

Prayer: The Invisible God's Gift to Us

Luke 11: 1 – 13

Over 6 years ago I stood before you and shared with you what I felt was the first piece of the puzzle for the vision of FCC. In doing so, I attempted to put everyone at ease by saying that a vision is not something that we have to create or conjure up. The vision for this church is already in the heart and mind of God because He is the source of all godly and Biblical visions.

I also tried to convey the idea that God desires to reveal his vision to us just as he did to Paul in the book of Acts and to others at various times as recorded in the Bible. Knowing these two truths ...

that God is the source of visions ...

and that he desires to reveal his vision to his church – should take the pressure off us.

All we need to do is be faithful in seeking to do His will.

I then went on to share what I felt God was revealing to me concerning the first piece of the puzzle of God's vision for us.

I described it as a corner piece, one that has two straight edges that would help us to begin framing in the picture of the puzzle. I said, **“When people cross paths with our church, whether it is due to a service they attend or a person they meet who calls FCC home, they should find us to be at least two things:**

A worshipful church

and a prayerful church.

For the remainder of that message, I attempted to show the key difference between worship and prayer, namely that in worship, we, as the pinnacle of God's creation, are the central actors. It is our responsibility to give all glory, praise, and honor to the One who made us, who sustains us, and allows us to partake in the blessings of life.

But when it comes to prayer, God is the main actor. Though we engage in prayer, it is **God who does the heavy lifting.** In fact, prayer is essentially asking God to intervene on our behalf.

I used the story of Abraham and his son Isaac as "exhibit A" to make my case. Not that Abraham and Isaac were perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but we see time and time again that when Abraham had to move and / or reestablish his household, that his first order of business was to build an altar to the Lord and call on his name.

And when God told him to sacrifice his only son on the mountain, he obeyed, knowing that the One he served could raise the dead to life again. This was Abraham's logical act of worship.

This brings us to the second edge of the first corner piece of the puzzle: **God's desire for us to be a prayerful church,** which I want to address today.

Now I know that anyone who has ever attended church for any length of time during his/her life has had to sit through, (or should I say suffer) through a myriad of sermons about both the importance of prayer and the power of prayer, and also the guilt trip we should feel for not praying enough.

I don't want to put you through that again this morning. But I do want to add my two cents to the topic of prayer and share what I've learned after meditating on the Lord's Prayer.

After all, what better way to start the season immediately following Easter than to study prayer, because like the disciples, we are reminded that the events leading up to and including Easter morning represent the beginning of a cataclysmic shift in how his followers would relate to Jesus. Up until the Last Supper, Jesus' disciples had access to Jesus on a personal and physical level.

They could see him, speak with him, eat with him, and even touch him, but those days were quickly coming to an end. Soon Jesus would ascend to His Father and disappear completely from their sight.

This transition from being with Jesus practically 24/7 to no longer seeing him was going to be an extremely bumpy one for the disciples, and perhaps, it was the disciples' practice of prayer and the promise that Jesus would answer them that kept the disciples from completely losing faith.

In fact, it was shortly after Jesus gave the great commission and then ascended, that we find the disciples all joined together for prayer. Acts 1:14 Luke records *that "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."*

If they weren't prayer warriors up to that point, perhaps they were well on their way now!

So here are some of my thoughts concerning prayer and how they relate to God wanting us to be a prayerful church:

To start, I think prayer is both a natural and an unnatural activity that we engage in. Let me explain:

1. Prayer is a natural thing for us because God created us to be relational - to converse and communicate with each other.

God made us to be relational beings. We see this from the start. In Genesis 2 when Moses recounts the creation of Eve, in verse 18 he writes, *"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"*

Can you imagine what life would be like if we did not have the ability to interact and communicate with one another? Life would be so strange and I dare say, intolerable.

I'm reminded of the movie Castaway. I think it could be argued that the volleyball saved Tom Hank's life! Without Wilson, what would have kept Hanks from going stir crazy on that deserted island for nearly four years? We are relational beings.

Likewise, God is a relational being.

This is a major reason why he made us in the first place. The Bible seems to imply that it is out of the loving co-eternal fellowship that the Father has with the Son that mankind was made. *"The God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.'"* Gen. 1:26

So prayer is natural to us because we were designed to commune with one another, which includes communing with our Maker.

Here's another reason why I think prayer is a natural human activity:

2 We are a finite, broken, and needy people, and because we find ourselves in such a state, prayer becomes our tool of choice and the default mechanism in asking for help:

Lord, I need a job. Lord, I need a friend. Lord, I messed up, please forgive me. Lord, I'm afraid, depressed, angry, sad. Lord, I want peace, prosperity, purpose.

You name it, people, believers or not, right or wrong have gone to prayer to get it.

It's almost instinctual. I think it's pretty well established by anthropologists that no matter what isolated tribe or people group that has been discovered, there is always evidence of attempts to communicate with a higher being. The desire to communicate with the eternal is built into us. King Solomon understood this about human nature when we wrote in Ecclesiastes 2: 11: *"He has also set eternity in the hearts of men..."*

To this day, the Book of Psalm is still mankind's Go To prayer manual. And if there is one overriding characteristic about the book, it's that the authors feel uninhibited about expressing to

God their questions and feelings that arise due to life's circumstances. Here's a sampling:

O Lord, how many are my foes! Strike all my enemies on the jaw. Break their teeth! Protect me and defend me!

My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Why O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

I love you, O Lord, my strength.

Prayer is a natural activity of man because we're not meant to keep our feelings all bottled up inside. We need an outlet, and every day as we board the emotional roller coaster called life, we need help to navigate life's trials and challenges and this help comes in the form of conversing with God.

This is why Fiddler on the Roof remains one of my all-time favorite movies. Tevya, a poor Jewish man and father of five daughters is always talking with God, always asking him why and pouring out his feelings, complaints, and cares to God in very honest and humorous ways.

Tevya understands that God is big enough, powerful enough, and merciful enough to tolerate his annoying questions.

3 Prayer seems to be a natural activity of man because God is invisible.

Now this may seem like a strange observation, but stick with me for a second. When Jesus was in the flesh, when he was God incarnate, did the disciples pray to him? Not that I can recall. Yet would they have been out of line for doing so? I don't think so, but it would have seemed strange to them because Jesus was already in their midst, wasn't he?

They listened to him, conversed with him, and even cried out to him to save their lives on one occasion, but they never prayed to him.

When they did pray – and I assume they prayed, for the disciples were God-fearing Jews who were taught to pray by their parents or synagogue leaders, they prayed to God in heaven who was invisible to them. Even Jesus taught in Matthew 6:6, *“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to **your Father who is unseen.**”*

The point I'm trying to make is that it is God's invisibility that on some level causes us or motivates us to pray. Why you ask? Well, because the Bible tells us that that which is unseen is actually the basis of our faith. Recall Hebrews 11:1: *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and **certain of what we do not see.**”* The Bible also teaches that faith is a necessary element for prayer.

Hebrews 11:6: *"Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him **must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.**"*

So when you put these two thoughts together...

one, that our faith is based on what is unseen and two ...

that we need faith to make our prayers effective,

we should be extremely grateful that our Father in heaven

remains invisible, because in a very real sense, It's his

invisibility that "forces" us to use our faith which in turn makes our prayers effective!

God's invisibility necessitates faith which makes our prayers work!

Peter seems to express a similar idea in 1 Peter 1: 8 – 9:

*"Though you **have not seen him**, you love him; and even though **you do not see him now**, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."*

Wow, how do you like that? When we receive anything good – and I think we'd all agree that the salvation of our souls is a good thing – the best thing ever – then we need to thank God who is invisible.

As Timothy expresses in his benediction of 1 Timothy 1:17:

*"Now to the King eternal, immortal, **invisible**, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."*

But for all of prayer's qualities that seem to take on such a natural bent, prayer can also seem quite unnatural to us as well. What other reason would account for so many of us expressing difficulty in maintaining a consistent prayer life?

Has anyone here ever experienced a time when you felt like no sooner had a prayer escaped your lips, that it came crashing to the floor?

Or have you experienced a time when God seemed distant or even unreal as you prayed? My bet is that all of us had felt this way at one time or another.

And this doesn't mean that just because we felt this way, that our prayers were ineffective or have gone unheard. James tells us that *"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."*

Our feelings can be very good at hiding the truth, but perhaps there are other reasons why we struggle in prayer.

One maybe that true and honest prayer demands that we relinquish control of our lives to a higher power, and for most of us, we just don't like to do this. It's inconvenient, difficult, and sometimes downright scary.

We, especially those of us who have been nurtured and taught under the influences of western civilization, find it difficult to give up the reins to another. But when you think about it, that's what honest prayer is all about - **not my will, but yours be done.**

There are other reasons that prayer can seem unnatural to us. And what may come as a surprise, is that some of the same reasons I alluded to that seem to make prayer natural, also make prayer seem unnatural.

For example, we're conversing with someone who is invisible!

I confess that when I enter my room to pray, I'm easily distracted. My mind bounces from one thought to another like a ball shot into a pinball machine.

It's only after some time that I'm finally able to settle down and tune in to God. Perhaps if God were a real live physical person standing before me, I could better concentrate on him. But then again, maybe not.

Look at people with smart phones today. They could be standing right in front of you and not even acknowledge your presence, because their device has captured their devotion. If we have a greater devotion to someone or something other than God, then our prayer life will be feeble, if existent at all.

So first, when we pray honestly, we're really asking God to take control of our lives. This is not easy to do.

Two, we're talking to someone who's invisible. And that's a killer on all of us ADD people!

But point three is a very serious problem when it comes to praying: Our sins get in the way our praying!

They have this effect because our sin breaks our fellowship with God, and until that sin is taken care of, our relationship with God remains strained to say the least.

Remember in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit? Their first reaction was uh-oh, we'd better hide from God.

They felt fear, guilt, shame, and a need to escape the holy eyes of the Lord. It's the same with us. When we've sinned, praying is not exactly the first thing on our agenda.

That's why I find the book of First John to be one of the most comforting books in the entire Bible. Not only because the Apostle John tells me what I must do when I've sinned, 1John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

But also because John reminds me and all of us that if Christ is our Savior, then God is our Father, and that we, as his children can be in the most wonderful and privileged relationship known to man and that we can engage in the most radical and powerful activity known to man, namely prayer!

Because prayer is relating to our Father in heaven. We can have fellowship with the maker of the universe! And we can call him Father!

There's nothing that delights me more than when my children call me father or daddy. It satisfies me to the very core of who I am, because when they say that, they're saying I am his and He is mine. This is how God feels about each one of us.

So, I'm thankful for the disciple who asked Jesus, *"Lord teach us to pray..."*

This took boldness! This took courage, and it took humility because I suspect all of his first disciples had done a lot of praying even before they met Jesus, if they were good Jewish boys, but this one disciple who had personally witnessed Christ pray knew that something cataclysmic was going on.

True, we are to revere the name of God. The Jewish people revered it so much they feared even writing it, but when Jesus came, he said, Father ... and this one word alone changes everything – if you're a believer in Christ.

1 John 3: 1 – 3: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are! Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, as he is."

So go ahead and pray. Your Invisible Heavenly Father is waiting.