

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for Wednesday, April 29! I'm so grateful to be here with all of you, and glad that you had a moment to tune in today.

Today I would love to talk about prayer with you all, so let's begin now with a moment of prayer:

*God of all life and creation, we come to you today with our whole selves, our whole beings, and all the thoughts and feelings in our minds and hearts. We lift all these musings and ponderings to you Lord, our strength, our comfort, and our guide in all things. Lord help us to be confident in our relationship with you. Even when we struggle to put the right words to things or do the right actions, we know you still love us deeply. Help us to love ourselves with even a bit of that great love you have for us Lord. Help us to be gracious with ourselves as you are so gracious with us. We pray for the strength and comfort of your son Jesus not only in our own lives, but for all the people around us who are in particular need. We pray that your Holy Spirit will empower and enlighten us always. In your Son Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

So earlier this week I was in the midst of reading some articles about the current situation of the world with the covid-19 pandemic, as many of us do, and I started to feel super overwhelmed. I just felt heavy in my heart as the reality of everything sank in. There are over 1 million confirmed cases of covid-19 in our country. One. Million. Even with safer at home and shelter in place orders in the vast majority of states the virus is still spreading like wildfire and has infected over one million people in our country alone. Nearly 60,000 people have died in the United States alone. It's going to take months and months before a vaccine is developed and while clinical trials are underway, it's still going to be a while before it's widely available and ready to be distributed. This is definitely much more severe and a long game marathon than any of us imagined when we first began our social distancing.

It's a heavy burden to hold. And we hold it in so many ways. Not only is it the severity and challenge of the situation as a whole, but we all feel the impact of this pandemic in our everyday lives. We are all living through collective, communal trauma. We are learning and working at home, with the vast majority of our time online. We are helping our kids on an even more direct basis every single day and often times working even more now than we ever did before. We are lonely, especially if we live alone and haven't been physically around other people for what feels like a really long time. And many of us are struggling with our mental health too, doing our best to care for ourselves when our whole world has completely shifted.

But in the midst of this shifting, this sea change of our life, there are things that tether us to hope, to joy, and to a brighter place than we find ourselves. And that tether is absolutely what I needed when I read those articles earlier this week. I realized I had read perhaps one too many and had to quickly switch onto a Zoom meeting with some folks from church. And I went in super overwhelmed, almost in tears. But I listened to the calling on my heart, the tether that tugged at my spirit, and that tether was prayer. I needed prayer in that moment. I needed to connect with God and be reminded that God is working in this world. God will never abandon or

forsake us. God loves us, God desires to be in close relationship with us, God is our tether to hope and to joy.

So I asked to begin our meeting with prayer. And that may have been the most vulnerable prayer I have shared in quite a while. I just let the words flow out. I'm not even entirely confident the sentences were grammatically sound, I just blathered it all out. I needed the reminder that God is with us. God has blessed and provided each of us with skills and gifts and I prayed for all the people whose gifts are in the areas of vaccine and treatment development and research, for people who study infectious diseases, for all the healthcare workers putting themselves at risk to heal the people who need it most, for all the people providing critical and essential services that they may be safe and be taken care of in all the ways they need. I prayed for reminders of hope and joy for all of us, that the new life of Christ will strengthen us, and that the Holy Spirit which gives us these gifts will be our guide in all times and places. I needed to focus on God's work in the midst of all this chaos, and I am beyond grateful to have the opportunity to do so in any time and place, but especially that I was able to use the gift of words in that meeting to call upon God in that moment of sorrow.

Prayer changes things. Prayer is the way we call upon our ever-present God, in word and deed. Prayer is the grounding of our faith in the Triune God.

I came across a definition of prayer in the continuing education class I'm currently taking online that I'd love to share with you. The definition my teacher provided is "prayer is a response to God, who initiates contact. Our responsibility is to listen, respond, and show up, but ultimately it is God's responsibility." I'll read it again.

Our responsibility in prayer is to listen, respond, and show up. What an absolute gift this is! This understanding of prayer allows us to truly be free to where God is calling us. We do not need to be in control of this situation. God is responsible for being present and in contact with us, and God absolutely is, more than we usually realize. God is always available for us in prayer - we need only listen when we are being called and respond in a way that is genuine to our love of God and neighbors, and ourselves.

This is what God has said to us about prayer through the prophet Jeremiah - this is Jeremiah 29:12-14a. "When you call upon me and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me if you seek me with all your heart. I will let you find me, says the Lord..."

What God tells us is not only that God will always hear us and is able to be found, but that we must seek God with all our heart. All our heart. So that seeking is not only with fervor, with strength and might in prayer, but it is with honesty. With vulnerability. With the deepest desires, pains, longings, and tuggings on our hearts, we must seek God. Even when we are overwhelmed and unsure and uncertain and just simply trying our best, we must seek God in the midst of it. And we're not usually used to communicating and thinking from this tender place in our hearts. But God delights in our prayers. God delights in you, your whole heart, your whole

being. God delights in us seeking out God's presence and workings in the world. God delights in all the ways we pray, in all the ways we show up in thought, word, and deed, even if it doesn't feel like enough or the right thing or any other ways we might feel uneasy or insecure. God's got us. God delights in us. God is here with you, with me, with this entire created world, and for that we give thanks and praise.

So the spiritual practice I would love for you all to try this week is what I'm calling heart prayers. This is praying from your heart, in the words most true and genuine to you and your prayers. You can pray out loud with a trusted friend or loved one, you can write down your prayers in a journal or just a sheet of paper, or you can pray quietly, meditatively in your own mind.

One of the best starting places I know for prayer, is that prayers generally fall into one of three categories: help, yay!, and thank you. (repeat) So if you need a starting place with your heart prayers, try thinking about one of these categories. Where do you need God's help in your life? Where does the world need the help of God? What are you grateful for today, that you want to lift up to your Creator? What do you want to praise God for?

The important thing with heart prayers is their genuineness and truth to you personally, how you actually speak on a daily basis in your life, not what you think prayers should sound like or trying to create an eloquent masterpiece. Or maybe it does come out as an eloquent masterpiece, never underestimate your abilities, especially in prayer! But pray truly from your heart, whatever comes out. Feel free to use one of the three categories as a starting place to get your mind and heart going. And really, just do your best to have a conversation with God. It's the showing up and responding in prayer that really matters. God delights in being in relationship with us and always hears our prayers no matter what.

And I know this can be challenging, but I want to affirm that you are not alone. People have been asking for holy guidance on how to worship and pray since the very beginning. And even when people were in the physical presence of Jesus himself, they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray." This story is in Luke, chapter 11. People have needed encouragement in prayer forever, so it's true that it's not easy. But whatever is genuine is beautiful. Whatever is honest and true is important. And whatever you need to pray for, God will surely listen and provide.

The way Jesus taught us to pray in the Luke story is actually the Lord's Prayer which we know so well. So as we end our devotion today, I invite you to join me in this powerful prayer, these words that Jesus taught us:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.*

Go in peace, dear friends in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.