

First Scripture Reading is Psalm 102:1-7

- ¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.
- ² Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call.
- ³ For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
- ⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
- ⁵ Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.
- ⁶ I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
- ⁷ I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

Second Scripture Reading is 1 Chronicles 4:10

- ¹⁰ Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked.

Third Scripture Reading is Matthew 6:9-15

- ⁹ "Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
- ¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
- ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.
- ¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
- ¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

The Message – Yearning for Fluency

As soon as it became known that I was entering the process to become an ordained pastor, I could be assured that I would be asked to pray. It didn't matter if it was a committee meeting, a bible study, a special event or even with friends at the Colorado River. I became the designated person to pray, because others assumed that I knew how to pray. They probably also figured that I would eventually be officially trained how to pray at seminary. You know "Prayer 101" would be a required course. I need to disclose the truth of my seminary education though, because it did not include a class entitled, "How to Pray." I had classes on Church History and Philosophy, Old and New Testament, Greek and Hebrew, Leadership and Mission and more. But none of my

classes specifically dealt with fluency in prayer. Now I did have classes in pastoral care and spirituality, but none of these classes specifically taught a student how to pray, unless you want to count reading already written prayers from the Common Book of Worship or the pastoral handbook for visitation of the sick, and officiating at funerals and weddings.

Yet, as a newly declared candidate for pastoral ministry, prayer was my new vocation. I could silence a room when all eyes looked to me to pray, especially when I said, "But, don't we believe in the priesthood of all believers, so in reality anyone of us could pray!" If there wasn't silence, there was nervous laughter. For as Pastor Ron shared last week, fear is a very real emotion when people are asked to pray out loud in a group setting.

Yet, fear also happens in private, as if there is only one right way to pray. Yet, if you read through the prayers I offered for summer reading from scriptures, you would realize that prayer comes in all shapes and sizes. As Abraham prayed he argued with God, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Moses prayed to God with a complaint, "Why have you treated your servant so badly?" Moses continues his whining and complaining to God in his prayer about God. What about Joshua who prays for a miracle or Deborah who sang to God saying most blessed is the woman who struck down Sisera, with a tent peg through his skull I might add. Solomon prays for wisdom. Hannah prays for a child. Nehemiah and Daniel confess their sins and the sins of God's people through prayer. David and Hezekiah pray for deliverance from their enemies. Elizabeth and Mary praise God for the fruit of their wombs. Stephen prays for his enemies. Paul prays for the church. Prayers abound in scripture and one size does not fit all.

Listen in again to the prayer of Jabez found in 1st Chronicles, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" Jabez was bold, albeit some might say a bit arrogant. Jabez didn't include the caveat, "Not my will, God, but yours." Jabez just called on God saying, "Bless me, enlarge my border, and keep me safe."

In case you didn't know, this bold prayer jumped from the pages of obscurity in 1st Chronicles eighteen years ago. Multnomah Books published Bruce Wilkinson's short book entitled *The Prayer of Jabez* in 2000. Listen to its subtitle: *Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. Wilkinson believed he uncovered the perfect prayer for he wrote, "I challenge you to make the Jabez prayer for blessing part of the daily fabric of your life. To do that, I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next thirty days. By the end of that time, you'll be noticing significant changes in your life, and the prayer will be on its way to becoming a treasured, life-long habit." This book, with this perfectly bold prayer and a 30-day plan, became a New York best seller, selling nine million copies!

This book hit the shelves after I had completed seminary, but before I had entered into full-time ministry as an ordained pastor. And although I am one of the nine million who purchased the book, I did so to be able to respond to the hype. At the time I was preaching monthly at a local Presbyterian church and it was a hot topic of discussion. The problem with this prayer though, is it became the one prayer needed to be fluent in prayer. It became the one prayer that would change the trajectory of one's

life, even if you didn't want your borders enlarged, as you liked the safe cocoon of your life just as it was.

Now I don't want to discourage boldness and I certainly don't want to dissuade you from praying for blessings. Yet, notice the pronouns of this one prayer that Wilkinson admonished his readers to pray without failing: me, my, me, and me! These pronouns are not unlike the pronouns we find in the psalmist's prayer: "Hear my prayer, O LORD, let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop." The psalmist continues accusing God, saying, "because of your indignation and anger; you have lifted me up and thrown me aside."

Notice the drastic difference in tone. The psalmist cries out. This psalmist is in distress. There is a sense of hopelessness, because as I shared, God is part of the problem believes the psalmist. Even so, the psalmist remembers and proclaims, "O Lord, you are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations. You will rise up and have compassion..." In despair, the psalmist is not unlike Jabez in his boldness, for the psalmist expects God to answer speedily! Both the psalmist and Jabez pray boldly, yet their prayers are very different, even though they use the same pronouns.

Now notice how Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

Notice how the prayer begins. It's all about God. It's not about the disciples or the psalmist or Jabez. It's not about the needs of the one who prays. And when the prayer turns from God to disciples, it is about all of them, not just one of them. Notice the pronouns of this prayer: us, we, our, us and us. There is no "me or my or I". There are no singular pronouns, only plural pronouns. This prayer leads us beyond our own needs, to the needs of all.

Given this diversity of prayers, it seems to me that fluency in prayer is not about the pronouns. It is also not about the tone, boldness or desperation. It is not even about our current circumstances. I believe fluency in prayer starts to take place when we begin to pray with vulnerability. When we willingly speak from the depths of our hearts whether with words or without words, as Pastor Ron shared last week.

Mark D. Roberts wrote a book entitled, *No Holds Barred: Wrestling with God in Prayer*. He concurs with my understanding of prayer fluency for he writes, "God wants your whole heart." Roberts suggests that if "our relationship with God feels stale or predictable, then maybe we are being too polite with God." Roberts continues saying, "Guarded and 'religiously correct' prayers might sound nice, but to God they sound half-hearted. God wants you to pray with freedom, boldness, and raw honesty."

I love Robert's term raw honesty. I believe this is how the psalmist and Jabez prayed. Jabez wanted what he wanted with all his heart. The psalmist did, too. Very different prayers, but the center of who these prayers were at a given moment in time.

Do you pray with raw honesty? Are you free to pray what is in your heart with boldness? Are you willing to let God have it like Moses did, “Why have you treated your servant so badly?” Are you as bold as Jabez in asking for you want from God? Do you offer praise when prayers are answered like Moses and Miriam, or Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary? Are you willing to speak to God from the depths of your heart?

While I was at the Zephyr Point Conference Center in Lake Tahoe last week, I had time to just rest in God each day. I had time to find a perch on a rock with a view of the beautiful lake, which some days had dancing white caps. In these times, I enjoyed extended sessions of silence just listening for God’s still small voice. I also conversed with God from the depths of my heart through journaling and by voicing my prayers out loud. I didn’t hold anything back. I didn’t worry about whether or not my words were right. I just conversed with God, as if God was perched on the next rock over.

I prayed for us and for our future together as a church. I prayed again and again for wisdom to guide us, especially to help us understand our “why” – that is, why has God given us this community of faith with these buildings in the midst of this specific community? What is God specifically calling us to be and do given who we are together in all our diversity? I spent some time arguing with God, too, especially about churches that seem to thrive even though they limit who can preach and teach as well as who they welcome into their community. Why, I cried out do these churches seem to thrive, while those of us who choose to love above all else, even when it costs us, seem to have a harder trail to blaze. As Roberts suggested, I prayed with freedom, boldness and raw honesty, appreciating the time and space to wrestle with God, surrounded by the beauty of Lake Tahoe.

On my last evening, another participant and I went out to the pier at 10:30 P.M. to gaze heavenward. We were both awestruck by the beauty of the moon and stream of the moon’s light that glistened off the water’s surface. We sat in stunned silence as the brilliant moon set behind the mountains at 10:58 P.M. and the milky way of stars came into clearer focus. We both experienced the psalmist’s words profoundly that night, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortal that you care for them.”

In the moonless night we felt wrapped in God’s love. We didn’t want the evening to end, yet we both knew that sleeping on the pier was not an option. We wanted to stay suspended in the grace of that night, because God was so palpably present to both of us.

Fluency in prayer is not about words. Fluency in prayer is about our posture before the mystery we call God. Fluency begins as we trust that God is indeed mindful of us and is yearning to be in relationship with us. Fluency in prayer begins as we expose the whole of our being in raw honesty to the God whom we worship whether we use words or groans too deep for words.

C.S. Lewis writes, “The prayer preceding all prayer is, ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’” As we yearn for fluency as people of prayer with the divine mystery we call God, we have to be real. If we hold back, if we put on a false face, if we sugar coat the details, then our relationship with God will be bereft of authenticity. As Walter Wink reminds us, “Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar, than the polite monologues of the church.”

There are no right or wrong words, there are only inauthentic or authentic prayers. May our prayers be bold as well as raw, may we haggle with God as in an outdoor bazaar, trusting that God will hear what we offer from the depths of our beings. Fluency in prayer is possible – all it takes is risking authenticity. Amen.