

Keep on Growing: Praying In Community - 9th July 2023

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[0 : 00] We're going to keep talking about keeping on growing. So I think last week I wasn't here, but I had caught up on YouTube and Dave talked about giving what we're able, about erratic growth, unpredictable growth, and how we can't always see our growth from the same perspective that God can see it.

So sometimes we won't even know we're growing, and we have been. Today I'm going to talk a bit about growing together through prayer. Now, honestly, I think when you're growing together as a community through prayer, you might not be doing the growing.

The growing might be happening somewhere else in the community. It might be that as a whole we're growing, but individually you might not feel like you're growing sometimes, because the growth is all of us together.

And I signed up to talk about growing together in community through praying together before a lot of things happened. But recently my sister has become quite ill, and I guess this week I've been walking through what it feels to pray together as a community with other people.

So I think it starts with thinking about how we are as a group, as a community. We behave completely differently in groups to the way that we behave on our own.

[1 : 22] Sometimes we can be propelled by the strength of other people to be stronger, to run faster in a race than we could before, to be braver, to stand up for things that we wouldn't be able to stand up for on our own, to manage situations that we can't manage on our own.

And sometimes you have the opposite problem. In groups we can be nastier than we might be on our own. Sometimes we might choose to pick on people we would never pick on on our own, but in a group it becomes easier to say that slightly nasty thing.

So in many ways I want to say that in groups we behave in a more extreme way than the way we behave on our own. Both extremes. The braveness that allows people to protest things, even against the scariest authorities, and the horror that can lead us to treat people in truly terrible ways, because we're unable to, because other people do.

And I think prayer in groups can also be something it's difficult to think about, because you start by thinking about prayer itself. How does God change the world through prayer?

We know God does, but sometimes it's difficult to think about. The truth is we believe in an all-powerful God who is always there, and who already knows everything that's going on, who already longs to build this world so it is the best for all of us, because God loves us each individually as God's children.

[2 : 56] And we see in the life of Christ, we see the promise that God knows what we need, and that God would never give up or walk away from us, even when we push him to death on a cross, and that God would not trick us or give us the wrong thing just to mess with us, but God will always provide for us.

So if God knows what we need, longs to provide for us, then why do we need to tell God what we need? It's a big question. And I guess in this case we don't really need to send God the shopping list, but we do need to remember that prayer isn't a one-way street.

It's not a vending machine. You don't put your money in and get what you want out. Because ultimately I believe that prayer is much more than that. Because I think what praying does is it changes us when we pray, as much as everyone else, as much as the rest of the world.

Because when we pray, it's almost like there's a line connecting heaven and earth, a space where we can reach out into heaven and be completely ourselves, completely with God.

And a place where God can reach out into us and nudge us towards the path that God is longing for us to go down. A path where we ultimately grow into the person God is calling us to be.

[4 : 17] We also pray differently in groups, don't we? It's quite difficult to see individual encounters, what's happening in prayer in groups. And some people struggle with praying out loud, praying in groups at all.

They struggle with saying what they want to say honestly in front of other people. Some people worry that they don't phrase things so they sound right or sound good. Some people worry that they're overthinking it and sounding too clever.

Some people worry that it's not authentic because they have other people listening to them. And yet we all know, through living it, that prayer is profoundly important.

That praying together is transformational. Even if, as some cultures do, you only sit together in silence. But even if you struggle to find the right words, struggle to say them in a way that you think is authentic, praying some words, any words together, is still important.

Because sometimes things in life are unbearably heavy. And when God made humanity, God saw that it wasn't good for us to be alone. Because even though we know God is in the mix and God is always with us, leading the whole world towards broad paths where righteousness echoes, sometimes the paths we find ourselves on now are hard, rocky, unstable paths.

[5 : 41] And it's not good to walk those paths alone. So while prayer is complicated, praying together somehow allows us to transform communities together, to grow together like trees that sit next to each other where their roots entangle around each other.

And I think a bit like Dave was saying last week, sometimes you're in a situation where you can't give much. You can't hold your end up very high. You can't take much more.

And I think praying together is really helpful in that situation. Because it's almost saying to someone else, I can't hold my piece of parachute up right now. So I need you to cover me. And I think as a community, we're very good at that in some ways.

Asking people to pray up, to hold your corner of the parachute on, to pass the baton on like it's a relay and run the wreck's bit of the race for you. Where ultimately victory lasts on everyone winning, the whole team winning, everyone being able to hold the parachute up.

Doesn't matter if one person drops it, if everyone else has got it. Doesn't matter in the relay race, if one of you trips and falls, if the next person picks up the baton and takes it to the next place.

[6 : 51] As Dave was saying last week, sometimes giving 60% is 100% of what you can give. And that's the best you can do. And between us, we can make that work. So when someone says that they're praying for me, as they have a lot this week, this is how it feels.

It feels like I've said, I can't do this mile. And someone picks up my baton and runs it for me.

They've got me. They're covering me when I can't cover myself.

And bit by bit, prayer by prayer, as we lift each other up to God, as we go into prayer, that vulnerable space where earth meets heavens and where God nudges us in the right direction.

Well, sometimes it's a little nudge and sometimes it's a huge kind of push. At least I find that. And sometimes it's turning you around and saying, you've been going completely the wrong way. As we pray like that with each other, for each other, something profound happens on earth, just like it happens in heaven.

It means that we kind of hold up all our broken bits of person, self, heart, perhaps, and we invite God into them. And we invite God's love into each piece of us.

[8 : 03] And somehow through that prayer together, what happens is, I believe, our broken hearts become whole. The shattered and broken pieces of our soul become knitted together.

In the Monday service recently, I said what I think happens is that God is using our prayers to sew our broken humanity together. And as it comes together, it began a thousand tiny bits of cloth and it becomes this ornate tapestry, so much more beautiful in its mended state than it ever was when we were small, alone, and not praying together.

And I think one of the best and most powerful examples of a prayer that shaped us all, that shapes what it means to be a Christian, is the Lord's Prayer. A prayer that we have all prayed at some point, maybe even just in school.

A prayer that generation after generation of Christians has made Christians out of the praying of it. And it's the prayer that Jesus taught us. In ancient liturgies, we're told to say this with words, we are bold to say.

So it's not always a prayer that you kind of curl up and say silently. It's not a tiny prayer to be muttered, but a bold prayer pushing a whole new agenda, really, of what it means to be Christians, of what it means to be transformed in this particular way to make Christians of us and to build a world as God wants it.

[9 : 29] I believe it's a prayer that kind of offers God's whole agenda. So we're going to listen to Jesus introduce that now. Now there are two different versions of this prayer. And today we're going to listen to the Luke version.

But the other version in Mark is also very good. One day, Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins.

For we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation. And then in the original version of the Luke version, it doesn't actually have the rest of it in controversially.

[10 : 42] But there is the deliver us from evil, which is in some ancient translations, but not others. So it's an intriguing prayer that has also been put together more by future generations.

So this prayer begins with two simple, seemingly innocent words, our father. Now on the video, you heard him just say father, but the hour is kind of implied in the language that is written in.

Our father. But these words aren't small little words at all. They're huge, expansive words. Because when we claim God as our father, we're declaring we're not alone in this world.

Not just my father, but a father to everyone. We don't have soul rights over God. We're not God's only child. We share God as one of God's many children, as one of the huge humanity that God loves.

One part of the big, broken, beautiful humanity that God is sowing back together. And when we claim God to be a father, father, it's a loaded term for some people.

[11 : 45] We aren't just claiming a familial relationship. Instead, it's something much deeper than that. It's not just that God loves us, created us and provides for us, but it's also claiming a very ancient promise that God made the world.

A promise that we first see in the book of Kings. It's a promise that God makes to David in the Old Testament. David is this king who God loved.

And David is obviously also a very flawed man. But we are told that he walked deeply with God and was loved deeply with God. And God promises to David that not now, but from his family, there'll come a new king, a king who will rule over God's people and whose rule will not be shaken.

And God promises King David, I will be his father and he will be my son. So when Jesus calls God father, he's saying, remember that promise that you'll probably all know that I made to King David. And this might sound like it's a promise just to King David and it's just about Jesus being God's son. But we also see in the other prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, that this promise to David is thrown open to everyone.

[13 : 01] In Isaiah, it says, if anyone is thirsty, let them come and drink and I will make with them an everlasting covenant. My sure, steadfast love for David.

And that's God promising, I made this promise to David. And this promise is also available to you. So when we say our father, we aren't just calling God by a deep, intimate name.

We're claiming an ancient promise that God made the world to set it free, to love it and to rule it as a king. And we see this echoed in the next words, your kingdom come.

Come God and lead our world directly and overthrow our governments and set us free from the sins that bind us. Things that make living in the way that God longs for us to live difficult.

Set us free just as you promised the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. Free to call God our father, who will come and live and rule upon us immediately.

[14 : 01] And this prayer, this huge promise, God, come make your kingdom on earth. Be our father in every sense of the word. Our direct leader set us free.

This promise isn't always easy. I mean, the other time we see Jesus pray, father, when he actually prays to Abba, father, which is kind of closer in the Aramaic to daddy.

We see him praying in the garden of Gethsemane alone when he knows he's going to die and when he's afraid of dying, as we all are a little. And Jesus prays, dad, let this cup pass from me and yet not your will, but mine.

And in so doing, we remember that calling God father, asking for those promises made to David, that's also costly. It's costly somehow to seek the freedom of God's direct rule of us. Sometimes the road to righteousness and justice has difficult and dark turns and sometimes it asks things from us that we don't want to give, that we long not to give. And Jesus models the best way we can pray this difficult prayer by praying, please no, and yet not my will, but yours.

[15:16] So perhaps when we're actually praying our father, we're praying something like, amazing God, who made each and every one of us, who knitted us together in the womb, God who is parent to us all in every single way, who loves us like a father and promises to protect us and that for each and every one of us, God will provide like we're his children.

Amazing father, mother, God, teach us to grow into being able to walk with you through difficult paths and ultimately lead us to a place where you will be our parent ruling this world, where you will transform this world and rule us directly in the place of our broken governments.

Mother God, Father God, thank you for not clinging to us or holding us back, but leading us into freedom because we know it is always costly to set our children free.

Hold us when it's hard, be our holy overshadowing, hold our wounds and bind them up like our parents do when we fall and see us as the best, most loving, most interesting versions of the people we can be.

Like all parents, look upon their children. Love us, God, like you loved David who had so many faults but who talked to you and loved you till the end and like King David, who you loved, make more of us through our future and through future generations of working with you.

[16:43] So we're going to keep looking at the Lord's Prayer and the next bit we're going to look at is the daily bread. Give us our daily bread. And I think this is a part of the prayer where you can't stop thinking about other people because when you say, give us today our daily bread, it's almost impossible not to think about people who are going hungry, where if we have plenty we can't ignore the injustice of having too much when others haven't got enough.

And that's important. I mean, we see throughout the Gospels, throughout whoever, the whole person Jesus was, that Jesus longs to see the hungry fed. And that's part of the reason why sharing communion is such an important part of being a Christian because it's one of those visceral ways we can touch Jesus because it was through feasting and sharing bread together that we meet who Jesus was.

That's how he wants to be remembered. Remember me at the party. Remember me through the bread where he was in life, at the table, breaking bread with people. But I also think that there is more going on when we pray for our daily bread.

We remember everything we have and that it all comes from God. But we also remember that God actually cares very desperately about what's going on in our life. God cares that you eat and you drink and that you live a good life.

God cares about our shopping list of concerns even when they seem really boring. God cares that we thrive as well as we survive, that our daily lives are filled with love and shaped well.

[18:16] And I guess when we say give us our daily bread, we really mean be there in all the small things in each little conversation, in each little part of the day. We're inviting God into ourselves because we make and remake ourselves through every little interaction.

So perhaps when we say give us our daily bread, we're saying something like this. Loving God, thank you for food, for all the things that we need to live. Thank you God that we have enough to get by if we do and help us to do something if we see others starving.

If we don't have enough, loving God, just get us through the next day. We know that you care about us, that you care that we eat and that we thrive and that we survive.

We know you care about our daily work of living and loving, so walk with us from the first mouthful in the morning to the last feelings before we sleep. Be with us in each word that we offer to other people, in our work, in our love, in our pray.

May we always offer people truth, not lies, wholesome love not sniping, bread not stones. Then we come to one of the more radical parts of the prayer, forgive us our sins, forgive us our debts.

[19:35] Because in the Bible, the language of sin is always tied up with the language of debt. It's best understood through that lens. That's partly, of course, the debt of love that we owe to each other, that we all fail at time and time again.

But it's also bigger and more than that because God really cares about big physical things and God really cares about economic things like money and the money and stuff that we owe to each other as well.

God cares that all God's people become free. And for that to be possible, for us all to be free, we need to build a world where people don't fill through the gaps, where people don't go hungry, where people don't choose between eating and heating.

So perhaps we pray, loving God, forgive us the things that we owe to each other. Fill in the gaps when it hurts too much to reach out, when it feels too costly to love someone.

Have our backs when we feel overdrawn, burnt out. Help us to forgive the debts of others. Help us not to overcount and run over things that people have said that hurt us when they meant it, when they didn't.

[20 : 47] And help us in this world where it feels like stuff matters so much. Help us to let go of stuff we don't really need. That can be really hard, God. Help us to give up enough so that we can, so that others who don't have enough to get by will have enough.

And help us to build a world without debts and without debtors, where everyone walks free and doesn't go hungry and can hold their head up high. Help us to pick the next section of the relay when we can't.

Help us to ask for help when we need it. Set us free in every sense of the word. Then we have deliver us from evil, which is only in some versions of the text.

Loving God, protect us from things in the world which wish to harm and destroy us. Protect us from unforeseen consequences of thoughtless actions, the costs asked for by thoughtless lies.

Fill us with love even when we want to hate. And that small bit inside of us all that can do evil and feel evil protect us most of all from that. Suppress the evil witness with love until love pours out everywhere and there's no space for evil.

[21 : 57] We know that you have won all of the battles in heaven and that evil has no power of us, so help us to live that reality. And when we pray this prayer together, this huge prayer about God's whole agenda for the world from having enough to eat to protecting us from evil to not owing other people anything, when we pray this amazing Lord's Prayer together, when we offer God our needs for freedom and bread and debts and for managing the evil within us together, when we offer this radical and sometimes utterly terrifying prayer to God, we are transformed.

We become more God's children and we claim our identity as loved people and make promises of love to the world even if we can't keep them all ourselves every time.

And ultimately, I think, through praying this prayer or prayers like it, this is a prayer that can lead the whole world on a path to redemption. When the whole world denies these promises and says, you're not loved enough to deserve bread, you're not good enough to be God's children, this prayer which Jesus gave us teaches us that it's a lie, that God loves us, that God is our Father in every sense of the word, that God will lead us like a shepherd to places where there are calm, still waters, that God will prepare a feast for us and unite us together with people we see as enemies into a renewed and whole, beautiful humanity stitched together from all of our brokenness.

Amen.