

## ***How Long? Until you get to "Yes"***

*(Based on multiple scripture lessons read throughout the worship service)*

Perhaps I haven't played fair with you up until now! I have led you through all these acts of praying, the ACTS – *adoration, confession, thanksgiving* and soon to *supplication* and even an extra "s" as in *surrender* or *service*. And I never warned you of the danger involved in praying. Maybe I should have inserted in the bulletin an exclamation point in a red box like the email does to advise the reader to use caution in proceeding. Or maybe I should have wrapped yellow tape around the prayers, or even the pews in which you are sitting, to say *stay away - hazard ahead*.

But I didn't do those things, so now I must counsel you about prayer and praying. You see, when you pray you take a risk – a big risk. When you let someone into your space, someone, anyone – a lover, a child, a friend, a neighbor, a stranger from across the globe, you're going to change. Right? Your life is going to get bigger, be different. So, when, in prayer, you let God into the very center of your self, you are going to change - big time. If and when you let yourself and God see who you really are, what you care about, what frightens you, what excites you, what you hope for, what you dread - that's a scary thing, not to be entered into lightly.

Sometimes it seems easier to just stay contained, in control, holding on firmly to what is familiar, what is comfortable. But if you are willing, please try this little spiritual exercise with me. Perhaps you have done it before but it bears repeating. And don't worry about how you will look to others, because everyone will be looking at their own hands. Take your hands and clench them tightly. So rigidly it almost hurts. Observe them, feel them – they are closed and nothing else can get in them and they are not very useful except for certain things like punching. That's not so great. Now open them, spread the fingers out. Feel the difference? Now our hands can receive, they are open to what may come, open to what else is available, open to freedom and movement. How wonderful! And if this were a Pentecostal church, I would invite you to lift your arms into the air in a sort of wild abandon of praise and giving God the glory, but maybe not here, although recently I read a sad commentary which said, "The more respectful people become, the more stiff [in their bodies] they become." And most of us do want to be **respectful**, don't we? But **stiff** isn't the be all and end all, isn't it? So unclench, and wave, if you are able and dare to.

Now the dangerous thing about prayer is that puts your entire life in the balance. In prayer you are aligning yourself with God's character and God's purposes. You become a partner with God in the dance of life, in the flow of Love, which is God. It becomes not so much what I want, I (in my little self in my little world), but what God wants and what God works toward bringing about...now involving not just God, but also me or us. *Thy will be done on earth as in heaven*, we intone. Prayer expands us, moves us beyond ourselves, changes our worldview, our priorities, our preferences. Prayer disarms us and extends us far beyond the limits of our own longings. And that is dangerous stuff, my friends, dangerous risky stuff. We may be called upon to do *God knows what* – to praise extravagantly when we'd rather be merely politely grateful; to own up to our shortcomings rather than hide them from view, even from ourselves;

to forgive and to accept forgiveness (who knows which is harder?); to be merciful, to care for folks that seem unlovable and undeserving; to plead, even to beg, for ourselves and others; to act in uncomfortable ways which initially go against our grain, our upbringing and our prescribed habits of thinking; to live without concrete responses even when we have asked for clarity; to go out and serve the world. True prayer is scary, indeed. Who knows where it will lead us?

Nevertheless, people of faith pray and pray faithfully. We do so in the midst of questions. Questions, like *Why? Why pray?* Do we pray to change God's mind or persuade God to accommodate our agenda? I can't say for certain how God hears and answers prayer, whether God Godself is changed by prayer, but I do know that **I** am changed by prayer – carried beyond myself into a larger circle of life, into the scope of the universe - like a small stream that flows into a river which surges into the sea. Prayer is powerful – people testify, and scientific findings support, that prayer adds a qualitative dimension in healing, and it certainly uplifts people to know that are praying - or that they are being prayed for. You have experienced that, haven't you, perhaps on both ends?

As I said, prayer is powerful - it puts us in relationship to God and to other people – and that makes a difference, a big difference. We are moved out of our isolation, our fears, our concerns, our narrow perspectives into the wideness of God's mercy, compassion and goodness, into that balm in Gilead which seeks to accomplish healing.

Will prayer change the world? Maybe not my prayer, or your prayer, but if enough people pray and are changed....who knows? I have to believe in prayer. It's worth the risk.

Prayer is often called *a conversation with God*. That nice, but how about considering it as a *rendezvous* with God, with God's loving presence in our lives. A *rendezvous*. That images for me a more purposeful intentional action. I have to do more than open my mouth to affect a *rendezvous*; I have to get myself some place to meet the Other. It doesn't just happen casually or automatically. I have to put forth some effort, or create some space, express some desire, hope for some encounter. And please consider that God has already set the date and place for the rendezvous, and invited us to the meeting. In fact, God is already waiting patiently (or perhaps impatiently) for us to arrive, hoping we'll get there soon. Always eager to welcome us into his embrace or nestle us under her wings.

Prayer is a rendezvous with God, and to answer another question which often comes up – there is no right way to pray in that meeting. No only certain words, no one body position (hands folded neatly, eyes closed, kneeling, prostrate, with rosary beads, ending with the sign of the cross). No right way. And in truth it doesn't matter how we classify prayer – those A-C-T-S-S labels don't really mean much – as long as we pray with hope. Hope. True prayer is not about wish fulfillment. Praying is not about getting what you are asking for – whether that means a new job or a clean bill of health or the end of the refugee crisis. It's okay to ask for concrete things, but in prayer the emphasis is on the Giver, not the gift. That's why our prayers start by calling on one of God's endless names. Prayer is about trusting in the promises of God. It is about being open to what can come about through the Giver of all good things. Remember

how it felt to unclench your fists so that you could receive freely. Remember that same feeling when you pray. Remember to open up space to receive from beyond yourself or from the deepest place within you where God dwells.

And to speak to another oft-asked question. *How long should you pray?* Martin Luther said, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” Well, good for him, and good for those dedicated souls who pray or meditate or contemplate for 20 minutes twice a day, or those who have other established traditional practices. That is advisable and enviable, and I trust it works well for them and for the God who hungers, who longs for, our prayers. But, as to *how long?* - that really isn't a question about time. Clock time, chronological time. It is about goals and commitments and promises. So to the question of *how long should I pray, I like the answer that says pray until you get to “YES”*. Pray until you can say....

YES, God, I will accept what you are offering me....

YES, God, to what I believe you are asking of me.....

YES, God, I offer myself to you.....

Until you can say, YES, like the apostle Peter said to Jesus, *Yes, Lord , I love you and I will feed your sheep.*

As we spend a few minutes in silent reflection before we come to the first “s” word in our ACTS acronym, *Supplication*, a fancy word which invites us to pray for ourselves and others, to pray *help* and *please*, I suggest that you might want to consider where you are in getting to YES. And remember that saying YES involves practice. You have to keep seeking to say it, and mean it, over and over again in the midst of whatever circumstances, bane and blessings, gifts and challenges life brings you at the moment. For such a short word, only 3 letters, it is a big word and it changes everything. It will change your life, I promise you. So keep praying until you get there, and then offer some more petitions...Pray without ceasing, *yes, yes, yes* (with an occasional *no* at the right time) until your whole life is a prayer. Your whole life!

May it be so. Amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess, First Congregational Church in Branford, March 19, 2017

Quotations and insights found in:

*Naked Spirituality* by Brian D. McLaren (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

*With Open Hands* by Henri Nouwen (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1972).

*A Spring Within Us* by Richard Rohr (Albuquerque: CAC, 2016).

Bessel van der Kolk, being interviewed on Kristin Tippetts' NPR's *On Being* 10.30.14