

September 27, 2015@Northview UMC (Rn)

Luke 11:1- 13

“Teach us to Pray”

Good morning. This is another beautiful day that the Lord has made. This is a day in which we have many reasons to give thanks and praise to God. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. It is my great joy to be here today and to join your worship service celebrating the 150th Anniversary. I am deeply grateful to your pastor Joe Klotz for his gracious invitation.

During your 150 years’ of history, there have been ups and downs, but the risen Christ has led this church to this moment. Through your mission and ministries many lives have been touched. Children, youth and adults have been baptized and experienced God’s amazing grace. Many couples have made their wedding covenants at this church. Many members of this church have served and dedicated their gifts and resources to God and, with the passage of time, have moved into God’s eternal kingdom.

Your mission and ministries have had an impact on your community and the world. Today we have many reasons to celebrate. Let us give thanks and praise to God for using Northview UMC for 150 years as Christ’s instrument.

But this celebration is not the end of this church. Our God wants to continue to use this church in the years to come. I think today’s celebration should be a new beginning for the next 50 or 100 years. Today should be a day for us to rededicate ourselves to God and to the mission the risen Christ has entrusted to us. So, I think it is very appropriate to ask ourselves this question today: What will be next after this celebration? What does the Lord want Northview UMC to do now and in the years to come?

I

This morning we listened to a scripture lesson from the Gospel of Luke.

In this lesson the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Jesus gave them a briefer form of the Lord’s Prayer and then, talked to them about the parable of the friend at midnight. He taught the disciples about persistence in prayer and assurance of God’s answer to prayer.

First, I would like to pay attention to the disciples’ request for Jesus to teach them to pray. They could have asked Jesus to teach them many other things. They could have asked Jesus to teach them how to heal the sick. They could have asked Jesus how to change water into wine or how to feed 5,000 people. They could have asked Jesus how to walk on water. But they did not ask Jesus any of these things. The one thing they asked Jesus in the Gospels was to teach them to pray.

Why did they ask Jesus to teach them to pray? The disciples observed and learned the importance and the power of prayer in Jesus’ life and ministry. The disciples knew that prayer always came first in Jesus’ ministry. They saw that Jesus always prayed before he made important decisions.

Before he began his public mission, Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days in the wilderness. Before he chose his 12 disciples, Jesus prayed the entire night. Before he went up to Jerusalem, Jesus prayed with 3 of his disciples at the Mount of Transfiguration. Before he was arrested, Jesus prayed at Gethsemane. And after he performed miracles, many times Jesus went out to the mountain and prayed.

The disciples watched and learned the importance and power of prayer in Jesus' ministry. So, they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. And after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the disciples got together and devoted themselves to prayer. The first thing they did to prepare for their future ministry after Jesus ascended into heaven was to pray together. Prayer was that important.

Today we also need to ask Jesus to teach us to pray. Celebrating 150 years of ministry, we may ask Jesus to teach us many things. We may ask Jesus to teach us how to increase our worship attendance. We may ask Jesus how to strengthen our stewardship. We may ask Jesus to teach us how to reach out to our neighbors. All these things are important. But most of all, we need to ask Jesus to teach us to pray. We need to learn to pray first. To respond faithfully to the question "What will be next?" we need to ask Jesus to teach us to pray. Prayer is the major thing in our life and in our ministries. Prayer should go first for our new future. Truly, prayer is that important.

II

Let me talk more about this request of teaching us to pray. Why is prayer this important? Why do we need to ask Jesus to teach us to pray while celebrating the 150th anniversary?

1) First of all, prayer is the essence and foundation of our faith. To build a new future, we need to examine and strengthen our foundation. If the foundation of our faith is not strong, we cannot build a new future on it.

Being a Christian is more than becoming a better person. Being a Christian is more than doing some good works. Being a Christian is also more than having knowledge about God. It is more than a culture.

We believe in a living God, and our God is still alive. Being a Christian means having a relationship with this living God. If our faith remains as only information or knowledge about God, our relationship with God will be "I and it." But, if we have a living fellowship with God, our relationship with God will be "I and Thou (You)." Having knowledge about God is important, but that is not enough. Faith as knowledge needs to grow into faith as relationship.

I was born in a Christian family. My mother was a devoted Christian. From my childhood, I went to church every Sunday. I did very well in Bible verse memorization contests. Once, I memorized the Gospel of Matthew chapter one to chapter five and the Beatitude. Of course, I got the first prize. Though I memorized many Bible verses, I was still in the stage of faith as knowledge.

When I was in my late teens, the pastor of my home church gave us an inspiring sermon on young adult Sunday. First, he quoted what Charles Reade, 19th century English novelist and play-writer said: Sow an act, and you reap a habit; sow a habit, and you reap a character; sow a character, and you reap a destiny. Then, he challenged us that if we sow two acts daily for six months, our lives would be changed. The two acts were simple: read the Bible daily and pray daily. I was deeply moved by his sermon and started sowing these two acts daily: reading the Bible and praying.

When I came to read the passages in the Exodus, especially the passages where the Israeli people had crossed the Red Sea, I remembered a man. Please guess who I remembered. It was Charlton Heston who played Moses' role in the movie, *The Ten Commandments*. While I was reading the passages remembering him, a sudden thought came to my mind: It was a miracle performed by God that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. If God is an eternal being, then, that God will be still alive. Wow, what is my relationship with that God? Am I not sitting before the Lord now? At that moment, my heart was filled with the sense of awe. I think that moment was the time my faith was transformed from knowledge to relationship.

Unfortunately, today many Christians are not strong in their prayer life. They say, "Yes, we pray." But just saying hello to God a couple of times a day at the table is not enough. *Some years ago, when Mother Teresa arrived at an airport, a journalist approached her and asked the question, "Do you have a message for the American people?" Mother Teresa did not say, "Give more" or "Love one another more." She answered without hesitation, "Yes. The American people should pray more."*

Our prayer needs to go deeper. A deeper prayer is more than asking God to give us something we need. A deeper prayer is opening ourselves and listening to God. A deeper prayer is seeking that God's will to be done on earth and in our churches. In this deeper prayer, we will be changed. We, the church will be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. So, on this joyful day, we need to ask the risen Christ, "Lord, teach us to pray." Prayer is that important.

2) Another reason we need to learn to pray is our reality. For the past 40 years we, the United Methodist Church, have been declining continuously and becoming an aging church. The average age of the United Methodist Church members is now 57 years old. The churches in the Virginia Annual Conference are not exceptions. I think the time has come to tackle our reality. Do we think this decline is what God wants for us? No, we do not think so.

Then, the next question is how can we turn around our churches? How can we respond to our reality of decline? We have tried many programs and initiatives for the past 40 years, but the UMC in this land has not been turned around. I think the time has come for us to think of a different approach. This new approach will begin with a new diagnosis of our issues. If the diagnosis is not correct, the treatment will not work.

I think our fundamental issue is more than a lack of programs or initiatives. It is more than the restructuring of our boards and agencies. It is a faith issue. It is a spiritual issue. If we do not address this fundamental issue, all our efforts to turn around our churches will be like building a house on sand.

E. M. Bounds properly said this in his book, *Power through Prayer*:

“We are continually striving to create new methods, plans, and organizations to advance the church. We are ever working to provide and stimulate growth and efficiency for the gospel... The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men and women... What the church needs today is not more or better machinery, not new organizations or more novel methods. The church needs persons whom the Holy Spirit can use- persons of prayer, persons mighty in prayer.”

This is the reason I say wherever I go, we need to pray harder and deeper. This is the reason I challenge the clergy and laity to dedicate at least one hour daily for our spiritual disciplines. This is the reason I invite the churches to become prayer covenant congregations. This is the reason I say, “No Spiritual vitality, no vital congregation.” So, on this joyful day we need to ask our risen Christ, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Prayer is that important for our new future.

III

Today is truly a joyful day. We have many reasons to celebrate and rejoice. I Thank God for your 150 years of mission and ministries. All of you have done a great job in serving and building up this church. I deeply appreciate all of you for your sacrifice and dedication to help this church carry out the mission that Jesus Christ has given us.

But on this joyful day, I would like to challenge you. I believe that the best of Northview UMC has not come yet. Our Lord expects more fruits from you in the years to come. Celebrating this joyful day, I pray that you will catch Christ’s vision anew and continue the journey towards a more faithful and fruitful church. I hope that you will faithfully prepare and respond to the question, “What will be next after this celebration?”

I read this story in the book *Unwinding the Gospel* written by Martha Grace Reese: Benton Street Christian Church is a solid, healthy congregation. The church formed a new evangelism team. Martha Grace Reese, the Author of *Unwinding the Gospel* met the team members over lunch. The team members have energy and excitement and kept asking Martha what to do.

Martha gave them a surprising advice. “Would you spend three months praying together and not do anything else, not make any decisions for three whole months?” The evangelism team members were surprised at this advice, but agreed to pray for three months. Martha suggested them to meet every week and pray at least an hour, pray for the church, for the members for discernment and for the people they don’t even know that God would love to be able to bring to Benton Street Church. And Martha told them to pray for each other and to pray that God will show them what they are to do and that God will nudge the right people to help them.

The evangelism team prayed every morning at 7:30 wherever they were. They read the book and searched the internet. Every month their report to the board was same, “We are praying.” After three months the team could recruit 65 members and their ministry was launched with vitality and excitement.

Connie, the team leader wrote to Martha, it was incredibly difficult for these four “can-do’ women to wait in prayer. All four of us have highly motivated, extremely organized, get-it-done personalities. In this practice of praying first all four of their prayer lives have been permanently impacted by this experiment. During the first year since the new evangelism team started ministry, this church welcomed 80 new members.

Yes. If we pray together, great things will happen to us and to the future of our church. Though we are facing challenging situation in today’s world, our Lord has never given up on you. Therefore, friends, we cannot stop here. Our Lord Jesus Christ calls all of us to a new future.

Let us open this new future with prayer, a deeper prayer. If we kneel down before the Lord together, great future will be dawned. Because He lives, we can face tomorrow. Because our Lord holds our future, we can dream a new dream.

So, on this joyful day we need to ask our risen Lord, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Truly, truly, prayer is that important.