

3.2.2025 Sermon

Prayer is Life

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Prayer, history, memory, legacy, faithfulness, community, pastor, prayer series, relationship, focus, God, interaction, communion, Christ, spirituality.

SPEAKERS

Elder Matt Kistler

As I've been thinking about this morning, this picture, and this idea of history in our story, I realize how we fit into a bigger story.

This week at work, I built a document that I called "Operation Memory" because our organization has not been intentional about remembering what we do in systematic ways. I realize that this has brought us to a place where it feels like we have amnesia. We can say we are here today and remember some history from the past few years, but it's hard to fully know where we've come from without that memory, without that story running through our heads. As people move on, we lose that history if we don't capture it.

I've been thinking about this because yesterday was the funeral of my 101-year-old grandmother, Ruby Kistler. She lived a full and beautiful life, passing away in her sleep and leaving behind a legacy of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even great-great-grandchildren. We gathered to celebrate and remember who she was and how the pieces of her are passing down to us. I kept getting this picture of the river of life, how God has moved through us, generation after generation. What He is doing hasn't just sprung up from this moment. We have come from a place, from the people before us who have built into us and spoken into our lives. God's faithfulness stretches across our lives and beyond.

I think about this even more today because it is my daughters' birthday. They turned 14 today, "Happy Birthday, girls!" And I think about this today also because today marks ten years since our founding pastor, Robert Miller, passed away. Many of you might not have known him, but I think it's important to recognize that he is part of our story as a community. He founded this church, pastored it for many years, and built us into who we are today. From there, we continued. Tracy and I have been reflecting on how most of our team of elders today has journeyed through that entire story. As a congregation, we carry that history, not just as a weight of loss, but as part of who we are. Who he was has shaped who we are today. Through all of these

things, God's banner of love has been present. There were moments and days when we didn't know if we would still exist in ten years, but we are here. God has continued to speak, move, and create beautiful things in our midst, and that continues today.

So, I'm thinking about history today, but that's not my sermon. Somewhere in here, I will probably have a moment where I say, "Oh! This connects!" I don't know where that is yet, because this word just came to me in the last five minutes. So, bear with me.

Today, we are talking about prayer. This is the last week of our prayer series. You know, we've been working with the idea of the gym in 2025. We talked about praise and worship as a lead-off, and then we talked about prayer. We've explored a variety of thoughts about what prayer is, how it is mentioned in the Bible, why we pray, and how we do it.

Before we jump too far ahead, I want us to look back for a moment. I'd like a couple of people to share: What have you learned about prayer in the last five or six weeks? What are some ideas or messages that have stood out to you through this sermon series?

Go ahead, let's hear it.

"Okay, prayer is necessary."

"What else?"

"It's like riding a bike."

"Mm-hmm."

"Yeah, like it's beneficial."

"People pray in different ways."

"Yeah. Any other thoughts?"

"It can be reinvented."

"Yep."

"Mm-hmm, not just about asking for things."

"Prayer changes things."

"It's about relationship."

Yes! Well, you've already said most of the things I was going to say. What stood out to me is how each of us brings our own history to prayer. I've heard from our preachers that, for some, prayer was introduced in certain ways, maybe as transactional, maybe as rigid. For some, it was modeled that prayer was about looking good or being good. Some were taught that prayer was only activated if they were good. But now, we are relearning, or even unlearning, that history of prayer.

I want to talk a little about my own story of prayer, how it was introduced to me, how I interact with it, and what I feel I've learned from it.

For me, I learned about prayer very organically. My parents prayed. They prayed over their day as a way to acknowledge what was ahead. Every night, they encouraged me to mention my joys and burdens, naming them before God as a way to remember where He was faithful and to recognize where I needed care or love. I saw my parents pray over relationships. When healing or restoration was needed, they would pray to create a sacred moment, where, in some ways, God would move and create healing that I couldn't explain otherwise.

When I was sick, my parents would privately lay hands on me and sometimes speak in tongues. It was the only time I would regularly hear them speak in tongues. That brought a sense of wonder, kind of like, "Whoa, this is different." It created a connection between the tangible world of feeling sick and the miraculous world of God's presence.

This was prayer to me. This was my context growing up as a child. And so, since I was surrounded by this kind of prayer, I started to pray. Like a child, I prayed for things I wanted. Sometimes I got them, sometimes I didn't. I made deals with God, "Hey, if you do this, I'll do that." Over time, I learned that maybe that wasn't the currency God traded in. I prayed for my sports teams to win, something I know still happens in this area. But I moved away from that when I realized other people were praying for the other team! I don't know how God deals with that so, you know, maybe just hold that a little loosely.

I mean, someone's praying for Alabama, but it sure ain't me!

Alright, over time, I pieced together my understanding of prayer from practice and experience. Here's where I land today:

For me, prayer is turning my focus to God.

Inside my mind, there is a constant stream of thoughts, ideas, music, pictures, arguments, emotions, narratives, all running all the time. Focus is when I use my will to shape that stream toward a specific direction, whether to solve a problem or perform a challenging task. In this moment, I am focusing so that my attention is in one specific place. Prayer is when I do that, but the direction of my focus is God.

Just as when I talk to someone, I know who I'm talking to even if they don't know I'm speaking, when I pray, I know that someone, God, is receiving that message. Because prayer is focused on God, and God is personal, prayer becomes an intentional connection between God the Creator and us, His created people. When we bring our consciousness to God and integrate His infiniteness into our finiteness, it's more than just "talking to God." It's richer than that, it's bigger than that.

I understand why we use the analogy of a relationship to describe prayer. In relationships, we share who we are and receive who someone else is, that connection builds something. Similarly, in prayer, we share ourselves with God, and in response, He shares who He is. That challenges us, calls us to follow, and asks us to listen.

Given this background, I want to share a couple of stories from the past month that show what prayer has looked like in my life. I believe these examples help shape what we can learn about prayer.

A few days ago, I woke up, and before work, I wanted to move a little bit. So I went out for a quick run, and the sunrise was just gorgeous. And so I turned my focus to God and said, "Wow, this is a beautiful moment." Then I thought about the meetings I had that day, and my focus was elsewhere. That was prayer.

Here's another example. I was traveling last month, and I had a day by myself with nothing to do, no way to do it, and nobody to do it with. So I was just in a little room, and I felt this need to try and connect with God when I woke up. When I woke up, I started listing the things I was feeling. I was feeling anxious about some work, things that were undone. Some relationships needed fixing, and there was hurt around them. There was sadness about the direction I see the world going, and I named those things in my mind.

I did not feel particularly spiritual. I intended it to be prayer, but at that moment, it just felt like listing my feelings. Still, I felt the urge to continue, and slowly, things changed. Somehow, I felt that the small bedroom become a little fuller. I felt a presence greater than mine, and the prayers I prayed began to not feel like they were just noise in my head. They felt like they were going somewhere. They felt purposeful. As I prayed, the emotions related to them were released.

I can only explain that as God being near. It was a sacred moment, and I didn't make it happen or even expect it to happen, but it happened. My spirit felt lighter and loved. I tried to clear my mind, and people began to come into my head, people who maybe had a need, but I hadn't taken time to respond to it yet. People who were seeking after God, but I hadn't known how to support them. So words came, and I began to write some texts. After an hour or two, the moment ended. I felt trapped in a small room, waiting for my ride to the airport. But I was grateful because I had experienced a moment with God. I had prayed, and it was good.

Here's another little story. One of my co-workers had a challenging week last week. They had to mediate very stressful conversations, and seeing those things coming up, they were feeling exhausted. They came into a meeting we had together, and in that moment, as she was sharing her situation and asking for prayer, a word came into my head. It was a word that had been spoken over me years ago as a blessing, and it resonated in my mind. I thought, "God wants me to say this." So I spoke it. It was meaningful. It was what she needed. It was prayer.

I'll share one more story that may be indicative of probably the majority of my prayer experiences. I woke up one morning and intended to listen to God. I asked God to speak and help me to hear what He was saying. I held out my hands and fell asleep. I woke up and didn't feel anything in particular. That is prayer.

So I want to highlight a few things from just those little snippets. What did I do in all four situations? I did not have control or power over what happened. I did not make God show up. There were no magic words. There was no guarantee that it would feel good or be satisfying. What I did in each situation was turn my attention to God, for a little, for a lot, for as long as I did. In my mind, I took that running narrative of internal dialogue and directed it, even just for a moment, to God. When God spoke, I tried to respond.

What did God do? This, I think, is interesting. God did different things. Sometimes He speaks. Sometimes He prompts. Sometimes there's a feeling, and sometimes there is not. There's a mystery in prayer. Just as we have free will, I've been thinking, does God have free will? God's unchanging nature, I believe, does not mean we can manipulate outcomes from Him. And I think this is something we get confused about. We imagine that if God is the same, we can come to Him the same, and the result will be the same.

Let me clarify something. I just don't think God is like that. That has been my experience. There is no magic formula to get a result out of God. If prayer is about this connection we're building, creating that formula works against the purpose. Then we're just following the rules instead of actually coming to God. I think it's intentional that He doesn't give us the five steps of effective prayer because then we're just thinking about the steps and not about God or the relationship.

When we pursue a relationship with God, we have to be ready for prayer to be improvisatory, like jazz. Prayer is different every time. So if that's the case, if we cannot force our way into results from God through prayer, why do we pray? Because it doesn't necessarily solve any of my problems or the problems of the people on my prayer list. But God does receive our attention. What I noticed is that when that happened, He often used that to activate me in faith, to do Kingdom work.

I could not have predicted the outcome of any of my prayer interactions, and they certainly weren't what I prayed for. But I've learned that the purpose of prayer for me is often to become activated. It's to be engaged with God in a way that utilizes what God has put in me and churns out Kingdom fruit by His Spirit. So this is prayer to me. This is my story of prayer, coming to God over and over again, coming with expectancy, meaning a hope that something might happen, but a surety that I have no idea what will.

In the context of the gym that we've been discussing, the principle I want you to consider is this: as a community, we say that our commonality, the core that holds us together in our diversity, is that we center on Christ. We come from wherever we are, whenever we come, to point our lives toward Jesus. So if prayer is turning our attention to God in the form of Jesus, then centering our lives in Christ and praying are basically the same thing. We can't imagine that we're centering on God if we are not intentionally directing our lives toward Him. Or said another way, we can't center on God without interacting with Him intentionally.

This is where I think friends who focus on the Bible exclusively kind of miss it. No amount of awareness of the Bible or understanding of the order of liturgy, right worship, or right thought requires us to actually interact with God. The traditions of the church, I think, can surely encourage and facilitate or even cajole us toward prayer. But they are only guideposts, which can also be misunderstood or manipulated as markers of righteousness. They can become things we do to look good rather than paths we take to connect with God.

So our work as members of this community, this body of Christ, is responding to God. The way we respond to God is by taking time to interact with Him in our minds, bodies, and spirits. We don't believe God is a concept or a philosophy. Spirituality isn't something to be mainly observed or considered. It's something expressed, lived, and experienced. Centering on God means adjusting our lives, guided by our sense of where God is and who God is. We can't do that without this interaction, this prayer. Otherwise, you're just playing pin the tail on the donkey, or, even worse, calling our rules God and creating ourselves a convenient, predictable idol.

The image that comes to mind here, that Tracy often talks about, is a dance. We're not soloing our way through life, pretending or hoping that God is with us. We're not walking our whole life on a beach and then looking back to see four footsteps with us. It's more than that. We're moving in the embrace of Christ, responding to each

breath, each shift of weight. Prayer isn't just shouting alone in the rain to the empty void. Prayer is entering into the dance, not just initiating but reacting to Christ.

So let me show you what it means. I'm going to call Steph up here. You can be thankful for her. She is not feeling great, but she is here because she loves me. When you dance, you're responding. You're listening to what God is speaking. You're not sure what will happen next, but it is through connection that you know how to follow. There's a closeness and an intimacy, but it's based on this connection of our attention being drawn together, where nothing else is distracting us.

So, this is the practice that I want us to try out. I want us to actually practice praying here, just for a moment.

I want you to turn off all the distractions within and around you. I want you to listen with undivided attention. Turn the narrative in your mind to God. Grab your thoughts and direct them to the place where you feel God is. Say within yourself, or whisper it if you want, "God, I'm here."

Don't say it to me, or to your neighbor, or because you want to look like you're following what people are saying. If you're ready to talk to God, talk to God now and simply say, "I'm here." Then, let's listen.

A prayer can be as simple as this. Now, you might not have heard anything at all, but fear not, that's not failure. God isn't looking for results. He wants to see your heart and see you come to Him.

Remember, it's going to be different for everyone. When I practiced my sermon on Friday and got to this point, I started weeping. I thought, "Oh my gosh, what's going to happen at church?" But today, just now, I didn't feel much of anything. However, I felt the space connected with God, and that made me happy.

You can use this phrase, "I am here," as a way to start that moment, or not. I'm sure you can find a Bible verse that means something to you or something in your past.

The challenge I want to give you, your gym homework for the week, is to try doing this three times this week. If you hear something, write it down and act on it. But the idea is building that muscle of connection with God.

Whatever you hear, if it's something, nothing, or maybe something you're unsure about, it's good to build this awareness of what God is speaking, what that feels like in our bodies, and how we can respond to it. We learn together what it means to center on God.

To close, I believe prayer is the heartbeat of Christian life. We've all heard that to be saved by God and to have eternal life, all we need is faith. But to follow, to use our

language, to center our lives on God, we need to listen to what God is saying, see where God is at work, and respond by turning our lives to point toward Him.

I think prayer is the primary tool we have to connect to God, to express our lives to Him, and, in turn, to receive peace, guidance, wisdom, hope, joy, comfort, strength, resolve, and instruction.

Prayer isn't a discipline for the select holy few to pursue while the rest of us just do our best. Prayer is for us all. Prayer is our life.

As I think about prayer and this element of history, I believe it really brings us to the place we're going next, which is communion.

We commune. Communion is part of our history, and I'll invite our servers to come on up.

Communion is a way that we remember who Christ is, what He's done, and His love over us. It's a way of connecting not only with generations but with millennia of people who have gone before us, of every tribe and nation, of every tongue and language.

We are connected here in something that we are doing together with all of those people who have gone before us.

So, let's celebrate and connect to God in this way together today.

On the night that Christ was betrayed...