

*Prayer Partners*

Romans 8:18-27

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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This morning we get back on track with our Discipleship Hour video series through Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, and our topic is prayer. I'm glad for the way this topic coincides with the New Year, because I think it is always a good thing for us to renew and refresh our practice of prayer. There are many spiritual disciplines. Prayer is the one such discipline that some describe as *more* important than a discipline. It is more basic, more necessary. It is, in other words, the one essential spiritual practice. (Again, you are invited to come upstairs at 9 a.m. to watch the 25-minute video, whether or not you are in a small group. Small groups will meet next week.)

Henri Nouwen once described prayer as *coming together around a promise*. I like the image that these words suggest. It's a picture of the church as a community of faith, drawn together not simply as a random group of individuals, but as people who are united by Good News—the Good News of Jesus Christ. There's more than one promise that we might say we gather around, but the one that I like is the promise of Jesus to be Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus said, *Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them* (Matthew 18:20).

And taking an inspiration from our moderator, Susan Nakaishi, I'd like to invite all of us to *come together around a promise* of God this year, and particularly as the year begins. Susan suggested that we hold a special service devoted to prayer—prayer for our church in particular, in all its ministries and plans and people. We're acting on this suggestion in a number of different ways. As we've already begun to do in our time of prayer during this service, we invite you to make the church a special focus of your prayers. Next Sunday during worship, you will have the option of praying silently, or praying with one or two others in the pews during our time of prayer.

At our first leadership retreat this year, scheduled for the first Saturday in February, prayer will also be a focus as we gather. And we'll follow this pattern with the rest of the retreats this year. Among the things we invite you to bring before God is the leadership of our church and your role—or your potential role—in it; discernment for the ministries that our church engages in; and the many on-going ministries of our congregation, both English and Japanese-speaking. Complementing this call to prayer is our continuation through *Celebration of Discipline*.

Richard Foster has played a big role in encouraging the evangelical church to embrace the church's legacy of prayer. He says, *To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us (Celebration of Discipline, p. 33)*. He points out that *All who have walked with God have viewed prayer as the main business of their lives (p. 34)*. And we can trace this pattern to Jesus, who, as the Gospels describe, would rise before dawn to find a lonely place to pray. Luke's Gospel even depicts Jesus as *habitually* withdrawing to lonely places to pray, even at the expense of the crowds seeking his ministry (Luke 4:42, 5:15-16).

Our call to be people of prayer is clear. But if we are honest, I would guess that most of us take to prayer the way we take to the Bible. We believe in it, trust in it and value it. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we read the Bible...or actually pray ourselves. At least, not as much as we think we should, or might even like to. Why?

Richard Foster says that one of the most discouraging myths about prayer is *that we have to have everything "just right" in order to pray (Prayer—Finding the Heart's True Home, p. 7)*. It's the myth that I have to be *good enough* to pray. I need to achieve a certain degree of uprightness or success or ability before my prayers will be heard. Some people think that you need to know special words or special techniques. All of these discouraging views of prayer rest on a basic misunderstanding of what prayer is.

The basic mistake is to view prayer as something we struggle to do well, and then God rewards us. This is a version of the old works-righteousness heresy—that we earn our salvation. We do something well enough and God rewards us. Apply this to prayer, and we are doomed not only to a poor prayer life, but prayer itself becomes part of our burden. View prayer this way, and it will be a relief to think that you aren't fit to pray. Rather than be a blessing or gift, prayer as a test or a performance or a work on our own power is a curse. Who could be good enough to pass the test?

But the good news is that this is not the Christian view of prayer. In the first minute of his video presentation, Richard Foster restores our perspective. The spiritual life we desire is not achieved by gritting our teeth, he says, but by falling in love. Prayer is not a burden; it is a blessing. It isn't a grind; it's a grace. Prayer isn't about our trying to get God to do something for us; it is a response to the fact that God has already done so much for us.

And in our Scripture this morning, the Apostle Paul reveals an amazing secret about what is happening when we pray. Listen to the way that the New Century Version of the Bible translates from verse 26:

*Also, the Spirit helps us with our weakness. We do not know how to pray as we should. But the Spirit himself speaks to God for us, even begs God for us*

*with deep feelings that words cannot explain. God can see what is in people's hearts. And he knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit speaks to God for his people in the way God wants.*

The Holy Spirit is our *prayer partner!* How can our prayers not be heard? How can our prayers not be effective?

This is how Eugene Peterson interprets the same verses: *Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves...and keeps us present before God.*

The Spirit is our prayer partner. Our prayers don't "work" because we discover the right technique or method, or because we come up with the right degree of emotion or passion or whatever. Our prayers are heard because God has not only given us Jesus his Son on a cross for our sins, but also the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts. The Trinity binds us in love to God. Our prayers don't achieve this. *God* has done this for us. Our prayers only bear witness to this spiritual fact.

As a writer named Frank Wallace put it, prayer is an encounter, not a performance. It is a conversation, a dialogue, a relationship with the God who loves us and wants to call us his own. We often feel like prayer puts us on the spot—will we use the right words? Is our heart right? Are we including everything we ought to include? We think of prayer as a performance that we have to get right, or do well enough, otherwise it doesn't "work."

Thinking of prayer this way quickly makes us feel like we aren't really our true selves when we pray. We feel like we are contorting and disguising ourselves, trying to fit into whatever spiritual persona we think we have to be in order to pray. Instead, says Father Wallace, *Authentic prayer just happens when I am truly myself and God is truly God and we meet in some depth. This is an encounter (Encounter Not Performance, p. 6).*

Professor Richard Hauser points out the basic misunderstanding that blocks so many from better praying. We think of prayer as beginning with our own initiative, and if it's good enough, God responds. But the reality is that God always initiates the relationship, and we respond only because we have already been given the grace to pray. (See *In His Spirit*, chapter 1.)

I also like Hauser's point that we often think of God being "out there," far from where we are "down here," and as a result, we often end up emphasizing the distance we feel between us and God. Yet, as Scripture describes our standing before God, the Holy Spirit dwells in Christians. As Paul says earlier in

Romans, ...*hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us* (5:5).

*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?* Paul writes to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 3:16).

Therefore, to think that God is “out there” while we are “down here” is an unbiblical, unchristian image. And in fact, what we need to get used to thinking is that the Spirit is already in us, among us, prodding and encouraging us to pray—and when our own words fail us, the Spirit fills the gap for us.

We don't need to worry about how *well* we might pray, or how *skilled* we might be in prayer. As Richard Foster quotes one writer, *Pray as you can, not as you can't*. Prayer is for *everyone*. There are no prerequisites or qualifications or certifications needed. And as our text this morning reminds us, we don't even need words, much less “the right words.” Because the Spirit is our prayer partner.