September 30th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Does Prayer Change things?

1. Gungor

There was a band called Gungor, a band composed by Lisa and Michael Gungor, that kicked off in 2011 and released six albums, with primarily Christian themes. Others might compare their work to bands like Bon Iver or Sufjan Stevens. Lisa and Michael Gungor were not alone bandmates, but husband and wife who led a 10,000 person Megachurch called Bloom at just 20 years old. Lisa just released a video this month named, “I stopped believing in God after pastoring a megachurch” and it’s worth a watch online.

Lisa speaks openly about the black and white and transactional theology that led her down the path of becoming a musician and pastor. But she shared where the rubber met the road: She and her husband travelled to holocaust sites in Krakow, and later struggled with infertility. Their friends and congregants would say, “Just pray about it. Just pray and believe – say it and it’ll happen.” Lisa thought, “If I prayed enough, if I worked hard enough, if I believe enough – then I’ll get blessings, or a baby, or a good life. But it gave me this perspective of who was in or out – who believed and who didn’t – a black and white model of God that didn’t work.”

Now this isn’t to point fingers at our evangelical non-denomination Christian brothers and sisters – because their resilience and dedication to the faith is to be admired. There are days in which I wish I could have that level of faith, that could see the beauty in the pain at all times, but that’s not the world I live in. I don’t think that’s the world many of us live in. I see joy, I see suffering, I see beauty, I see agony, I see delight, I see pain. One cannot appreciate the joy without the pain, and one cannot appreciate the weight of pain without knowing the hope of joy.

So, what do we do, when we come to such crossroads – where people feel like their prayers have failed or have yet to be heard? Where do we find resilience in a faith when God seems silent? How do we pray without ceasing?

II. James perspective

From our lectionary reading today, from the epistle of James, we hear his last eight verses to communities of faith. He could have ended this letter in many ways, but we learn that his most important point, the culmination of his thinking comes to one point: personal and communal prayer and praise.

He says, “Are you suffering? You should pray. Are you cheerful? You should praise. Are any among you sick? Then go to the ill and pray and anoint them. If you have sinned, confess to one another.” This, this is the life of faith and a model that plays out in our worship Sunday after Sunday as we confess together, sing together, and offer our pastoral prayers aloud and in silence. Perhaps, we’ve mastered this whole life that James speaks of...or maybe not.

Something that occurs to me on a regular basis is that we are deficient in prayer. That isn’t to say that our prayers here aren’t authentic or real, but rather, I feel like we don’t spend much time on teaching people how to pray. What is prayer, anyway? It’s a conversation between you and God, often filled with concerns, or thanks, or silence. But, take a moment – think about it – where and how did you learn to pray?

I learned how to pray around the dinner table, as we said grace before dinner. I learned how to pray when I sat in the pews as a youth and just listened to the words flowing out of the pastor’s mouth. I learned about diversity in prayer in seminary. And my key learnings were two-fold: The first is that a prayer can take many shapes – from formalized liturgical prayer that you’ll see in the service to the most informal, ‘Dear God, it’s me, I’ve messed up, I need some help, I’m sorry, I seek your forgiveness.’ There isn’t a right or wrong way to say a prayer, and whether you sit, kneel, lie down, or stand up – God hears the prayers everywhere.

The second thing I’ve learned about prayer over the last few years is that prayer seems more effective when I spend less time talking and more time listening. I have the tendency to sputter out all of my joys, concerns, and try to tie up my prayer with a nice and neat bow and go upon my merry way. The hardest part of prayer, for me, is the silence – to uncomfortably listen, to wait, to pause, in a hectic and fast-paced world. In our caffeinated culture, we aren’t often encouraged to sit down, to pause, to breathe, at least outside of a yoga, meditation, or mindfulness session. That’s where prayer challenges me – that this isn’t a monologue, but a dialogue, and for it to truly be that, I have to sit in silence.

1. Why Do We Pray

Despite the pontificating of prayer and ways to pray, we are still left with the conundrum question: “Why do we pray – and what if that prayer doesn’t work?” And, my friends, if I knew the clarity to all these answers, I would be far far more divine than human, but I can answer to the best of my ability. We pray for one another because when we pray for each other, we see the humanity and the image of God more closely. We extend more grace, more kindness, more understanding, in praying and acknowledging that we are equally God’s own.

We pray, not to change God’s mind, but to change ourselves. Again, back to the dialogue – to plead what we need and wish, but to also undergo the transformation within ourselves. Perhaps what we initially think is ‘right’ or ‘just’ becomes muddled when we enter into the deep conversation of prayer.

There’s been a facebook meme that’s been traveling around, and it more or less says, “God is not a fairygodmother. You don’t just repost and say ‘amen’ and expect it to happen.” And that’s where we learn to see God a bit more clearly – not as a God who bends and melds to what we wish and to what we think is best, but a God who listens, who cares for, who makes the best decisions for us, despite what we believe to be best.

For Lisa Gungor, who I spoke about at the very beginning, there was this very black and white theology – “If I pray enough and believe enough, then I will be granted my wish.” It doesn’t work that way. If it did, the world would be a very different picture of what it is today. We don’t ‘pray’ to get ‘God points’ – we pray because it genuinely comes out of a need and a desire to know God more and to rely on God whether or not joy is magnified or when pain is looming.

And where does the community come in? I respect those folks who say, ‘I’m spiritual, but not religious – I don’t believe in the institution of the church.’ And you know what, I get it – I get that the church as an institution of humans has hurt many people in many ways throughout centuries. We miss the mark often, even despite our best efforts. But, for me, I need community, even as an introvert – because when you can’t pray because you feel so defeated and so down and like God or the world is against you – I’m here, we’re here, to lift you up and to sing you the hymns that remind you of better times and encourage you when you cannot see life in all it’s glory. At the same turn, when I, as a faithful pastor, see the pain of the world and feel tired and exhausted and overwhelmed, I have the joy of remembering that I’m not in this alone. Not at all. I’ve got elders, congregants, friends, who will continue to say, “We’ve got you, and we’ll work with you.” And those are the moments especially where I feel like the burden or the yoke isn’t on my back, we carry each other – and that is what the life of Christ, the life of the community is called to be.

So, does prayer change things? Yes. I think it does. If anything, it changes us and how we interpret the world - to become more faithful, more loving, and more open to the Spirit at work in this community, and the world around us. Amen.