Jonah 3:6-10, Luke 11:5-13

“Why pray?”

Welcome back to week three of the Spiritual Disciplines. We are still on the topic of prayer, but this is our last week. I hope you have become more disciplined in your prayer life. I hope you have become more knowledgeable in you prayer life. I hope you have talked with and listened to Jesus more these past two weeks than at any time in your life. Heidi Arnold once said: “As long as we think that we can save ourselves by our own will power, we will only make the evil stronger than ever.” So spiritual disciplines are not the Home Depot solution to sin, we cannot fix it ourselves. We simply cannot.

Without maintaining a relationship with God which is totally dependent upon God for all things then these disciplines serve no purpose. But if we have that relationship then the disciplines help us to dwell with God or as Brother Lawrence said: “to remain in the presence of God daily.”

We asked the question two weeks ago: How do we pray, and we talked about location, location, location is absolutely key. Choose a time and a place where you will be alone and where you can hear the voice of God. Last week we asked what do we pray and we saw the priestly blessing: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. We saw the Lord’s prayer and both are perfect models for a way in which to converse and listen to our Creator.

Today, why pray? I mean really, what’s the point? If God knows everything anyway, if God is in control of all things, what difference does it make? Why pray? Well, because we can change the mind of God. Both of our Scriptures today speak to our God, the lover of our soul, answering our prayers in a way that is a promise for good. Or as Jeremiah 29:11 states: here is a random underline verse, folks, stay with me. As Jeremiah 29:11 states: “Surely I know the plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

So why pray? To allow God to work in our lives to provide us with welfare, that future, that hope.

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Scripture gives us some very excellent examples of people who understood the answer to the question of why pray. We find people praying when they are angry – Psalm 137:9 we hear “Happy shall they be who take your little children and dash them against the rock.” We find people praying when they are joyful – Psalm 136, just the one previous to the last one “O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” David prays to confess his sin and assuage his guilt in Psalm 51 “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” Or the desperate prayer of the psalmist in 22 that Jesus borrows while he is on the cross, he quotes it word for word – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.” Why pray? Because we find ourselves angry, happy, guilty, desperate, all of those things.

When we were serving in Italy I befriended the priest who served in the church across the busy street. That Catholic church was built literally as a response to the orphanage and church that had been built in 1905. In the mid 1900’s the priest would hire a boy to ring the bell for an hour during the time that the Protestant service met. But when Stacy and I got there we gathered our youth groups and worshipped together, and Padre Peppino and I would see each other and decide that day was a good day to go get a pizza together. Peppino knew the city of Portici where we both lived. It was a zoo. It remains the most densely populated city in all of Italy. Organized crime was called the Camorrah in that area, and it was part of all of our daily lives.

Padre Peppino would tell me of these hit men who were members of his church who would go to confession with him before the hit so that they could have their guilt cleared for what came next. It was a different world, there truly was a Portici Mafia that would put our Amish Mafia to shame, but this is not one of the reasons to pray, in order to clear you of guilt so that you can go and take someone out. You can’t be cleared of your guilt through prayer or confession if you are going to keep on sinning.

Prayer in these Scriptures underline the reason for prayer is for change. A person is looking to change a current situation. In Nineveh, look at your Scripture for today, the reason for prayer was to change God’s mind. That was the ultimate goal. Who know? The king of Nineveh said, God may relent and change his mind. But notice, and this is so important to understanding prayer and to understanding the Scriptural perspective to prayer, it is not enough to come to Monday evening prayer, or Thursday morning prayer, or Tuesday women’s Bible Study, or Sunday morning worship. Yes, the people prayed. But change is not just on the part of God. It is not enough to pray. Look at vs. 8b: “All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.”

You see, there are 9 separate occasions where we find God changes his mind. Follow me now: Exodus 32:14 after Moses implores God, he changes his mind from destroying the people of Israel. Judges 2:18 the Lord is moved to pity and saves the people of Israel. II Samuel 24:16 and I Chronicles 21:15 after David beseeches the Lord in sackcloth and ashes God saves Jerusalem only after having wiped out 70,000 strong. Psalm 106:44-45 the people cry out and God changes his mind. Jeremiah 42:10 God says he is sorry for the disaster brought upon Israel and prevents anything further. Amos 7:3 and 7:6 the prophet speaks for the people, twice, and God changes his mind.

On these 9 separate occasions the people agreed to change their ways so God changed his mind for the plan that was laid out for them was affected for the good. Normally, we are used to God having plans for us for good but then our sinful actions cause effects that have repercussions that require God to scramble to bring about good.

Here in these cases the assumption is that the Ninevites will not repent, the people of Israel will continue in their wayward ways, we will walk down that path of bad decisions unaware of God when in fact, the kind ends up wearing sackcloth and ashes, the Israelites actually groan in prayer, a person comes into our lives and gets our attention and calls us out and we reverse direction and so reverse the course that was laid out for us that we assumed would lead to evil, but in fact is turned around for the good. Why pray? So God will change his mind.

The theme is the same in Luke, but he why pray is matched with a changing mind of God due to our persistence. You’ve seen that child at the grocery store with the frazzled mom. He keeps asking for that candy and the mom just started shopping and she is going to be pestered by him for an hour. As experienced parents we are thinking to ourselves, don’t do it, we are cheering her on, don’t do it, hang tough, in the long run it will be so good for him. But she gives in because she doesn’t want to be bothered. As if you’ve never looked for movies when you were a young parent and chose the ones that had the most minutes and didn’t even know what you got until you got home, you just knew it was going to be 87 minutes of peace, instead of 38.

The examples we have in Scripture tell us to pray, and I love this word, shamelessly. Look at vs. 8 where you have a persistent friend who finally gets what he wants. That word in Greek actually does mean shamelessly. Because of the friend’s shamelessness. When we approach God in prayer we are to be shameless. Because, as the next verses lay out, we know that God wants our good. If we who are evil love our children, how much more does God who sent his only son to die for each one of us individually, how much more does God love us? This is love, and so we can pray knowing that our words actually have an impact upon the one who loves us beyond our understanding.

Why pray? Because God cares. He cares for the Ninevites. He cares for us, every single detail there is to know about us. And he is moved when we speak with him.

There are many applications to these verses today. If prayer is for the sake of changing God’s mind, but that is then again impingent upon our own selves changing then shouldn’t we pray that we would change to provide room for God’s work? This church has so many opportunities to gather together to pray. If you missed it Friday was World Day of Prayer, our church was open for that. Monday evening for years now people gather to pray in this Sanctuary. Thursday morning men’s prayer breakfast prays to lobby for people who are in need.

We are going to have one more opportunity for prayer starting this week. Every Tuesday morning at 7:30 in the morning I will be in the sanctuary for prayer for whoever wants to be there. There will be no food, no liturgy, just prayer as we gather to see how we can have our lives changed so that God will work miracles in our midst. We are a church that is in need of miracles right now. We are a church that needs God to change his mind for people in our midst.

Once again, we are a people that believe in the words of Jeremiah: “Surely I know the plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”