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**October 1, 2017**

**Put Your Whole Self In - Prayers**

**Philippians 4:4-7**

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**Matthew 6:6-15**

<sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup>“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup>“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup>And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup>And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. <sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

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If you are familiar with the cycle of the church year, you'll know that October is typically when we kick off our Stewardship campaign, which concludes with a dedication of financial pledges for the coming year. During this time, we talk honestly about the relationship between our faith and money and about the gift of generosity. But “stewardship” encompasses more than simply *how much we contribute to the church budget*. A holistic understanding of stewardship looks at everything we have and everything we are, as blessings from our Creator God, and thus how we use our gifts, financial and otherwise, has implications for our faith. Stewardship is more about faithfulness in how we live in all aspects of our life, than simply how much we put in the offering plate on Sunday.

When someone joins the church, either through confirmation, profession of faith, or transferring, they take a vow to support the church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. These promises highlight two truths for me... that **the church needs people**,

faithful members who are willing to step up and serve in various different aspects of ministry. A church depends on the **people** who make ministry happen. People who give of their time and talents, their passion and dedication, believing that through their participation in this community of faith, we can make our lives and the world a better place – more like the Kingdom of God. As we do *church* together, our faith grows – faith in each other, in the love of God that we experience here, faith in the one who creates, redeems, and sustains us.

Which leads me to the second truth... that **people need the church**. How we live out our faith life in *this community*, which includes what we choose to offer for God's work through the church, is dependent upon the development and growth of our spiritual life... our growth as a follower of Christ. And growth doesn't just happen by accident... growth takes work and intentionality, opportunity and inspiration, nurturing and support – it takes a community, a Village to help along the way. People need the church because **here** we are reminded that the world doesn't revolve around us, that love really does win in the end, that we are not alone in our fight for justice, and that YES, God can do amazing things in our lives and the world by using us as instruments of peace. It is with these two truths – *that the church needs people, and that people need the church* – that we engage this year's Stewardship theme – Put Your Whole Self In! acknowledging that spiritual growth and vital ministry don't happen by accident, but with intentionality and faithfulness.

Being a faithful and growing Christian means more than simply showing up to worship on Sunday mornings, it means putting our whole selves into our faith development and to the church we call home. Over the next 5 weeks, we'll dig into each one of the membership vows; prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness – and look for where God is calling us to grow and stretch. This week, you should receive in the mail a pledge card that will look different than it has in past years. This year, rather than just making a pledge for a contribution amount, we're asking you to make a promise to God in each one of these areas – prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, and on October 29<sup>th</sup>, we'll bring forward and dedicate our pledges during our worship services, asking God to bless us on the journey ahead.

So we turn today to look at how we support the church with our PRAYERS. Many of us are taught to pray as children through rote prayers, ones we just repeat or recite, day in and day out – like “God is great, God is good...” before a meal, or “Now I lay me...” before bed... or even, “Our Father who art in heaven...” These prayers teach us the basics of praying, but unfortunately some people never stop to think about the meaning of the words they say, or graduate to using their own words to simply talk with God. In our Gospel reading, Jesus said, <sup>7</sup>“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases; [thinking that you] will be heard because of [your] many words... [God] knows what you need, even before you ask.”

But then there are some who simply use prayer as a request to get what they want from God. Those prayers go something like this... “God, please help me find a parking spot!” or “Please let the weather be beautiful for my wedding tomorrow!” They pray as if God is a genie in a bottle and all they need to do is rub the lamp, request something, and then sit back and expect God to work miracles. Deep and meaningful prayer should not begin with

who **we** are or what **we** want from God, but with who **God** is and what **God** wants for us. “**Your** kingdom come, **Your** will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” It’s about God working in and through us to transform us from the inside out, and as a result, the world around us.

Prayer has the power to make real change in our lives and the lives of those around us... the question is, do we believe it? Do we believe in the power of prayer? I heard about a congregation of tee-totaling Methodists who prayed for years that the Lord would do something about the disreputable bar across the street from the church. One night the bar was hit by lightning and burned to the ground. The bar owner promptly sued the church, saying that the congregation’s prayers were responsible for the fire. The church contested the suit. After hearing the case, the judge said, “I’m not sure how I’ll rule on this case, but one thing is clear. The bar owner believes in prayer, and the church people don’t.”

Do you believe in prayer? When was the last time you really opened up and let God in? Quieting the voices that play in your mind, removing the false mask that we don in public and just were yourself before God? It is in this place of vulnerability that our true prayers reside – our deepest fears and hopes, our joys, sorrows and doubts – and it is here where we can, not just talk AT God, but stop to listen. To discern God’s leading in our lives.

When you entered the service today, you were given not only a bulletin, but a slip of paper. Please take that out now, as well as something to write with. I’d like to invite each of us into a time of reflection, a moment to reflect about our own prayer life and the ways we support the church with our prayers. On this paper, I invite you to write down two things, on the side that says “Now”, I invite you to share a word or phrase that sums up your prayer life... on the side that says “Pledge”, say a word about something you’d like to try or change about how you pray. There’s no right or wrong answers here, and please don’t write your name on these... But when the offering plates are passed, I ask that you drop your slip of paper in the plate as an offering to God. Throughout the week, we’ll compile our reflections and post them for us to learn from and inspire one another. Whether or not what you put on this slip of paper is what your prayer pledge ends up being on the 29<sup>th</sup> when we consecrate our pledges, I invite us to start thinking about what it might be, and how we’d like to grow in our faith.

I’ll give us about two minutes to reflect and write and then we’ll break the silence as we move into the Pastoral Prayer. Let us take this time for reflection...