

Prayers of the Faithful

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
September 26, 2021
Text: James 5:13-16

This Sunday marks the third in our journey of exploration into what it means to be part of the United Church of Christ generally, and part of this church – the United Congregational Church of Westerly – specifically. Up to this point we have talked about who and what the UCC is and its origins as well as how this church we so love came to be. We have also explored the UCC core values of “continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and transforming lives.” Another way to think about this is that, to this point, we have talked about our specific identity as Congregationalist Protestant Christians in terms of how we are organized and what we believe. This week we begin to consider some specifics of that faith and practice.

For this church particularly, there is only one place to begin that conversation and that is with the practice of prayer. This church – UCC Westerly – is a faith community that “gets” prayer and you have for a long time, since way before my tenure as your pastor. In fact, you are the first church I have ever served that has an active and functioning communal prayer practice that the entire congregation, and dare I say the entire extended community, relies on. What’s that, you’re wondering. The Prayer Tree, dear ones. You are the first church I have ever served that has one that actually functions. The UCC Westerly Prayer Tree is a carefully planned structure that actually involves an entire rather large group of folks in the daily prayer life of this congregation. For those of you not familiar with the Prayer Tree, let me try to explain it to you. I say try because I have learned in my time here that this Prayer Tree functions like a living entity. It changes and morphs as needed to respond to requests received.

Basically, here’s how the Prayer Tree works. You determine you have something you would like to invite our prayer ministry team to pray for, like a sick relative or a worrisome situation you are struggling with. You then reach out to the Deacon of the week or myself to ask for prayers. The Deacon or

myself then notifies the members of the Prayer Tree which is structured into five different “branches” with someone at the top of each branch. When I came here as Pastor, the Deacon or Pastor receiving a prayer tree request would call all the branch leaders with the prayer request and those leaders would then notify all the members of their branch of the request, usually by phone. In recent years, the Prayer Tree has recognized that the ability to respond quickly to these requests is enhanced and improved by sending out a mass email to the entire Prayer Tree so all receive the request at the same time. This change happened gradually as we realized it was getting more and more difficult to respond to prayer requests quickly because of the time it took to make all those phone calls. There are more than two dozen folks on the prayer team currently and some weeks we receive as many as a half dozen prayer requests! That’s a lot of phone calls! Often by the time the last of the calls were made, the folks being called had already learned about the request from another source. So, we realized we needed to come into the 21st century and use email. Then, the Prayer Tree branch leaders are just responsible for calling anyone we know doesn’t have email or doesn’t check it very often.

Our new Prayer Tree structure works pretty well. When I send out a prayer request, I often get return emails from folks confirming receipt of the notification and that they are already praying. What’s amazing in this system is that folks never ask for details beyond what has already been provided by the Deacon or myself. That information is carefully crafted so it reveals as much about the situation as seems appropriate but not too much so that confidentiality is compromised. In other words, we are very careful that our Prayer Tree is not ever a source of gossip. The gossip factor is, in fact, one of the biggest reasons why some churches shy away from Prayer Trees or Prayer Teams – they don’t want to be accused of gossiping or violating confidentiality. Let me assure you that is not ever a factor with our Prayer Tree, and I am quite sure it never was. That kind of toxicity, once embedded, never goes away which is why I am quite confident it has never been a factor here, and I trust it never will. However, I should explain that one of our newer Prayer Tree innovations is that we do provide follow up to the Prayer Tree, on some occasions, on how things turned out for the prayer requests they have honored. We did this as we realized that some of the situations we have been invited to pray for have been

quite significant and dramatic – emergency surgeries for life threatening conditions, unexpected deaths leaving behind unimaginable pain and grief, job losses, car accidents, and so on, and so on. Because prayer in its best sense, in its purest sense, is the stuff of daily life. Prayer is how we invite God to be part of all the messiness, all the pain, all the confusion, all the fear and all the joy of our own lives each day. That’s why I say this church “gets” prayer because that is exactly what this long existing Prayer Tree is all about – inviting God into the middle of our lives. This church understands that God wants and needs to be in the middle of our lives, BUT God will only come there when invited by us to do so. And, dear ones, our Prayer Tree does that routinely for everyone in this church.

Still, this brings us to the point of another basic question. Is this kind of prayer – praying for specific people and their needs in various situations – the only kind of prayer there is? No, not at all. This kind of prayer, known as intercessory prayer or prayers of petition or request, is only one kind of prayer. And it’s so important to remember there is so much more to prayer than just asking God for something. For example, there are prayers of thanksgiving and praise. And no, I am not talking about the prayers we offer on the Thanksgiving holiday, though they would fit into this category. I am talking about the prayers when we pause to thank God for the blessings that come just with being alive, when we praise God for the gift of life, recognizing God as the Creator and Sustainer of everything. Sometimes we forget about this kind of prayer because we in the Congregational tradition are not as comfortable with the notion of prayers of praise. Giving thanks, of course! Praise along with all the “Praise Jesus!” and “Glory Hallelujahs” we think that implies, not so much. Too much emotion! Too much carrying on! We forget there are so many stories in the Bible when that is just what prayer brings out in people. David “danced before the Lord” in prayer as he walked in procession with the Ark of the Covenant. Both Miriam and Moses offered sung prayers and Miriam danced to celebrate the glory of God who delivered them from the Egyptians. In other words, this type of prayer is joyful and happy, excited and enthusiastic about this God who has done, is doing and will continue to delight in us. So in these prayers of praise we delight in God and God’s presence in our lives.

Then there is another kind of prayer that we seldom recognize and yet is so much a part of who we are as people of faith. I think of this as spontaneous prayer that is experienced rather than spoken or sung. Like this gorgeous new cross window and how it reveals the wonder of God in the way the light is constantly changing as the clouds float by and the leaves on the trees dance. That incredible feeling in your gut anytime something you see or experience brings you to a whole new level of awareness of God's Creation, God's sacred presence – that's prayer. Walking or hiking far from people, wrapped in the gentle quiet of God's world, that's prayer. Weeding the garden, getting all sweaty and dirty as you co-create with God in maintaining the Creation – that's prayer. Cooking a meal or donating food for people who need some extra support in the moment – that's prayer. Sending a card or writing a note to someone you know is struggling – that's prayer. So many things we do as an act of compassionate caring, that is prayer. Why? Because in those moments we are God's hands and feet. We are in deep conversation with God because we are allowing God to act through us to become an answer to someone else's prayer. Imagine that! Prayer is a two-way street! If we are open to it, we can actually be God's answer to someone else's prayer! That moment when you think, "I think I'll just drop a note in the mail to whomever because I'm just really thinking about them all of a sudden." Hello! That's God tapping you on the shoulder because God can't write out thinking of you cards! But we can. God can't take a meal to someone just home from the hospital or take someone to a doctor's appointment, but we can. And every time we do, that's prayer in action.

Of course, there are also the beautiful ritual forms of prayer we use in our worship. In fact, technically, everything we do in worship can be understood as prayer. The greetings from both myself and the Deacon are prayers of welcome for folks we know and those we don't. The call to worship, the unison prayer and even the Lord's Prayer are all moments of direct communication with God as a gathered body of the faithful. The pastoral prayers and the silent prayers offer opportunities to share our thoughts and needs with the God who loves us beyond all reason and is always ready to hear whatever it is we want to tell God. And the songs? Those are also prayers – prayers of joy and praise, prayers for inspiration and guidance, even prayers of heartbreak when we sing at memorial services. This is why we have missed singing so much during the pandemic. An

entire form of prayer we crave, we need as emotional outlet, was taken away from us and that loss was, and still is, painful as now we must sing softly, in measured tones. We long for the days when we can just let it go, making that joyful noise! Soon, dear ones. Soon.

The prayers of the faithful here in this church is what we have been talking about this morning and they are literally the foundation of everything the church has ever been, is now and will ever be. James knows this which is why he wrote as he did about the role of prayer in the life of a follower of Christ. He literally gives us a list of all the times our first thought should be prayer. We should pray when we are sick or suffering. We should pray when we are cheerful and happy. We should ask others to pray for us. We should offer prayers of confession to each other – having the courage and trust to believe that even at our worst God still loves us and so will our fellow travelers on this journey of faith. James also makes the point that we pray for each other trusting that those prayers will be answered. “Pray for one another so that you may be healed,” he says. Trust that prayer works, he tells us. But, it’s not a magic wand that simply erases all our pain and problems. Not hardly. Instead, prayer is the means by which we invite God and each other into the struggles we all face each day. The answers to those prayers are sometimes not what we expect, but they are always what God knows we need. This too James understood.

“They should pray,” James says. We should pray, and we do. In fact, there is no such thing as too much prayer. It is literally not possible to pray too much. James knows this as he urges all of us to trust that “the prayer of the faithful is powerful and effective.” Notice he doesn’t say the prayer of the faithful is answered clearly. Nope. He reminds us that prayer is powerful and effective when it is grounded in deep and abiding faith. That’s because prayer changes the entire situation whatever it is. Prayer changes the person praying and the person and situation being prayed for. In other words, prayer is transformational always. Prayer changes things always. Why? Because prayer brings God right into the midst of whatever the situation is and that’s right where God wants and needs to be. And dear ones, please remember that prayer, like faith, is not a spectator sport. It is an interactive relationship with God and the community of faith in which you are grounded. Prayer creates energy that carries us forward in hope into whatever the future holds in any situation.

Prayer changes us as we pray, together and alone. Prayer is trusting that God longs to be a part of our lives, if only we will let God in. That, dear ones, is totally up to you. Amen.