

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**November 12, 2023**  
**Philippians 4:4–7, Hebrews 4:14–16**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Philippians 4:4–7**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**Hebrews 4:14–16**

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The writer, Anne Lamott, has a short book about prayer entitled, “Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.” She starts the book by saying, “I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to

believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow." Over the next few weeks, we will talk about prayer – and specifically the seemingly simple and also complex petitions of Help, Thanks, and Wow.

As we begin to talk about these things, I want to be honest. Prayer kind of comes with my job description, and I am practiced in the habits of prayer, and different types of prayer, and I pray every day or almost every day. And, even with all of that, I have no idea how prayer works. Prayer is, and for as long as I can remember, has been somewhat of a mystery to me. I don't know how it works, except that it does, but not always in the way I think it should.

Philippians 4, and I know I say this very often, but Philippians 4 might be one of my favorite passages of scripture. It comforts me, and again, I don't completely know why. Perhaps because it tells me right in the passage that when we come to God with all our petitions and praise, we will have a peace that surpasses understanding. I like that because it means that I don't have to understand everything. Which is good because I don't understand everything. It's above my pay grade to understand everything, so I am off the hook, and Philippians tells me that's ok. My job is to bring everything to God, and then God gets to sort it out.

Lamott says that prayer is us humans, "reaching out to something having to do with the eternal, with vitality, intelligence, kindness, even when we are at our most utterly doomed and skeptical. God can handle honesty, and prayer begins in honest conversation." She says, "When you are telling the truth, you're close to God."<sup>i</sup> Lamott says, "Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to being helped by some force, some friends, some something."<sup>ii</sup>

The Philippians passage starts with the command to “rejoice.” In fact, it tells us twice to rejoice. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say Rejoice!” The passage then moves on with a different tone. It says, “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything...” My goodness how quickly the message went from the double reminder to rejoice to telling us not to worry. Maybe the writer, and God, know that we are more wired for worry than for rejoicing. Or perhaps the place we turn when we are most fearful is to prayer.

Eugene Peterson has translated the Bible with the intent of making scripture easy to read, to put it in language that is accessible in a version called The Message. He translates verse six about worry this way. “Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns.” I like how this turns things around. Instead of worry being at the center and shaping things, our prayers can shape our worries, and eventually, work them into something else.

Of course, there is a lot to worry about in the world. Which is why Lamott mentions that the first essential prayer is “Help.” There are prayers for health and happiness, for wholeness and healing. There are prayers for natural and human-made disasters and the plight of our planet. There are prayers for wisdom for leaders to work for the common good for all people. Prayers for children to know they are loved no matter what. Prayers for peace, so many prayers for peace. There are prayers for those that are grieving loss – both large and small, definite and ambiguous. These are big prayers, small prayers, and everything in-between-prayers. Help. Help the world. Help my friend. Help the doctors and nurses. Help the leaders. Help the children. Help me.

Help me – that might be one of the hardest prayers and petitions we make – particularly when we do so out loud. For many of us, it is easier

to give help than receive it or ask for it. There is so much in our world telling us to be strong and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. But the Body of Christ doesn't work that way. Scripture tells us that when one of us suffers, we all suffer. We are better together. To be a part of a community of support means we care for one another, and sometimes that means we need to ask for help. The great theologian and Presbyterian pastor, Fred Rogers, better known to all of us as Mr. Rogers, said, "Confronting our feelings and giving them appropriate expression always takes strength, not weakness. It takes strength to acknowledge our anger, and sometimes more strength yet to curb the aggressive urges anger may bring and to channel them into nonviolent outlets. It takes strength to face our sadness and to grieve and to let our grief and our anger flow in tears when they need to. It takes strength to talk about our feelings and to reach out for help and comfort when we need it."<sup>iii</sup>

Mr. Rogers also said, "All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors--in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver." This is the strength of the community of faith, to give and receive help. To ask for help when it is needed. That is a brave thing, indeed.

While we may offer our prayers and petitions to God, we also can receive help from the community of faith and be help to others. Lamott says it works this way. "We find God in our human lives, and that includes the suffering. I get thirsty people glasses of water, even if that thirsty person is just me. My friend... goes through the neighborhood and picks up litter, knowing there will be just as much tomorrow. We visit those shut-ins whom a higher power seems to have entrusted to our care – various relatives, often aging and possibly annoying, or stricken friends from our church communities, people in jails or mental

institutions who might be related to us, who benefit from hearing our own resurrection stories. My personal belief is that God looks through Her Rolodex when She has a certain kind of desperate person in Her care and assigns that person to some screwed-up soul like you or me, and makes it hard for us to ignore that person's suffering so we show up even when it is extremely inconvenient or just awful to be there."<sup>iv</sup>

This is how God works, through the community of faith, as imperfect as we are. We stumble through together. We pray together. We march and shout together. We share meals together. We offer an encouraging word or sometimes just sit with one another in silence. We help one another.

I've told this story before, but it is one of my favorites because it is true. It comes from the TV Show from several years ago, "The West Wing." In one episode, one of the characters, Josh, is having an extremely tough time after suffering through some trauma and he is afraid he may lose his job. His mentor and boss, Leo, tells him this story.

"This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out.'"

We help one another find the way out.

Beyond the community of faith and prayer, there is another tool that I have used when it comes to asking for help, when things seem too big, and I know I can't fix the problem, and when I know I am not in charge. The passage from Hebrews reminds us that we also have Jesus as an intercessor and one to whom we can go for help. And what's more, we can do this in confidence knowing that in Jesus, God has been tested and suffered just like us. We know we can receive mercy and grace and approach God because Jesus has experienced the trials and tribulations of life, just like us. Jesus has cried. Jesus has asked for help, and we can also ask for help.

When there are those times when things seem too big, when I clearly am not the one in control, it is time to bring the request to God's inbox. This can be a literal box, a shoe box, a box where you keep treasures, your car's glovebox, any kind of container. And you can write down a note and give it to God to work with. Put the concern in God's hands, on God's agenda. Maybe it's the name of a person who needs help, or a situation that is perplexing. Whatever it may be, you can write it down, fold it up, and deliver it to God's inbox.

Anne Lamott describes when she uses God's inbox. She says,

...the willingness to do such a... thing comes from the pain of not being able to let go of something.... We learn through pain that some of the things we thought were castles turn out to be prisons, and we desperately want out, but even though we built them, we can't find the door. Yet maybe if you ask God for help in knowing which direction to face, you'll have a moment of intuition. Maybe you will see at least one next right step to take.

The response probably won't be from God, in the sense of hearing a deep grandfatherly voice, or via skywriting.... But the mail will come, or an e-mail, or the phone will ring; unfortunately, it might not be

later today, ideally right after lunch, but you will hear back. You will come to know.

When we think we can do it all ourselves – fix, save, buy, or date a nice solution – it’s hopeless.... We can summon a child’s courage and faith and put a note with a few words into a small box.<sup>v</sup>

For those of you worshipping in person, you will find a small blue blank sheet of paper. If you are joining us at home, I invite you to find a piece of paper as well if you wish. This piece of paper is an opportunity to ask for God’s help by putting the request in God’s inbox. If you choose to write a note, and you are here in person, you may take the note home with you to place in a box at home, or you can place it in this box which will be outside the middle doors of the sanctuary. No one will look at your requests, they will be in God’s inbox. For those of you at home, you may find a place of your own choosing. Some music will play shortly for about a minute or two, and this can be the opportunity to write your note to God if you wish.

Before we begin, let me also remind you that we have an active prayer chain and email that goes out every week for the community to offer prayer. Anyone is welcome to add a request to this prayer chain by letting Mary or me know the request or by contacting the office.

Let me close with this simple prayer:

Loving God. Help. Help for the world. Help for our friends. Help for the stranger. Help for our enemies. Help for the children. Help for ourselves. O God, help. We put all of these requests into your hands. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Anne Lamott, “Help, Thanks. Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.” p. 6.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p 35.

<sup>iii</sup> Fred Rogers, “The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember.”

<sup>iv</sup> Lamott, Ibid. p24-25

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., p. 36-38.