

An Invitation to a Summer of Prayer

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

June 22, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Mark 9:15-29

Summer has begun, as today's heat and the coming heat wave this week is reminding us so powerfully. I confess I have not always been a big fan of summer. I do not like heat and humidity, and I find living in air conditioning to be much more confining than staying indoors during the colder times of the year. But yesterday changed my mind about summer. I had just spent two back-breaking days finishing off our front and back gardens, pushing myself both days beyond what I thought I could do. Then, when I finally decided I would call it quits and after dousing myself with the hose while I was watering the gardens, I sat down on our front porch to cool off and finish my bottle of water. That's when it hit me. I actually do like summer now.

I love the clear blue skies and even the heat – in moderation. I love sitting outside and just feeling the breeze. Holy Spirit weather I call it. I love watching the birds at the feeder and the tree branches dancing every time a gust of wind blows through. In that moment, sitting on my front porch I allowed myself to be fully present to everything in my life. I felt so incredibly blessed. I felt enfolded in God's love and realized that, in my heart, without even being aware of it, I was offering my prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God for all the many moments in my life when I allowed myself to be fully present to and with God. It was powerful and restful. In the quiet stillness of my neighborhood I felt God's presence. I rested in it. I celebrated it. That, dear ones, is prayer in its most elemental form. With the state of the world these days, we all need to invest in those moments of deep reconnection with God. This is why I want us to spend some time

together today thinking about prayer on a deeper level than we usually do. I am inviting you to join me in making the effort and the time to experience a summer of prayer.

Let me begin by explaining that this invitation is not a lighthearted one. I'm not inviting you to set aside a few additional minutes for prayers in the morning or at bedtime or even making the commitment to say grace at every meal. Those things are important, of course, and I encourage you to do them certainly. But this is not the core part of my invitation. Dear ones, we know there is more to prayer than rote prayer relying so heavily on words. It's just that we're not exactly sure what that "more" of prayer is. That's why I chose this text from Mark as the starting point for our conversation this morning. This is not a story typically associated with prayer per se. In fact, it's usually referenced primarily as a story about faith. We see this in the description of how the father came to be in conversation with Jesus. It happened because the disciples had been unable to heal his son. So, they bring the boy and his father to Jesus. The father asks Jesus to please help his son however he can, "if you are able." Jesus, according to Mark at least, takes great offense at this. "If you are able? All things can be done for the one who believes!" This is when the father replies with that verse we know by heart even if we don't know it originates with this story: "I believe; help my unbelief!" Then Jesus heals the boy by casting out the demon (demons were believed to be the cause of illness in Jesus' time) and eventually sends him on his way with his father.

This next part of the story, the last part, is what I want us to focus on this morning. After the boy and his father had gone on their way, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him, "Why could we not cast it out?" meaning the demon. This is not how we would think of healing a boy who appears to have had epilepsy but they

knew nothing of epilepsy in Jesus' time. They believed demon possession caused illness so, in order for the boy to be healed, the demon had to be cast out. Jesus was able to do this. The disciples were not, and they wanted to know why so they asked him. And he answered them with a simple, direct and surprising answer: "This kind can only come out through prayer."

This kind can only come out through prayer. Sounds so simple, but we know it's not. This one little sentence tells us more about prayer than almost any other story or quotation in the Bible. Why do I say that, when prayer does not even seem to be the point of this story? Because what Jesus is saying here is that prayer is the best way, the only real way, to connect with the limitless power of God's love for us. Jesus is not saying here that the disciples weren't praying hard enough, or specifically enough or anything like that. He is telling them that whatever they thought they were doing as prayer was not really prayer. Despite what they had been thinking, whatever they had been doing, it wasn't prayer. I'm sure it seemed like prayer to them at the time. Word salad tossed up in God's direction, pleading for help, begging for mercy. Perhaps they even laid hands on the boy. It all sounded good. It felt like the right thing to do in the moment, even what Jesus would do in the moment. But now Jesus is telling them this was not prayer. Not really.

So, this then leaves us with the obvious question – then what is prayer? Simply put, prayer is deep connection with the divine force of the universe we call God. Sometimes prayer is expressed through words, written or spoken or both. But prayer is so much more than words, no matter how lyrical or beautiful they may be. Words can be one of our tools for being in prayer, but the words are never the prayer on their own. I know, that sounds weird. And, if we're honest, it also sounds impossible. But it's not. It does

require us to set aside all our typical thinking about prayer in order to leave ourselves open to the myriad possibilities beyond the limits of language. That, dear ones, requires effort. It requires effort because everything in our culture tells us that there must be a right and a wrong way to pray and we, like the disciples, want some assurances that we are doing it right. And if we're not, how do we fix it? This is how the disciples were feeling, how they were thinking, when they asked Jesus why they could not heal the boy. I'm thinking his response to them, that their efforts, their prayer, had not been enough was not what they were expecting.

So, let's take a moment to think about our own ways of praying for something like healing. As I hope you aware, we do have a prayer team which operates through the structure of what is called a prayer tree. It's envisioned as a "tree" because, back in the dark ages before email and texting, the only way to let folks know of a prayer request was to call them. Thus, our original prayer tree had branches and each branch had someone at the head of it. Think of this person as the one at the point where the branch connected to the trunk of the tree, the tree being the church itself. When a prayer request would come in, the Deacon of the week or the pastor would call the branch "heads" and they in turn would call the rest of the folks on their branch. It functioned sort of like a structured game of "telephone" with prayer as its goal. It worked well for a long time, but then we realized that it actually was no longer able to be as responsive as it had been originally. People could not stop to make phone calls in the middle of work. Or, if the branch heads couldn't be reached, then the whole process bogged down. In theory the Deacon or pastor initiating the request would then just call the entire branch themselves, but this was proving more and more impractical given everyone's time constraints. So, gradually, we experimented with

using email and even group texts and were delighted to find that this worked beautifully. And this is how the prayer tree works today.

Much more could be said about the prayer tree but for now, I just encourage you to think of it as a giant “crowd of witnesses” connected electronically with the sole purpose of offering prayers for whatever situation has prompted the request. I’m also confident that each one of us who participates in the prayer tree responds to those prayer requests in a different way. Some immediately stop, bow their heads and offer prayers in their hearts for the need to be met. Others take it in, hold it in their hearts and thus carry it with them through the rest of the day. Still others respond to the prayer request in writing, with even this simple act of acknowledging the request becoming a prayer of support in this time of need for another person. All of these are prayer. All of these help us, the person requesting prayer and those praying in response, connect with God and with each other. And that piece – connecting with each other on a spiritual level – is also an elemental part of prayer. Jesus was very clear that whenever two or three are gathered, it is then that he is in the midst of the prayers and the deep spiritual connection being formed in that moment. Dear ones, the practice of faith and the experience of prayer is always done in community. Always. Not because God only hears prayers offered with the “force” of a group. Most definitely not! Rather, prayer offered in community is a means of deep connection with one another as we come to God in prayer. This prayer done in community – either physically together as we are on Sunday mornings in worship or remotely connected as the prayer tree is in its electronic connections with a wide range of folks – this prayer done in community literally strengthens both the ones praying and the one being prayed for.

We are together in God's presence in prayer in a way that is unique and uniquely powerful.

"This kind can only come out through prayer." So what is it that comes through this prayer? A powerful sense of community for one. A mutual encouragement that we are not alone in whatever it is we are praying about together. An acknowledgement of our fears in the moment that prayer is too simplistic an approach to the complexities of life as it is today. That's a biggie, if we're honest. Again, companionship through prayer is so vitally important. But, ironically, so is solitude. Prayer is a literal both/and conundrum. Prayer in community is very important, as we have been pondering. But so is prayer in isolation. Now what do I mean by that? Jesus tells us himself in the Sermon on the Mount: "whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." In other words, Jesus is telling us that we also need to be comfortable praying with God, being in God's presence one on one. No pretense. No hiding behind someone else's words. Just you and God. So, how do I do that we might be wondering. Not difficult at all. Take a walk and allow yourself to focus only on your breathing. Let the quiet, or the noise, of your surroundings penetrate. Yes, this does mean NO HEADPHONES! Just you and God taking a walk in Creation together. Dare to immerse yourself in God's presence in the midst of your life and be open to the change this can bring. Admittedly, this is difficult to do, especially in the frenetic anxiety-based reality that is our lives in this day and age. But, this act of surrender to being fully in God's presence for even five minutes can change you and your relationship with God. This is prayer, just as surely as saying the Lord's prayer in worship is. Being alone with God, in silence and without words, is prayer in a complete sense. This is what Jesus was doing in all

those stories where he is described as “going off by himself to pray.” He was investing time in his relationship with God so he could handle whatever he had just experienced as well as whatever still awaited him.

So, dear ones, as you consider my invitation to join me in this summer of prayer experience, I have a few suggestions for you. 1) Buy a notebook or a journal to keep track each day of your encounters with God because each of those encounters is prayer. 2) Pay attention and look for God because if you don't look you will never see. 3) Make the effort to pray with others on a regular basis through worship here, through joining the prayer tree, even through participating in an online prayer experience from the Iona Community or the daily prayer service from the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Both are available on YouTube. 4) Give up the idea that there is a right and a wrong way to pray. There is only prayer which is your connection point with God, and this is unique to each person. 5) Pay attention to when you feel a sense of God's presence, a sacred moment. This is prayer, whatever prompted it. Write it down so you remember it. 6) On occasion, go back through your journal to note any patterns. This will reveal your own spiritual journey in surprising ways.

Remember, too, that I am here and would love to talk with you, to pray with you, to accompany you on this summer of prayer experience. But, and this is the most important piece of all this, it all starts with you. You have to make the time. You have to make the effort. You have to want to deepen your connection with God. I hope you do because wherever this experience of prayer takes you, God is already there waiting for you. Amen.