

# 1.26.2025 Sermon

## Prayer | 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

### **SPEAKER**

**Rev. Dr. Tracy L. Saletta**

Before I go into my sermon, I want to pause, because I want to acknowledge that right now in our world, there are some weird things going on. You know, we very much shy away from political things, and we do not preach them from the pulpit. We just do not, but I want to acknowledge that there are a lot of questions, fears, concerns, and what, for some, feels like instability going on in our world right now.

And I also want to acknowledge that there are some in this room that are not feeling that way. And I want to acknowledge you as well. I also want to invite you to open your heart to those who might be feeling that way. We are a diverse community that is part of who we are. As a center-set community, we are a unicorn; we are an anomaly, and we are learners, trying to figure out, how do we walk the tightrope?

How do we love fearlessly in a community that has different beliefs and that we want to love one another and we want to stay at the table, and we want to value and respect all people equally, and we want to receive and offer God's grace in abundance? How do we do that?

We don't know. But we're going to try with everything we got to do that, and we believe that it is going to be done through our core values and through love and through staying at the table. So, I just want to acknowledge that that is in the room.

And when the Bible talks about bearing one another's burdens, this is what it means. It means not necessarily understanding where the other person is coming from, but I'm going to love you anyway. And it means I may not agree with what you're saying and what you're doing, and it may actually piss me off, but I'm going to love you anyway, and we're going to figure it out, and we're going to try to walk together, and we're going to try to listen to one another, and we're not going to disparage one another, and we're not going to block, and we're not going to hate, but we're going to try to figure out how to do this thing in this world that does those very things. I love who we are.

I love who we are, but I don't know what's going to happen. None of us know what's going to happen. We are going to have to stick together. I haven't even begun. I want to cry.

We are starting on the subject of prayer, and - I'm already jumping ahead of my own sermon - I am convinced, convinced, convinced that the only way we're going to make it is on our knees, and the only way we are going to love one another is on our knees. And the only way that we are going to figure this thing out, especially the next four years, is on our knees and is listening to what God is telling us to do.

If you hear nothing else from me today, hear that it is listening to what God is speaking to us and hearing God's heart, that is how we're going to do it. That's it. That's my I could sit down right now, but I'm not going to.

So, we have started our series on The Gym. We're officially starting that today, and we kind of started it last year when we were preaching on worship. But our premise is that church is usually referred to as "the hospital," and I love what Pastor James said last week, that the hospital is important and necessary. So please hear we are not throwing the hospital out. We are not saying we no longer need the hospital, because you do need the hospital when there are emergencies. You sometimes need emergency surgery. You sometimes need the ER, you sometimes need to go to the doctor. So, yes, the hospital is needed, but you can't live in the hospital. It is not a healthy place to be, and the gym helps keep you out of the hospital. So, the gym is a preventative. It is something that strengthens you. It is something that builds you up. It is something that builds your muscles up. It is something that helps your body. It is something that keeps you going in a strong way, and it helps us remain in a healthy place.

So, our goal this year, and again, I think about where we are in the world. This year is about gaining muscle. It's about gaining stamina. It is about gaining strength, and it is about gaining spiritual perseverance. How many think that we're going to need that this year? Right? Right. How many have hit 2025, and gone? What the heck? Hey, hey, hey, right, exactly. So, we're going to be taking, we're going to be walking through and taking us through the various tools or machines to train on our spiritual strength. We're going to be going through repentance, prayer, repentance, laying on of hands, resurrection, judgment, meditation, solitude, confession, salvation. Y'all might be surprised how a few of us believe about salvation. Y'all might run out the door. I hope not.

But this is something that's important that you know, you know, how have you ever read, it's mostly it's on the internet. You read one person, and they talk about nutrition, or they talk about, like, how to do. I've been looking at stuff on Tai Chi, you know, you know that stuff and I, because it's probably the only exercise I can really do is, you know, really slow, like this, I can do that.

So, okay, once you start following it, you got all kinds of different stuff that come up. Like yesterday, I was looking at something, and it was like, rubbing your hands together and then rubbing your face. And Tony just looks at me. He's like, you're gonna do that? I'm like, No, but so you get all kinds of different ideas for what

nutrition looks like, or what the way you're supposed to work on a machine, or the way that something is supposed to be Tai Chi is rubbing your face Tai Chi, I don't know. It doesn't seem right to me, but I don't know, is it? This is what it's going to be like when you hear from different people preaching on different subjects. You are going to hear different ways that we are all talking about these different things, which is why we have more than one preacher preaching on a different subject. But the purpose is that as you hear us, you all go out and discover yourself. How do you use the tool of prayer? What are you going to do with the tool of repentance? What do you believe about these tools at PS, by the way, I'm going to put a plug in here, starting in February after Pastor James and Janice get back from their incredible vacation that they're about to go on five days from now, and they are Pastor James is going to be teaching on foundations of faith. So, if you have not taken that yet, I encourage you to take that. That starts February 23.

It's going to be different opinions. You're going to hear difference. But that's our secret sauce. In our elder meeting yesterday, we were talking about this, our secret sauce is diversity of voices. Our secret sauce is that it's not homogenous voices up here with homogeneous theology. It is that we share with you our theology with the hope and the prayer that you will go out and study this and act.

Activate the tool in your life. So that's the purpose of it, so, and that is actually the most important thing, is that we all take what is said here, and we go out and implement them in our life. The other thing is, is that we all understand. We are all still learners.

We all have something to learn from all of this. No matter how long we've been teaching or how long we've been learning, we all still have something to learn. You know, one of the things that I my is my mantra when I'm coaching is what we do in my coaching sessions is great, but what people do outside of the sessions is what's going to change them.

So great we can talk our brains out. It doesn't it really doesn't matter how many of us have been in therapy. You walk away and you don't do anything, and you go back into therapy and you're talking the same thing that you just talked about last week.

Brandon raises his hand.

Thank you, Brandon, love you.

Me, yeah.

So, we gotta put the tools into practice. It's not enough to go Amen, Pastor t, what matters more is that after we preach on prayer, that you take it and we implement the tool. So, we're going to have little exercises at the end of our sermons that we're going to encourage you to implement.

So, today's tool is prayer, and as I said, man, this is such an important tool in this season. So, the Bible has over 650 references to prayer. So, there is prayer, about how to pray, ways to pray, where to pray, positions of prayer, why we pray, what to do when we pray, all kinds of things around prayer. The verse that I grabbed, that that stuck out to me, that is, I think the most profound for me, is 1st Thessalonians 5:16-18, and it's rejoice, always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. And what this verse does for me, it encompasses our word from last year, which was gratitude. Give thanks in all circumstances. It encompasses our last sermon series on praise and worship, to rejoice always, and then it moves us into prayer. And it also encompasses, I believe, an attitude and a way of living our lives. It is a way of being that I believe that God invites us into every day, and so when it goes, this is God's will for you. For me, it's almost like God is going. There's a way that you can live in a space of positivity that will help you in your life. So, it's not like law, but it's more like an invitation to breath and to life.

So, this word prays without ceasing, the sense of the word is unflagging resolve means man just don't stop, and it does have a connotation of speaking with God, and often times to make a request.

Now this is where you're going to hear my bias, because I do believe that prayer is about making requests, but I believe we've been taught that prayer is primarily about making requests.

But I personally believe and live my life that prayer that making requests is like at the bottom of the list, that that prayer is not about transaction, that prayer is about relationship. And that prayer is that what you always hear me say, that paraquatic Dance with God, and that when you are in relationship with God, it's not about making requests, it's about living into God and listening more than it is about God. I want this, and I want that and make this come to pass.

Yes, it's more about, Lord, what? What do I need to know in this moment? What? What are you speaking to me in this moment? And it's less about what I want.

Because when we're listening, and I'm going to ask for a show of hands, how many times have you been in a moment with God, and God has shown up within you? Your circumstances remain the same, but everything changed within you, and it was like, "Oh, I can do this," right? And did that not make all the difference in the world? That is prayer. To me, I could sit down again, but I'm not.

So, I just think it is so much bigger. Nine times we're told that Jesus went off by himself. And I think that's very poignant because in the gospels, where so much is written, we're told nine times that he went off. I'm sure it was more than that, but the gospel writers made sure that we knew that nine times he went off by himself. And I believe one of the things that I find fascinating about this is that he stepped aside to

make time for prayer. The Son of God, God the Son, took time to pray. He was God, why did he need to pray? But that tells you something. That tells you how important it is.

The other thing is, most of those times were at night. When was the last time we all stayed up at night to pray? Now, I was thinking about this, not a guilt trip, it's just a question. How many times have we all stayed up all night, praying? All night. Yeah, now, I've done it at vigils with other people, so I was more motivated. But by myself? Never. Never.

I guarantee that I would not make it. He would not make it. But Pastor Bill Gaultiere, if that's how you say his name, says, "The priority of Jesus' solitude and silence is everywhere in the Gospels. It's how he began his ministry, it's how he made important decisions, it's how he dealt with troubling emotions like grief, it's how he dealt with the constant demands of ministry, it's how he cared for his soul, and it's how he prepared for his death on the cross." What does that tell you? That tells you that if it is not a vital part of our life, then there is something missing.

If we are not taking that time, then there is a vital part missing in our life. Just think about that. Another thought, the reason the gospel writers made a point to include their many accounts of Jesus returning to the presence of God was because they were offering those who would hear the message then and now an invitation to understand that we, too, can experience the power and the presence of God ourselves as well. That we can enter into that ourselves.

Do you know the gifts that we have? I just think of that communion song, "Bring me back to the garden." That's prayer. "Bring me back to the..." I can't think of the words..."to the moment I saw your face, my God, bring me back to communion." That's breath and life. That is our sustenance. More than anything, that is our sustenance.

The first-century prophet Nephi says, "And now, if the Lamb of God and him being holy should have need to be still and be alone with God, how much more need have we, being unholy, to seek the same in our own lives?" I don't think that there's a person in this room that would dispute or question the importance of prayer. No one. There's no one in this room I think would do it.

But how many of us actually spend deep, saturating, quiet, listening, not asking for anything, prayer with God? Extended time with God? You know, yesterday was, I think, one of the sweetest retreats we had as elders. And I'm not looking at the elders, in case they're like, "What?"

But I think part of it was because we started with what I labeled the "three-breath prayer" and listened for what we needed to know. What did I ask? "What do we need to know in this moment?" And then we went off by ourselves for one hour with

questions, which I'm going to hand out later, and just spent an hour listening by ourselves. Just meditating, doing whatever, quiet and listening. And that rooted us into a different space. And then we started the retreat. And then we got stuff done.

It was so sweet. And what was so beautiful, and I want you all to hear this, then we went in and we did an exercise called Photo Language. Some of you know about this, some of you don't. You choose pictures. So, we laid out these beautiful pictures, and then we went through and picked. And the question was, "Where are we as a community?"

What was spectacular about this was that we all, you're only allowed to choose two or three pictures, we all wanted to choose all the pictures that everybody else had. And we all basically were saying the same thing. The unity was profound. And what everybody was saying was that we were all in the same place. Said differently, but in unique ways with everybody's voice. Said a little differently so we could gel it together, but all, in essence, going the same way. Nine people going the same direction, hearing the same thing. Do you know how profound that is? That's amazing. That's God. That's listening.

For me, as I was thinking about today and about my whole sermon, I went, "That's what happens when you have a listening team." When you take time and just listen. And just dig deep.

I'm going to reiterate again, we need to be listening in this season. Every time I say that, I want to cry. And I want to cry because everything in my soul says we are walking a tightrope in our society and in our culture right now. There is so much division. And we have a choice to make.

We either saturate ourselves with social media, doom-scrolling, looking at the fear-mongering, or we saturate ourselves with God, and the truth, and listening, and prayer. Hearing what God is telling us to do. Engaging in justice, protecting one another, fighting on one another's behalf, and standing up for what is right.

We must become a people who follow God's heart and are willing to die on that sword of love and of justice. And the only way we're going to do that is if we listen to what God is saying. Because if we live over here, where we're inundating ourselves with the garbage, you know, I'm going to say a trite saying that I've heard my whole life, garbage in is going to produce garbage out. It's just the way we are wired as human beings.

I think of Mother Teresa. I'm going to skip way ahead in my sermon, but that's okay. I think of Mother Teresa, and she says, "You should pray and meditate every day so you know that you are loved, so you can feel the presence of God's love in your life. This is the only way you can truly help others and serve the poorest of the poor. We have to give from a full heart, one that is saturated with love, overflowing to others.

Before we can give freely, we have to know that we are loved. That this is the why. You should pray and meditate every day so you can remember that you are loved, letting it fill your heart and your body. Let it fill every cell of your being, then give it all away." And then she finishes with this: "Do you see?"

Do you see? Do we see?

I've got to be honest. There's something that burns deep in my soul. The day of Christianity, where we come in and get our ears tickled, kind of feels like it's over. Kind of feels like we've got to be doing something.

Yes, it's more about, Lord, what? What do I need to know in this moment? What? What are you speaking to me in this moment? And it's less about what I want, because when we're listening, and I am going to ask for a show of hands. How many times have you been in a moment with God, and God has shown up within you? Your circumstances remain the same, but everything changed within you, and it was like, Oh, I can do this, right? And did that not make all the difference in the world? That is prayer. To me, I could sit down again, but I'm not.

So, I just think it is so much bigger. So, nine times we're told that Jesus went off by himself. And I think that's very poignant, because in the gospels, where so much is written, we're told nine times that he went off, and I'm sure it was more than that, but the gospel writers made sure that we knew that nine times he went off by himself. And I believe one of the things that I find fascinating about this is that he stepped aside to make time for prayer, the Son of God. God the Son took time to pray. Pray like he was God. Why did he need to pray? But that tells you something, that tells you how important it is. The other thing is, most of those times were at night. When was the last time we all stayed up at night to pray?

Now I was thinking about this, not a guilt trip. It's just a question, how many times we all stay up all night praying all night. Yeah, now I've done it at vigils with other people, so I was more motivated, but by myself, never, never. I guarantee that that is what would have. I guarantee that is what I would not make. I would not make it. He would not make it.

But Pastor Bill Gaultiere, if that's how you say his name, he says the priority of Jesus is solitude, and silence is everywhere in the Gospels. It's how we began his ministry, it's how we made important decisions, it's how we dealt with troubling emotions like grief, it's how we dealt with the constant demands of ministry, and it's how we cared for his soul, and it's how he prepared for his death on the cross. What does that tell you? That tells you that if it is not a vital part of our life, then there is something missing. If we are not taking that time, then there's a vital part that's missing in our life.

Just to think about that. And another thought, the reason the gospel writers made a point to include their many accounts of Jesus returning to the presence of God was because they were offering those who would hear the message then and now, an invitation to understand that we too can experience the power and the presence of God ourselves as well, that we can enter into that ourselves. Do you know the gifts that we have, that we like? I just think of that communion song, like, bring me back to the garden. That's prayer. Bring me back to the to the I can't think of the words, to the moment I saw your face, my God, bring me back to communion. That's breath and life. That is our sustenance, more than anything, that is our sustenance.

The first-century prophet Nephi says, "And now, if the Lamb of God, and him being holy, should have need to be still and be alone with God, how much more need have we, being unholy, to seek the same in our own lives? I don't think that there's a person in this room that would dispute or question the importance of prayer? No one. There's no one in this room, I think, would do it. But how many of us actually spend deep, saturating, quiet, listening, not asking for anything, prayer with God, extended time with God?

You know, yesterday was one of the, I think, one of the sweetest retreats we had as elders. And I'm not looking at the elders, in case they're like, what? But, and I think part of it was because we started with what I labeled the three-breath prayer, and listened for what we needed to know, what I asked? What do we need to know in this moment? And then we went off by ourselves for one hour with questions, which I'm going to hand out later, and just spent an hour listening by ourselves, just meditating, doing whatever, quiet and listening, and that rooted us into a different space. And then we started the retreat. And then we got stuff done. It was so sweet, and what was so beautiful. And I want you all to hear this.

Then we went in, and we did through an exercise called Photo language, where some of you know about this, some of you don't, you choose pictures. So, we laid out these beautiful pictures, and then we go through and we pick, and the question was, where are we as a community? What was spectacular about this was we all, you only can choose two or three pictures. We all wanted to choose all the pictures that everybody else had. And we all basically were saying the same thing. The unity was profound. And what everybody was saying was we were all in the same place, said different but and said in unique ways with everybody's voice and said in a little bit different, so we could gel it together, but all in essence going the same way, nine people going the same direction, hearing the same thing. Do you know how profound that is? That's amazing. That's God, that's listening. And for me, as I was thinking about, you know, today, and about my whole sermon, I went, that's what happens when you have a listening team, when you take time and just listen and just dig deep. I'm going to reiterate again, we need to be listening in this season.

Every time I say that, I want to cry, and I want to cry because everything in my soul says we are walking a tightrope in our society and in our culture right now. There is

so much division. And we have a choice to make. We either saturate ourselves with social media, doom scrolling, looking at the fear-mongering, or we saturate ourselves with God and the truth and listening and prayer and hearing what God is telling us to do, and engaging in justice and protecting one another and fighting on one another's behalf and standing up for what is right. We must become a people who follow God's heart and are willing to die on that sword of love and of justice. And the only way we're going to do that is if we listen to what God is saying. Because if we live over here where we're inundating ourselves with the garbage, you know, I'm going to say a trite saying that I've heard my whole life, garbage in is going to produce garbage out. It's just the way we are wired as human beings.

I think of Mother Teresa. I'm going to skip way ahead in my sermon, but that's okay. I think of Mother Teresa, and she goes, "You should pray and meditate every day so you know that you are loved, so you can feel the presence of God's love in your life. This is the only way you can truly help others and serve the poorest of the poor. We have to give from a full heart, one that is saturated with love, overflowing to others. Before we can give freely, we have to know that we are loved, that this is the only this is the why you should pray and meditate every day so you can remember that you are loved, letting it fill your heart and your body. Let it fill every cell of your being, then give it all away. And then she finishes it with this, do you see? Do you see? Do we see?

I got to be honest, there's something that burns deep in my soul, the day of Christianity, where we come in and we get our ears tickled, kind of feels like it's over. Kind of feels like we got to be doing something. We got to be awake and listening. I don't know what your call is. I don't know. I don't know, but the only way you are going to hear and I am going to hear is if I quiet myself and I listen longer than 12 seconds. I want to show you this video. I'm skipping. I'm skipping all over, but I want to show you this video of Martin Luther King Jr, so let's show it here.

That's one of my favorite stories. And this is it. This is how he writes about it. He says, "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine, as I had never experienced before, almost at once, my fears began to pass from me, my uncertainty disappeared, and I was ready to face anything. "The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me an inner calm. Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God given me a new strength and a trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and the problems.

If we are going to do what God is inviting us to do, we have and we are going to stand up for what is right, whatever God is inviting us to do in that moment, we must quiet ourselves.

We must enter the inner sanctum, and we must be listening to what, to have those moments where we can step in and do what God is asking us to do, because they're

not easy. They're not easy. They're not easy to stand up on behalf of others. It's not easy to do when I look at his life, Martin Luther King's life, and all that he went through. You know, we talk about it. We quote his sayings. We put them on buttons. We love what he says. But I always go back to something Pastor James said that his mother said, and it was, "Be careful who you get in the foxhole with when they can get out of the foxhole." And that has always stuck with me.

I want to be the person that stays in the foxhole. I want to be the person, I, God, that bears one another's burdens. And I want to be the person, and I want to be the church that stands up on behalf of others. And I want to be the church that even though I might not understand it, I'm still going to stand with you. And I want to be the church that even though we might not understand one another, or we might disagree with one another, we are still going to stick together. And we're going to still love fearlessly with one another.

But it's going to take, it's going to take being a people of prayer, and it's going to take us on our knees together and exercising by ourselves alone in our homes, practicing the presence of God. So, let me see if there's anything that I didn't say that I want to say. As I've skipped all over the place, I'm going to say this, and then I'm going to go to the end.

Richard Rohr says this: For some reason, it's easier to attend church service than, quite simply, to reverence the real and to practice the presence of God. Making this commitment doesn't demand a lot of dogmatic wrangling or managerial support, just vigilance, desire, and a willingness, here's the key, to begin again and again and again and again and again. That's the journey. We just keep trying. It's not law. We just keep trying.

And P.S., by the way, it doesn't have to be some, you know, light a candle, go hide in your closet thing. It's through and in life. As we're driving, don't turn the radio on; as we're walking; as we're making dinner; as we're grocery shopping, it's just coming into the moment and into the present and listening and hearing and inviting God into that moment. It's returning to the center again and again and again in a kind of an in-and-out movement, like a dance, a breathing in and a breathing out, a strength and a calm, and listening for where there might be an injustice that needs to be righted, and then going into the world and living into what God has invited us to live into.

So, here's the training. There are going to be things in the back. There are two things I am going to invite you, at some point this week, to take an hour, one hour, set the timer, and there are questions, those questions, and Tony is going to, you don't have to hand them out now; at the end of the service, pick them up in the back. And I'm going to invite you to one hour. Just take some time, sit with the questions, or sit with your own questions. Just sit quietly. Turn instrumental music on, turn off the TV, get off social media, because I want to acknowledge, listen, Instagram is more fun.

Okay, it answers something; it's meant to work on the dopamine in our brains. It's made that way. I want to acknowledge that.

Move away from it. Take an hour this week, as your trainer, is what I'm going to invite you to do. Take an hour one time this week, and just sit with these and journal, even if you hate journaling, journal and just sit and whatever comes up, let come up alongside of that. Take time again, one time this week, instead of picking up your phone, instead of doing something like that, take three minutes and just breathe in and breathe out and come into this moment and ask, "God, what do I need to know in this moment?"

All right, that's the invitation as your trainer this week around prayer. And in the meantime, we're going to start here. Joni has an invitation for you.