

Trinity United Methodist Church

March 8, 2020

“Talking With God: Short, Simple, Honest”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Sermon

Let’s pray. Lord, we give thanks. We open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

At 8:30 service this morning I actually prayed for our leaders in our country to actually get rid of stupid daylight savings time. Yeah. I mean, it’s the one thing everybody in our country can actually unite around right now, right? You would think they would actually—it would be a perfect move for them. Anyway...

You may have heard the old show, *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. And it’s a general principle as well, their simplicity, their honesty comes out and leaves us either laughing or sometimes with our mouths just hanging wide open at what they have said. And especially when it comes to kids’ prayers. And so as we’re talking about prayer during the season of Lent, I Googled and found sort of a “top ten” list of kids’ prayers. Some of them you may have heard before.

“Dear God, my mom tells me that you have a reason for everything on earth. I guess broccoli is one of your mysteries.”

“Please make my parents understand that if I don’t eat salad, I do better at school.”

“Please forgive me for hiding my sister’s favorite doll, and please don’t tell her where it is.”

“Dear God”—I like this one—“I need you to make my mom not allergic to cats. I really want a cat, and I really don’t want to ask my mom to move out.”

One for the 21st century: “Dear God, can you get me a smartphone? Santa must have forgotten.”

“Dear God, it must be super hard to love all the people in the world, especially my brother. I don’t know how you do it.”

And conversely, “Dear God, when will my sister stop being so annoying? I’m down to my last patience.”

“Dear God”—I’ve prayed this one—“I promise to never say those words again, at least until my next round of shots.”

“Dear God, please don’t let it rain on Saturday. The first ball I hit will be for you.”

And the last one is quite touching: “Dear God, I hope my dog is with you in heaven. Please take care of him, and sorry if he chews on your sandals.”

And so, in our prayer series, it’s entitled *Talking With God*, and when we think about prayer, I talk with so many people in counseling and so forth about their prayer life. And there’s so many hang-ups that people have with it, including just how to pray. And so last week we talked about how prayer is essentially just simply talking with God, especially like we talk with a friend. And that’s the basis of prayer, right there.

But still people often get caught up with what words to use in prayer. That maybe there’s some magic formula that we have to pray, some special syntax that we have to use. Sometimes the “thee’s” and the “thou’s,” and “talk like Yoda, we must,” and things like that, in order to get God to hear our prayers more effectively. Maybe there’s some special cadence that we have to use, or some special vocal inflection to really get God’s attention, or whatever the case might be.

Often in a group setting, Bible study or a meeting, I ask, “So who wants to open or close us in prayer tonight?” And invariably, everyone will stare at either the table or at the floor. The whole “don’t look at the teacher; they’ll call on you” kind of thing. And I think it’s because, and I’ve had people tell me, “I would do that, I just don’t know *what to say*.” And that’s what we’re talking about.

There’s no need for precise or churchy language when it comes to talking with God. After all, you don’t have a special language or syntax with which you talk with your

friends, do you? Maybe you do, like Amy and Penny on *Big Bang Theory*, when they develop their special language, but most of us don't. And so we can really take a cue from the way that the youngest of kids will often pray. And as the sermon title says, they pray short, they pray simply, and they pray honest. Whether you pray with kids, if you sub in Sunday Schools downstairs or whatever, or you've prayed with your own children or grandchildren, or whatever the case might be, sometimes we adults tend to veer into thinking, "Well, that's cute. Someday you'll learn *really* how to pray, but that's cute for now," when nothing could be farther from the truth.

In the scripture reading for this morning in the Gospel of Matthew, in the beginning of chapter 18, the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Who is the GOAT for them, the Greatest Of All Time? And really they're asking, "Who *among us 12 really special disciples of Jesus* is the greatest and is going to be the greatest in the kingdom of God?"

And Jesus' response is not to ask one of the most experienced fishermen to stand up. He didn't ask an educated doctor to step forward. He didn't look to a wise priest for his thoughts. Instead, Jesus called over a little child and put the kid in the middle of them. And he said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now think about the best characteristics of a child. They're completely dependent upon their parents or guardians, whether they want to admit it or not. They're trusting by nature. They haven't gotten everything figured out, and sometimes that seems for the better. And Jesus says, "become like this, even though you're adults now. Become dependent on your heavenly Father, on God, whether you want to admit it or not. Trust by default. And you don't have to have everything figured out in order to enter into the kingdom of God." Thanks be to God for that.

And if we apply this to our prayer life, how might we become like little children in our prayers? Maybe we can pray short and simple and honest. Now just to be clear, when we talk about short prayers, there is nothing inherently wrong with long prayers, unless it's a prayer like Aunt Edna, was it, in Christmas Vacation, leading into the Pledge of Allegiance and all that sort of stuff. "Yeah, Grace? She's been dead 30 years!" The point of it is that prayers are not required to be long. Just because you pray a longer prayer doesn't make it a better prayer, just because it's long. We don't have to randomly add words to our prayers. We don't have to get our prayers to a certain length. We don't have to pad our prayers like we did book reports in eighth grade in order to meet a certain page requirement. When we're talking with God, there's no need to ramble. God just wants to hear from us.

Whether our words are few or many, God just loves hearing from us to begin with, any time throughout our day. He longs to be part of things with us, and just like any parent, He'd rather His children give Him a quick "hello" than to hear nothing at all.

And sometimes what makes us think we need more to our prayers is when it's been a while since we've really prayed to God, and this guilt factor sets in and we think that we need to pad our prayers with more words because we feel guilty, and so we need to make it up to God somehow. When all we simply need to do is, "Hey God, it's me. Sorry it's been a while." And that's a great prayer right there.

It leads to the "simple" part of praying like a child. Prayer needs to be simple because as human beings, especially as adults, we often make things a lot more complex than they need to be. We take something so simple and we make it so complex, partly because we feel this constant need to impress others by looking better than we really are. Sometimes to the point that we even try to be somebody that we're not.

Early on in marriage, we were at a gathering and I was chatting with a group of guys and Bekah was kind of nearby, and these guys were all talking about cars. And I know next to nothing about cars, but you know, it's the *manly* topic, and I'm "Oh, yeah!" and everything, and trying to fit in with the group. Later, my new bride asked, "Why did you do that? You don't know anything about cars."

And we do those types of things to try to fit in and impress others. We do the same thing, sometimes, with God. Sometimes we clean up our language when it comes to talking with God. Maybe not overt cursing, but maybe in the things that we say to God.

But again, we don't need to impress God, because God would rather hear from us, all the words and all, rather than some weird version of who we tried to be. We don't need to try to sound all prim and proper. We don't have to have the strange religious words. We don't have to worry about saying the wrong thing. We don't have to make it complicated. Just keep it simple and talk with God.

Oftentimes people have told me that they don't volunteer when I ask who wants to open or close in prayer because they think that I'm asking them to give a "speech," and there's this innate fear so many have of public speaking. But Jesus isn't looking for a show. In fact, He called that out among the Pharisees, those who were trying to impress others with their long and elaborate prayers. Jesus just wants to talk with us, so keep it simple.

And then lastly, keep it honest. When it comes to being honest with God, how many times have we prayed what we *thought* we should say instead of what we were

really thinking and feeling? We might tell God that we're *thankful*, but really we're upset. It's one of my biggest pet peeves, where the super-Christian, you ask them how they're doing, and you get, "Oh, I'm *blessed*." And you know they're going through a bunch of *stuff*, right? And you're like, "Come on, no, how are you, *really*?" "Oh, I'm just so blessed." Tell us how you really feel, right? We tell God we're grateful for peace, when that's the last thing that we have. And some people call that type of thing lying, right? When we say something that we don't really mean or something that isn't true.

Think about one of the most famous Psalms in the Bible, Psalm 139. It's a bit scary to think about. David says in the Psalm how God sees everything in us, everything that we say and do. David says, "before a word is on my tongue, You know it completely, oh Lord." That's a beautiful thing, but it's also a pretty terrifying thing, isn't it? "Sorry, God." Right? He knows and hears everything, even the words we *haven't* spoken.

And here's the thing: If God already knows the truth of what's going on inside of us, why would we keep it in with God? Why wouldn't we be honest with God? If He already knows and sees everything in us and still He loves us, why not be honest with Him? And David knew this truth well. As you read through the Psalms, it seems at times like David has lost his everloving mind. He's happy one second and he's despondent and/or mad the next. And through the Psalms he questions God constantly. And David is raw. He doesn't hold anything back. Nothing at all. And just as it is with David, God sees everything in us as well, so why wouldn't we be honest with God?

It's like, have you ever had some tension in a relationship? And this often happens with spouses, but sometimes with friends also, where something happens and the tension starts to build, right? And you start maybe doing the silent treatment or the passive-aggressive huffing and puffing or whatever the case might be. And one will ask the other, "Are you okay?" And the other responds with the, "I'm fine." Right? And of course, the stereotype is, if the woman says, "I'm fine,"—DANGER! DANGER, Will Robinson! The woman is not fine! But the thing of it is, men do this as well. I often do this to my wife. "I'm fine," because I just don't want to get into it, honestly. But it builds to a point that finally, it comes out one way or another. And you finally get to say what you've been wanting to say. And it still might be messy, but there's this relief that you've finally said what you've been thinking and feeling for so long.

It's the same in our relationship with God as well. Just say it short and simple and honest. Maybe it's simply, "Thanks be to God." Oftentimes my prayer is simply, "God, help." Maybe it's "I need you. *We* need you." Or "I'm sorry. Please forgive me and help me to forgive."

One of the most favorite things of mine that happens at Trinity right now is what happens at the beginning of every worship service here at 9:30 as the Pied Piper, Debbie Spruill, leads the children down here. And I do try to get in here in time; Debbie tells me that some of the children really get concerned that “Pastor Dan isn’t in here yet to pray with us.” “It’s okay, we can still pray.” Debbie and I started doing this; she did this with Pastor Jeff, and it started out just the two of us, and I think at some point one of the kids asked her what we were doing, and Debbie shared with them and invited them, “You can come pray with us, too.” And now, sometimes, y’all see how there’s often not enough room. We’re trying to figure out how to build more room for the kids to come forward and pray with us.

And so in preparation for today I asked Kim Orrock, our fantastic Children’s Ministry Director, if she would share with me some prayer requests or prayers from our own Trinity kids, and here are some of those:

“I’m so glad for God. I’m just happy for everything.”

Once a little girl prayed, “My cat died.” And her brother piped up, “He died three years ago, Ms. Kim.”

A child, after parents’ divorce, said, “I miss my dad.”

Another said, “I can’t tell you my prayer request because it’s a secret. I have a brother, but I haven’t met him, because he’s in heaven.”

Another said, “I’m just so glad that we get to come here. I’m happy here.”

And lastly, from a kid who took a long time, she said, to offer any prayer requests or prayers; he finally piped up one time and said, “I like meatballs.”

Friends, keep it short, keep it simple, keep it honest. That’s all we need to do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.