

Being the Church at Brentwood

The Power of Prayer

**Ps 124 & James 5:13-20
(712, 634, 648, 440 [to 611])**

September 30, 2012

A lot of people these days reject Christianity.
They don't believe it.
They don't practice it.
They don't respect it.

And they certainly don't come to church,
especially here on the west coast of North America.

I was working yesterday with a group of United Churches here in Burnaby.
In the conversations, we were talking about
why young people don't come to church.
Most people there recognized that many young people
experienced the church as closed, hypocritical, and judgemental.
They were looking for community that was
open, honest, and forgiving.

I happen to think that's what all of us are looking for –
communities that are open, honest, and forgiving.
We want to feel welcomed, greeted with open arms,
appreciated, and respected.
We want to be in a safe place where we can be honest
about our joys and our sorrows, our ups and our downs,
our struggles and our triumphs, our bad sides and our good ones.
And we want to be with people who know how to forgive,
who understand that every human being is a treasure in an earthen vessel,
that we all mess up a lot of the time,
that there is goodness in each and every one of us,
and that that goodness needs to be nourished to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

That's what people should find when they walk into a church,
when they respond to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit and seek to come home,
when they risk being vulnerable enough to seek out new friends.
That's what people should find here at Brentwood Presbyterian Church.

For the most part, they do.

And we can do this kind of welcoming even better.

The key to being even more consistent in offering this Christian hospitality
is cultivating a richer life of prayer.

Why do I say that? What does all of this have to do with prayer?

For me, the connection is this.
The quality of our relationship with God is reflected in our relationship with others.
And prayer lies at the heart of our relationship with God.

In essence, prayer is conversation that you have with your most intimate friend.

In the case of Christian prayer, that conversation
is with the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe.

It centres on wishes, aspirations, and hopes.

Since human beings are created in the image of God,
there is a hunger to be close to God, reflective of God, like God,
that is sown deep within us from the very beginning.

Lots of things cloud that desire.

Things get in the way of us recognizing and acting on it.

We are distracted by other sources of satisfaction.

We are diminished by settling for partial satisfaction.

We are drained by wasting energy pursuing false sources of comfort.

But the desire, the aspiration, the hope never disappears.

It may seem absent because our attention is focused elsewhere,
but that inner presence of the Holy Spirit
inviting us into a healing and healthy relationship with our Creator
is always at work.

Christian prayer is the recognition of that friendly Presence in our lives.
Its power arises from the God who has reached out to us in Jesus Christ,
who has restored us to an intimate relationship with him in his Triune form,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

a community of healing love and healthy companionship.

In that divine community, we converse with each other
to encourage, support, correct, and enjoy.

That is the breadth and depth of Christian prayer.

Clearly, in our reading this morning,
we find James sharing this wisdom with his readers.
Pray when you are in trouble, when you are happy,
when you are sick.

Pray always to refocus on and remember the source of your eternal health,
to refocus on and remember the friendly Presence
who forgives our failures so we are free to flourish.

Knowing how to pray is a challenge these days.

There are so many voices out there trying to teach us to pray.
I entered “prayer” in the Amazon search function
and came up with more than 86,000 books!

The little booklet you have in your bulletin this morning was one of them.
It’s a booklet I’ve known about for years.
I introduced it to the Session last spring
and we decided to get copies for the whole congregation.
Not only that, we’ve got extra copies to put in the pews
and give to people who visit us.
It’s our way of inviting and supporting each other
in finding a life of greater intimacy with Jesus Christ.

The author taught evangelism and spirituality
at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA.
It’s a seminary of the Presbyterian Church USA.
Throughout his life, he imagined ways of enriching and strengthening the church
through its intimate relationship with its Lord.
He said recently that he just “wants to live for what matters for the rest of his life.”
One of those things that matters to him today is constructive multi-faith relationships.
Currently, he is focused on fostering a more positive dialogue
between Christians and Muslims in the wake of 9/11.

I encourage you to look a look through this booklet.
Think about experimenting with the pattern of prayer suggested here.
Adapt it to your own strengths and needs.
At the heart of this gift lies the hunger and desire
to let the Holy Spirit make prayer more powerful for all of us,
individually and together.

Prayer is an urge that all of us feel.
It’s the urge to connect with the loving source of our being.
That urge starts with God reaching out to us in a wide variety of ways,
seeking to connect so we can flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

The elders of this congregation hope this little booklet will help you
feel God reaching out to you afresh,
inviting you into an intimate conversation with your Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer
about what matters most for the rest of your lives.

When people come to this congregation,
whatever their age or race or class,
our hope is that they will find a community engaged

in these kinds of intimate conversations with God
through Jesus Christ and the workings of the Holy Spirit.

That kind of prayer will give form
an open, honest, and forgiving faith.

People are seeking those qualities of community
because God has sown that desire deep within them.
I trust and pray they will find it here at Brentwood Presbyterian Church
as we nourish each other to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church