

## “Spiritual Practice: Prayer”

Psalms 139:1-12, Luke 3:21-22, 11:1-4

February 2, 2014

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

For the next three Sundays, I will be preaching about spirituality and our spiritual practices. This morning, I am going to talk about prayer. C.S. Lewis, the author of *Mere Christianity* said that in worship, God imparts himself to us. What is spirituality? In a basic sense, spirituality is about our relationships with God. Spiritual practice helps us to discern and discover God’s presence in us and around us. Whatever ministries in which you are involved in this church; for example, Sunday worship, prayer, communion, singing hymns, Chancel Choir’s anthem, and offering, you are spiritually disciplining yourself to strengthen your spirituality. Spirituality really matters, especially for believers, because without God, church is not the house of the Lord, but merely a social club. What is God?

Our Old Testament reading helps us to understand who God is. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) describes our God as “The Inescapable God.” Listen to the words of God from a different version, “You have looked deep into my heart, LORD, and you know all about me. You know when I am resting or when I am working, and from heaven you discover my thoughts. You notice everything I do and everywhere I go. Before I even speak a word, you know what I will say, and with your powerful arm you protect me from every side.” In other words, our God is not separable from us because we are fully connected with God like the same body. Can we understand this mystery? I have a funny story about a little boy’s prayer to God. “Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and my cat and me. Oh, please take care of yourself, God. If anything happens to you, we’re gonna be in a big mess.” In a spiritual sense, it is not important to prove whether God exists or not. The more important matter is whether we can discern God’s signs and experience God in our daily lives or not. It is totally up to our choice whether we live our life with God or we live our life without God.

Spirituality is not about a statement that we acknowledge God’s existence, but it is more about our attitude toward our everyday life whether we are able to be sensitive about God’s presence. This includes the way we spend our time, the way we see our works and world. For example, are we merely wasting or killing our time, or are we attempting to discover the sacred dimensions of life all around us. Early Methodists often shared these three questions in their gatherings. **Where have you seen God lately? Is your soul well? Are you still**

**experiencing personal love of God in your daily lives?** Consider these questions for your spiritual check-up. John Wesley, our Methodism founder, emphasized spiritual practices for the ways to be in touch with God. As I announced, our church is going to have the first Church Spiritual Retreat at the end of February. We are going to learn important lessons from John Wesley's spiritual disciplines to deepen our relationships with God. In March, during Lent, we will continue to learn and reflect on Jesus' spiritual discipline for strengthening our spirituality. In a sense, the incarnation of Jesus Christ on the earth was an example of God's spiritual discipline to raise our 'spiritual awareness' of God's transforming love. The purpose of spiritual practices is to be closely in touch with God. Let's talk about prayer: What is prayer? Why does prayer matter?

I want to share my prayer experience. Over ten years ago, when I worked at the hospital as a hospital chaplain, one day, I was called to a patient who had a miscarriage. When the patient asked for my prayer, I felt that I didn't know how to comfort her. When I left the room after prayer, I felt that I failed in my prayer. When I talked to my supervisor about my frustrated feelings, I still remember his advice. He said that "There is no good prayer or bad prayer. Don't worry about your prayer. It is better to have a heart without words than words without heart. Your presence must be a meaningful prayer for your patient." We know that the essence of prayer is not to make a beautiful description of our requests to God. Rather prayer helps you to be fully connected with God expressing your feelings, thoughts, doubts, fears and joys. John Wesley saw the prayer as "the chief instituted means of grace" or prayer connects us.

While I was preparing my message about prayer, I wondered about its definition. If I ask you to define prayer in one word, what word comes to your mind? (I ask for congregation's participation.) Prayer is a way of communication between God and us, or 'conversation', 'request' and a way of 'praising' God. I want to say this, "**full connection with God**". Apostle Paul encouraged Christians in 1Thessalonians 5:17 saying "pray without ceasing". I had trouble understanding the meaning of this verse when I was young. I wouldn't believe that Paul advised us to disconnect ourselves from the world and dedicate ourselves only to prayer practice. Rather, he emphasized the importance of 'being fully connected with God.' Our New Testament reading describes that when Jesus was praying, the heaven was opened. Symbolically, it means that prayer enabled Jesus to connect with God. The Bible says, "And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The other New Testament reading describes the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. The prayer begins with *Father*, or *Our Father in*

*Heaven.* You may replace the word, Father with Mother or our Mother in Heaven. Gender is not a point here, but the point is relationship with God. Children and parents are ‘the inescapable relationship’, but fully connected with each other.

When I pictured in my mind an image of ‘a full connection with God’, I thought about my new baby who we expect to meet in early March. Last Thursday, my wife, son Jacob and I went to see OB/GYN doctor. Since my wife has gestational diabetes, she has many more medical appointments and lab tests to do during her pregnancy. Her pregnancy is now at 34 weeks. Because of her diabetes, she was asked to come and take tests twice per week. It is called ‘fetal non-stress test’. While a test was going on, I clearly could hear the baby’s heartbeat through the machine. She has also been asked to keep track of counting the baby’s kicks. I often put my hands on her stomach to feel baby kicks. It is an amazing experience! A new baby is living and growing through the umbilical cord in its mother’s womb. Through the cord, a baby is fully connected with its mother for his life. Spiritually speaking, our prayer connects us with God like the umbilical cord for our spiritual life. Without prayer, spiritually we will not be able to breathe, nor grow. We will slowly die. As fish cannot survive out of water, our spiritual relationship with God cannot continue without our prayer life. Prayer doesn’t mean prayers during church meetings, grace before meals or on Sunday worship service. Rather, prayer means our status of being connected with God all the time. If you are aware of God’s presence in your daily lives, you are praying. Therefore, don’t stop praying. Continue to be in touch with God through your prayer spiritual practice. Amen.