

Muscular Prayer

Esther 4:13-17, Apocryphal additions to Esther 14:3-19, Luke 22:39-45

Center Church, Hartford

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“Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Guide me through the starry night, and wake me when the sun shines bright.” I love this little prayer (in its more modern version) because in many ways it is perfect. It captures what the poet and theologian Christian Wiman suggests that “faith is a motion of the soul toward God.” (*My Bright Abyss*) The prayer invites God to envelope the pray-er and be one with their soul.

Prayer is that conversation that moves our souls toward God. Prayer is the conversation of voice, heart, mind, spirit that moves us toward God. Whether that relationship is still new for you or one that goes back decades, the continuing movement of our souls toward God by honest conversation with God is the key to the strength of our faith.

That is a different understanding of prayer than many of us work with on a daily basis. If we pray at all, it is usually to come to God with requests. Heal my friend of cancer. Help my son get a job. Help me out of whatever trouble I am in. Sometimes we may be moved to say thank you, when something particularly wonderful happens in our lives.

Prayer is usually, for most people, asking for something.

Certainly, that is part of many relationships. When I am troubled or ill, I will call my husband or my best friend for support and comfort. But if that were the sum total of our interactions, we would not stay married or friends for very long. There has to be more to it.

So, with God as well. The purpose of prayer is not to get stuff, the purpose of prayer is to develop and deepen a relationship with the one who loved us first and loves us best. Prayer is a conversation that moves us toward God and engages us with God’s love, mercy, strength and power.

Throughout the Bible, we read stories like the ones we heard today of people engaging in passionate prayer at critical moments of their lives. They pour out their soul, are moved to tears, engage in fasting in order to spend more time and empty themselves to fill their lives with God. Those minutes, hours, days, filled with prayer change them in profound ways.

But that kind of prayer doesn't come out of nowhere. It comes as the culmination of a deep relationship of trust and love built over time through conversations with God. Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians that they should "pray without ceasing." Which seems, of course, impossible. What he's getting at is that conversation with God should be muscle memory for us, something that flows naturally throughout our day. I wish there was an app that would allow us to "text" God throughout the day, the way we text family or friends. It might spur us to increase our prayer life!

Why talk about prayer today in the midst of the craziness of this week in this world and each of our lives? In a time when the phrase "thoughts and prayers" has lost all meaning and depth.

Because I long for each of you, and for me, to dive deeper into a relationship with God that can make us each into Esthers in our time and place. A relationship that empowers, comforts, en-courages, and, as Esther may have prayed, saves us from our fear. A relationship that can help us to be more than we can ask or imagine. A relationship that can bring us, and others in our lives, joy. A relationship that can change the world.

What we have as people of faith is not a magic spell or the corner on truth or a nice set of rules to live the perfect life. What we have is a **relationship**, one that Jesus encourages us again and again to live into and to trust. Our souls long to move toward God, toward a meaning beyond what we can see, hear, touch or think. Because our lives, and our world, will be better for being in that relationship, in the same way that lovers are better people for being in relationship with their beloved.

The way into that relationship begins and continues with conversation, sharing the mundane and the meaningful, the simple and the complex parts of our days and years in a focused way, like Esther or Jesus, especially when we need to lean on God most.

Judy Blume wrote a young adult book years ago with the title *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. There have been few books written on prayer as genuinely genuine and helpful as this YA novel. Adolescent Margaret talks with God about everything including her struggle to understand sex and issues with friends. These conversations change her life because they are real, honest, and difficult.

When I was in Korea, as some of you have heard, I was blown away by the passionate prayer in worship shared not by the pastor, but by lay leaders of the church, men and women. They did not simply read or recite words. They prayed as though it mattered, in a way that made you believe that their relationship with God was utterly solid. That they could get angry with God or themselves, like the Psalmists often did. That they trusted God and craved God's mercy and love.

New England Protestants don't generally pray publicly like that!

We could. And even if we might not here, we can wherever we find ourselves alone with God, getting into the movement of our souls toward their source. We can move toward God like a quiet stream or the raging waters we saw this week after the rains. The critical thing is to move and communicate about everything.

Beloved, pray. Without ceasing. Say thank you. Say help me. Say help someone else. Say I'm confused about. Say I wonder if. Say I'm happy. Say I'm depressed. Say I don't understand. Say you are amazing. Say I need. Say I want to give. Say this incredible thing happened to me. Say I'm afraid. Say I'm angry. Say I'm not sure what's next for me. Say the world sucks right now. Say I love you. Say whatever comes to your heart. That's what prayer is.

I don't know if Dr. Christine Blasey Ford is a person of faith, but if it had been me I that room in DC this week, the only way I would have gotten through that was the way Esther did: preparational prayer, deeply connecting with God, and asking her community to join with her in that prayer. That's the only way I can meet deep struggle with strength and persistence and hope. For me, this is true over and over again in my life. I hope it is true for you. Remember to ask for this community to join you in prayer with passion when you need us! Draw on God, and on our love, strength, and centering power!

I'm going to end today with the words of Maya Angelou in her Prayer. Then we will continue in prayer in our hymn and pick up again after with all our deepest prayers. Amen.