

“Staying Connected”

Psalm 95:1-7b and Matthew 14:23

Pastor Charlie Berthoud | Sermon for Sunday, September 12, 2021

Let's pretend we are all construction workers, working on a building. If we all decide to do our own thing without communicating, the building will be a disaster. We need to stay connected to the plan on the blueprints and to each other.

Let's pretend we're going on a mountain hiking trip, a challenging technical climb. If we all wander wherever we want, we will probably get lost and might end up in danger. We need to stay connected to the route, following the map; and we need to stay connected to each other.

Let's pretend we're a football team. If it's fourth and goal late and we're losing by four points, and we each decide to do whatever we want instead of what is in the playbook, then we're going to lose the game. We need to listen to the coach, work together on the common plan, and stay connected to each other.

As Christians, it's vital that we stay connected to God and to each other. Worship and prayer are primary ways of staying connected, and together they make up the first of the five essential practices in Adam Hamilton's book *The Walk*.

In September and October, we're looking at these five essential practices with the hope that we all could get back on track with our faith and with our lives.

Worship is something we do together. Psalm 95 reminds us something of a call to worship, inviting us into the spirit of singing, praying, listening, and growing together. Listen for God's word:

O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
³For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
⁶O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
⁷For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

Worship gives us time to praise and thank God.

Worship gives us space to hear God’s word—both the good news of God’s love for each of us and the challenge of the call to live a life of meaning and purpose.

Worship gives us the opportunity to pray for the world and for people we know, to be renewed in caring and making a difference.

And we need to remember, as Adam Hamilton reminds us in his book, that worship is not a performance, with some of us “on stage” and the rest of you “in the audience.” Reflecting on the model of the early church in Acts 2, he writes:

Worship was not something believers attended. It was not something they watched. It was something they *did*.... The pastors, musicians, and liturgists are not performers on a stage hoping to entertain the congregation. They are offering themselves to God to lead the people in authentic worship, seeking to bless God and to be used by God to draw the worshipers to God.

—Adam Hamilton, in *The Walk*, p. 25

The word liturgy means “work of the people.” So, worship is an engaged activity for all us—here in the sanctuary and out there on the interwebs. I’ve had people ask me: “If I’m a member, how often do I have to attend worship?” In replying, I would remind them that it’s not just “attending” worship but being actively engaged. As for how often to be in worship, we have hesitated to establish a number, for fear of being legalistic.

In our Inquirers’ Class, we encourage people to aim for at least three Sundays a month. Adam Hamilton aims higher. In the book he describes how they started giving stickers for people who were in worship over 90% of the Sundays of the previous year. That means missing five or fewer Sundays.

While that’s intriguing, and while I like the idea of motivation and a challenge, I’m not sure that’s the best way to go. But I have a modest alternative. Last week, I encouraged you to read the book, join a small group, and listen to the sermons during this seven-week series.

Let’s make a seven-week challenge: Can you commit to seven consecutive Sundays?

Over the course of this series, I invite you to be in worship all seven weeks, or at least to listen to or read the sermons. This is week number two.

Fortunately, we have many ways to worship:

- In person, on Sundays in the sanctuary
- On internet, through Livestream, Sundays at 11:00
- On internet, through Youtube, anytime
- With podcasts, pdfs, and paper copies of sermons

I don’t think we’ll keep count or give out stickers for this seven-week series, but I invite you to set a goal for yourself for this series and evaluate yourself. Five weeks gets you a B. Six weeks gets you an A. And seven weeks gets you an A+.

Worship is our collective way of connecting with God.

Prayer allows us individually to connect with God whenever and wherever we want.

The Bible tells us that Jesus himself often spent time alone in prayer:

After Jesus had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

—Matthew 14.23

I'll be the first to admit that there are many questions about prayer, especially intercessory prayer. We pray for someone who has cancer, but sometimes they don't get better. We pray for world peace, and that doesn't seem to help. We pray for God to speak clearly to us, and we're not sure what we hear or sense.

While those are all legitimate uncertainties about prayer (that we need to discuss), I am certain that prayer helps us reconnect to God.

- When we pray for a loved one with cancer, they may or may not be healed, but we are opening ourselves to be more caring.
- When we pray for world peace, the chaos may continue, but we find ways to be instruments of reconciliation.
- When we pray for God to speak to us, we are at least tuning in and open for divine guidance.

Prayer can happen in many different ways and places. Certainly we pray in worship and maybe at meal time. But we can also pray when we walk, at a red light, as we sing, while reading a good book, standing in the shower.

We can just offer our own simple prayers. Ann Lamott famously says the simplest and best prayer is: *Thank you, thank you, thank; help me, help me, help me.*


We can sit still with our eyes closed and just listen for God. Or we can pray expressively, with our bodies, even dancing—although that could be a challenge for a lot of Presbyterians!

We have an abundance of prayer resources to give us words to pray.

One of my favorite books of all time is John Baillie’s classic, *A Diary of Private Prayer*. It has a morning and evening prayer for every day of the month.

You can also pray through technology. There are lots of websites and apps available. Wouldn’t it be great if the first thing we did with our phones every morning was to pray?

One of my favorites is “Daily Prayer” from the Presbyterian Church, with scripture and prayer. One of the prayers for today goes like this:

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Collect

Eternal God,
send your Holy Spirit into our hearts,
to direct and rule us according to your
will,
to comfort us in all our afflictions,
to defend us from all error,
and to lead us into all truth;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.††
Amen.



As with worship, the question of how often to pray comes up. Adam Hamilton suggests five times a day. That may sound like a lot, but it’s very doable, with short and simple prayer.

Hamilton suggests five moments for prayer each day:

- Morning: Thank you for the gift of life. Bless my words and deeds today.”
- 3 Meals: “Thank you for food. Nourish me to serve your kingdom.”
- Evening: “I pray for the people I was with today. Give me peaceful rest, so I can be ready for tomorrow.”

Let’s all try to do this every day for the next week.

So you have your invitations, your challenges:

- Read *The Walk* and consider joining a small group.
- Engage with worship every Sunday during this seven-week series.
- Pray five times a day for the next week.

Worship and prayer are vital for our connection to God and each other. Just as a body needs food, just as our phones need to be fully charged, just as our cars need gas or electricity, we need worship and prayer to be fully functional as people, as Christians.

The Good News of the Gospel is that God wants us to be fully fed, fully charged, fully fueled, fully functional—and fully alive.

With worship and prayer, God gives us many ways to make that happen.