This was a tough crowd and I knew that my winsomeness, eloquence and strategic teaching weren't going to cut it. I needed Jesus' power and the Holy Spirit's wisdom to effectively teach this class. I needed to know what to say, how to say it and when to say it. I needed to trust God to transform and soften these men's hearts. **So I decided to spend as much time *praying* for the class as I did *prepping* for it."**

Boy did that line ever strike a chord with me as I was thinking about this sermon on prayer this week! I'd like to say I spent as much time praying about this sermon as I did prepping for it. I tried my best.

Christena goes on to say that those prayers did have an effect. The boys she prayed for eventually began to respond and engage with her teaching. Prayer changes things.

Many of you have stories of prayer changing things. Two of you in the past two weeks have shared stories with me about your miraculous healings that can only be attributed to prayer – both your own and the faithful prayers of our congregation. BUMC is full of faithful praying people. Our prayer team is available after each service in the prayer chapel to pray privately with people. They offer prayers for healing during our communion services. They also pray over each of the prayer requests anyone fills out from the pew cards. We also have a host of faithful prayer warriors who pray daily over the requests in the Gethsemane Letter. The Gethsemane ministry was started 25 years ago by people who felt a deep desire to pray daily for the needs of the church. One of you told me recently that you're so thankful for the way God has answered prayers in your life that you can't go to bed without first praying through the Gethsemane prayer requests. Prayer changes things.

But it's important to remember prayer isn't a magic formula to receive what we want. When asking for prayer a friend of mine used to say "Hey, throw one up for me!" I know that was just his way talk, his way of asking for prayer. But it always kind of made me cringe a bit. As if prayer were some kind of carnival game where if enough people toss the rings eventually one sticks on the bottle and he wins the prize and his prayers are answered.

Prayer changes things but it doesn't always change our circumstances. Even Jesus prayed "Lord if you are willing, take this cup from me." And we all know how that prayer turned out.

Prayer changes things. But sometimes the thing it changes most is our heart. And that's perhaps the most important reason we pray. Prayer connects us with God and allows us to hear God's voice.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christenacleveland.com/2014/07/dismantling-the-white-male-industrial-complex/>

One great way many of us use to connect to God through prayer is the Upper Room devotional. I try to start every day by reading and praying through this before I do anything else. This week I came across a Henri Nouwen piece on prayer. He defines prayer as spending time listening to God calling us beloved.<sup>5</sup>

“We are called to pray not because we feel like praying or because it gives us great insights but simply because we want to be obedient, to listen to the voice that calls us the beloved. The word *listen* in Latin is *audire*. If we listen with full attention, it’s called *ob-audire*, and that’s where the word *obedience* comes from. Jesus is the obedient one – totally open to the love of God. But if we are closed, we are *surdus*. That is the Latin word for *deaf*. The more “deaf” we get, the more *absurdus* we become, and an absurd life is precisely a life in which we no longer listen and are constantly distracted by all sorts of voices, losing touch with the truth that we are the beloved.”

“Real freedom to live in this world comes from hearing clearly the truth about who we are, which is that we are the beloved. That’s what prayer is about. And that’s why prayer is so crucial and not just a nice thing to do once in a while. It is the essential attitude that creates in us the freedom to love other people – not because they are going to love us back but because we are so loved, and out of the abundance of that love we want to give.”

This is the kind of love the apostle Paul demonstrated to the jailer, his enemy, someone he should have hated. Instead, because of the love Paul knew from God he was able to love the jailer. He saw the jailer not as his enemy but as one of God’s beloved children. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

If you’re looking for a way to practice prayer more regularly I want to remind you of our Sacred Space Sunday School class. For the next six weeks we’ll continue to meet in room 120. It’s a chance to pray and listen to God.

Am I praying for my friends and enemies this week?

If you want to find a way to live out this measure more fully, I encourage you to consider becoming part of our prayer team. We’re currently looking for people to help us re-imagine our prayer ministry across the entire church in light of our mission and vision language. If you have a heart for prayer and would like to help lead our church forward I’d love to talk to you. Please find me after the service and put your name on the sign up at the table in the back after the service.

Disciples pray. Prayer changes things.

I want to close with some of Jesus’ words from John chapter 15. Let’s offer them as a prayer.

John 15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because **apart from me you can do nothing...** 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Jesus we want to be your disciples. We want to bear fruit that brings you glory. You say we can ask whatever we wish and you’ll do it. Lord, teach us to pray! Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> *Upper Room* July/Aug 2014, pages 40-41.