

Sermon: September 26, 2021

“Another Voice Speaking into the Silence”

Scripture: James 5:13-20

The poet Mary Oliver has long been an inspiration in my life and faith. When she passed away a few years ago, I cried, and I don't usually cry over famous people. Her work saved me faith in a time when I was struggling to find my footing as a young minister. I don't think I've referenced her much in my sermons since I've been your pastor, primarily because I designed my entire 25-page ordination paper around her work and thought folks like Sue and Sandy, who may have had to read at least some of my paper for my ecclesiastical council, might not want to hear *more* about Oliver. But then the scriptures for this week came across my desk and Oliver's words were the first thing to come to mind. Her book, “*Thirst*,” is a spiritual offering, a book of poetry that speaks to a life lived in the purest kind of faith: a faith seeking connection with the Divine Creator of all the worlds.

I realize it's a bit on the nose, but the first of her poems to come to mind is called, “Praying.” In it, she reminds us that prayers do not need to be complex, perfectly constructed, poetic tomes. She advises, instead: “just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest.”

As a people of faith, prayer is one of the most important spiritual practices we can engage in. It's why I take time out of my schedule twice each week to pray live with you on Facebook. If you join us on those mornings, you will

notice that I don't come to those prepared with fancy prayers or with a mountain of preparation. Those moments are meant to be moments of presence with the community in which I speak from the heart. Of course, that also means that some days the words come easier than others. Some days, the words come and other times, it's like straining to reach God. Mahatma Gandhi said that, at its heart, prayer is a "longing of the soul," noting that it is better to have a heart without words than words without heart when you pray. I think that's true. The writer Anne Lamott has said that the three most important prayers are, "Help," "Thanks," and "Wow." If one of those words is all you can get out, I think that's good enough for God.

Often when we pray, though, we feel that there must be some magic words. Some prayer that will really get God's attention. If I just say the right words, maybe God will answer my prayer the way I want God to do. It can feel like we're giving some kind of persuasive speech, convincing God to help us or someone else. I remember giving a persuasive speech in middle school. I don't remember what my speech was on, but I do remember thinking that I persuaded myself right out of the position I was trying to argue for. Public speaking, itself, was a terrifying experience for me then. If you'd have told me after that speech that I'd have a job in which I would do public speaking weekly... well... let's just say that God has a funny sense of humor.

Prayer isn't persuasion. God does not need persuading. The Divine is going to do what the Divine is going to do. And, frankly, God is good whether we pray or not. God is listening whether we're speaking or not. God is answering our prayers whether we've said the right words or not.

In truth, there are probably not any *wrong* words. The scriptures are replete with expressions of gratitude and love of God, but they also contain frustration, lament, and even raging at God when things aren't going right—God can handle our frustration, lament, and yes, even our rage. Prayer is many things, and sometimes, it's little more than a moment to express our deepest negative feelings.

In his parting words to the Jewish followers of Jesus, James offers his readers an exhortation on prayer. If we believe all scripture has something for us to learn from it, then this letter is no different. This letter is part of what are called, "the general epistles" because they are understood to have been directed broadly to the early church and not, necessarily, to a particular person or community. This isn't like Paul's letter to the church at Corinth (which we are studying in our twice monthly Bible study (hint, hint), or Ephesus. This is directed at followers of Jesus who could be from any place and life experience in the first century. And if directed to the early church, we can be sure these words have relevance for us, the 21st century church.

I think it's quite significant that most of James' final words focus like a laser on prayer. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." James writes that the "prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven." Saved and forgiven through the prayer of faith. James doesn't expand on what that prayer looks like. He doesn't say it shouldn't be done individually, which is how many of us pray when we aren't in church. But James does

talk about the importance of praying for one another. He calls the prayer of the righteous powerful and effective. Earnest prayer, whether it is spontaneous as I usually do during the prayers of the people, or written in advance, is incredibly powerful. Who among us, when sick or worried about those who are, hasn't been moved to tears by a prayer of faith in the healing power of our God? Who among us can say we've not been in some way changed through prayer? If you do it, if you take time, no matter what that time looks like, to pray for one another, you can't help but be changed through the experience.

Prayer can be a form of meditation—the health benefits of which are numerous and have been scientifically studied. Silence can be a prayer if we spend that time earnestly seeking connection with the still-speaking God. There's very little wrong way to do prayer, my friends, and what I wanted to use my message for today is to encourage you, if your prayer life has become lax, to reengage that connection with God. To recommit yourself to the spiritual practice of prayer. Your prayer might be, "Help, thanks, or wow," but it might be something much simpler. It might just be a silence. In her poem, Mary Oliver closes by calling prayer "the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak." That other voice we listen for in our silences is the voice of God.

I don't know what I think about the claims of those who boldly assert they've literally heard the voice of the Holy One. Far be it from me to question someone else's religious or spiritual experience, and I don't know about you, but God just doesn't speak to me that way. Maybe someday that will change, who can say? But for now, I look for answers all around me. In my experience, and in that silence hoping to hear that other voice. I seek to

connect with God and ask for the patience to wait for God's answer. And then, I ask for the grace to accept when that answer is, "No," because sometimes, my friends, it is.

But, Pastor Jessica, what if I can't still myself? What if I my spirit is unquiet? My body and soul restless? Well, then, I would argue that you need that quite more than anyone else. Oliver writes in another poem called, "Coming to God: First Days," which is really more like a prayer, that she cannot sit still, can't quiet herself. She's trying to enter into this transformative space of faith, to learn the value of stillness, but finding it a bit of a struggle. She writes that she would run for God, "climb the highest tree, to be that much closer." She can do those things, like we all can. If God was speaking into the busy-ness of our lives, we'd be good. But, we, like Mary Oliver, have to learn there is value in stillness. There is value in prayer. There is value in kneeling (literally or figuratively) and coming to God individually and as a community. Oliver writes, "I will learn also to kneel down into the world of the invisible, the inscrutable and the everlasting." We instinctively know this. This is one of the reasons why we gather for prayer vigils after disaster has happened. There's power in togetherness and there's power in community prayer. James calls on us to be a people that prays in community, that confesses in community, that draws nearer not just to God, but to each other.

What would it look like if, in all our busyness, in all life's running around, amidst all the children's sports, all the work and play, all the time on our electronic devices, all the time we spend going from here to there, what if in the midst of all of the noise that is constantly around us, we took a moment

to kneel down in the world of the invisible and inscrutable? Into that everlasting silence in which we might just hear the voice of God?

So friends, today, I present to you a challenge: For the next few weeks take 5 minutes every day and connect with God. Pray. Pray silently or aloud. Pray with words or with a deep longing of your soul. Pray individually, or pray with others. Just pray. Connect. See what a difference it makes in your faith to seek out that Divine connection. Whether you think you're ailing or not, there's healing in prayer. If nothing else, listen to the still small voice of God, speaking into the silence. Amen.