

A Generous Life: Revealed Through Prayer

I have a friend named Jill. I knew who Jill was for a long time before I actually got to know Jill. We went to the same church, and I had seen her around. I guess you would say she was an acquaintance of mine. And then I was invited to join a group of about five women who walked at the local trail. The group met every weekday at 5:15 a.m. whether it was 30 degrees or 90 degrees to walk the 3 mile trail. And Jill was in this group, so I got to know Jill better. We had some great surface level conversations, and she became a pretty good friend of mine. And I know this will surprise you, but the time of day and sometimes the weather were a little intense for most of the group and one by one they drifted away. All except for Jill and I. We walked for five years. And we came to know most everything about one another. We talked about all kinds of things — our families, our childhoods, our faith, our deep struggles and our great joys. We talked, and we listened, and we survived encounters with snakes, turtles, mad mamma racoons protecting their babies and even the local alligator. Other than my husband, no one knows more about me than Jill. I am so thankful for my friend Jill. Looking back on it, our friendship developed over years of spending time together on a daily basis--talking and listening. Trust grew between us. Our relationship over the years developed to the point that it was natural to share deeply and to be vulnerable with each other. And our relationship was such that if we ran out of things to talk about, silence was comfortable and good.

Likewise, I had known **about** Jesus for a while before I really came to know him. From childhood, I had heard **his** name in church, too, but I had never really gotten close enough to **know** him or to **talk** to him. He was an acquaintance of mine. As far as I knew the priest was in charge of praying, and that was that. But, this casual acquaintance kind of relationship was not what God had in mind for me. And it is not the kind of relationship God has in mind for you, either. Instead, God's grace continued, and still continues, to draw me and you into a deeper relationship, a closer relationship —one that keeps developing more and more through an every-day, consistent routine of spending time together. A routine that involves our drawing near to the holy one — through talking to Jesus, through listening, even through just sitting in silence. This relationship developed in me through sharing everything on my heart - through being honest and vulnerable. It was over a period of years that I came to know so much more about who Jesus is, and I came to know so much more about who Jesus wants me to be.

Prayer is our path to a relationship with God. And it is through the process of praying that God reveals who God wants us to be.

Today, we continue talking about how we might grow in this relationship — we are thinking about how we might live a generous life both by sharing our time and our treasure for God's work in the world. We are thinking about what our next steps might be on our journeys of becoming more like Jesus. And specifically today, we are talking about how God reveals who he wants us to be through prayer. It is through prayer that God reveals moment by moment what our next step as disciples will be.

So, I have two pieces of great scripture to share with you. The first one comes from the book of Genesis, and is called "Jacob wrestles with God;" and I can really relate to this scripture. Because you see my spiritual growth has not been quiet, serene and contemplative. Instead, my discipleship path has been more like a wrestling match with God. My prayer life has often been more like a wrestling match with God. Listen to this experience Jacob had:

Genesis 32:22-30 Common English Bible (CEB)

Jacob wrestles with God

22 Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. **23** He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. **24** But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. **25** When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. **26** The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

27 He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." **28** Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel,[a] because you struggled with God and with men and won."

29 Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. **30** Jacob named the place Peniel,[b] "because **I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved.**"

This story of Jacob wrestling with God happens as Jacob prepares to return home to face his brother Esau after years of separation and alienation because Jacob had done wrong to his brother. Jacob hopes for reconciliation. But Jacob spends the night wrestling with God before he is able to face his brother. At the end of the long night as dawn breaks, Jacob realizes that through the process he has seen God face-to-face and his life had been saved. I think that it is through this up close wrestling with God that Jacob came to understand who God wanted him to be.

It seems to me that prayer can be like wrestling with God. Prayer is not necessarily a quiet, peaceful serene time to talk to God. Prayer can be agonizing and exhausting. At times in our lives prayer can involve whining and complaining and weeping and wailing. Prayer is this mysterious process where we get up close and personal with God, just like wrestlers do with one another. Prayer is how we figure out who God is. Prayer is how we know who God wants us to be. When we get face to face with God — like Jacob did as he wrestled through the night — that is when we will be transformed and that is when our lives will be saved. When we dare to come face to face with God, God will teach us exactly how to follow.

Jesus also portrays prayer as an active process where we approach God face to face. Listen to the way that Jesus teaches his disciples about praying:

Luke 11:9-13 Common English Bible (CEB)

9 And I tell you: Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. **10** Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened.

11 "Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? **12** If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? **13** If you who are evil

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Jesus teaches us that not only must we ask, but that we must seek God. And then we must knock on the door. We don't just ask and magically receive. Jesus says, "ask and seek after God" — the seeking is the hard part - in the seeking we try to determine what **God's** will is - we try to figure out who God wants us to be. Then we are called to act — then we are called to get up and knock on the door so that the door of God's kingdom might be opened unto us!

I'm afraid though that we often stop at the ask. We settle for a casual relationship with God, and so we don't take the time and we don't do the work to seek God's will - we just ask and expect to receive without doing the face to face wrestling with God.

I'm afraid we tend to think that prayer is about knocking on that door so hard that we change God's mind about a situation. But you know what, God is a good good father and knows much better than we do about what is good for us. That's what the Luke scripture is saying at the end — God loves you like a father loves a child. God wants to give us all things that will be good for us. A good father doesn't give a child everything she asks for. Prayer is not about us changing God's mind, but rather it is about conforming our desires to God's and growing to trust in God.

E Stanley Jones said it this way:

"Prayer is surrender——surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."

Prayer is surrender to the will of God. Prayer is experiencing this connection with God that will transform us into people who are becoming more like Christ every day.

My prayer for us this day is that wherever we find ourselves in our walk with God, that our relationships would grow stronger. My prayer is that we would make a definite plan for how and when we are going to spend time getting to know Jesus better and that we might listen for who God wants us to be. When could you spend time with God? And where might you go to do it? My prayer is that we would wrestle with God and that we would ask and seek and then get up and knock on that door--that we take action on who God wants us to be.

And so here's your challenge. I want to ask you to pray about some very particular things. Would you pray about how God might want you to serve? The last thing that Jesus did with his disciples before he died was to wash their feet as a way of teaching them to love one another by serving one another. So, how has God gifted you to serve? After the service today, you are going to have the chance to visit Serve Fest and learn about some of the ministries of the church — you can ask questions and get information about each area. Check out each table. Sarah is going to be passing out bingo cards marked with the names of the ministries and as you go to each table they will mark your card and when you get all the spaces marked, you can enter your card for a door prize.

This week, would you get out your Be the Church book and spend some time looking through it — pray over it. God has given us so many good gifts, and God wants us to use those gifts for God's work in the world. This church has some of the most amazing things going on,

and we are even asking you at the emerging ministries table to share your own ideas for new things.

I would love it if you would all would especially consider how you might serve in the areas of children and youth — we are all called to love our kids in some way, so please see if there is a way you can help in these areas. And then next Sunday, you will have a chance during the service to turn in your commitment to serve in areas that God leads you to.

I also ask you to pray about your next step in the giving of your treasure. I shared with you a few weeks ago that the last part of me that I was willing to share with God was my checkbook. Honestly, I didn't feel like it was any of God's business what was in my bank account. But you know what, as I grew closer to Christ over the years I began to realize that God wanted all of me and that God was calling me to be "all in" as a disciple. I finally figured out the joy of tithing - the joy of being generous, and I realized that I could never outgive God. So I ask you to pray about how God might be leading you to give financially to support your church and its missions so that you can respond next Sunday.

Having an amazing friendship with Jill has been a once in a lifetime experience for me --- and it happened because we spent an hour a day together, five days a week. We talked. We listened. We even walked in silence. Such a relationship is a fantastic gift from God!

But having a relationship with Jesus is a **life saving and life-giving** gift from God. Imagine how our lives, our church and our community might be transformed if we committed to spending one hour a day to talk, to listen or to just sit in silence with our God.

The next step is up to us.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, friend of sinners, open our hearts and minds to the presence of your love. Teach us to walk with you and talk with you. Lord, teach us to pray. Lord would you make these words of scripture real for us - would you light a fire in us to set a time and place in our daily lives to wrestle with who you want us to be. Lord, may we see you face to face, and may our lives be saved. In the name of the Father and the Holy spirit. Amen.