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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
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Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26
I Thessalonians 5: 16-24

**Acts of Faith:
Prayer**

This is the last sermon in the series entitled Acts of Faith. Taking the stories of the earliest Church from the book of Acts as our launching point, we have been looking at some acts or practices of faith that may (or may not) resonate with us here and now. Acts like testimony, courage, love and friendship. All of these relate to the challenges and opportunities faced by the early Church, challenges and opportunities that may not be all that different from those faced by the community of faith of the 21st century. Now some of these so called acts may strike us as more of attitudes or states of being rather than concrete practices, but what we have learned from Peter and the other apostles is that sometimes rather than acting from an attitude, we need to take steps to foster that attitude or outlook through active practice. Love is probably the best example of this. We tend to think of love as an emotion. But, as we talked about a few weeks ago, in the Christian sense, love is more of an act of the will than a feeling. As Frederick Buechner puts it, “According to Jesus, we don’t necessarily have to like our neighbors to love them.”

Last week I used William Sloan Coffin’s characterization of faith as “leaping first, and then growing wings.” This is another way of saying what I mean by acts of faith. They are the things we do—and there are many of them—that teach us how to have faith. This is why we can also refer to them as practices. Practice is the thing we do to get good at something. And the same is true of our faith, although it seems to me that we don’t always think of it that way. I hear all the time from people, “I want to read the Bible, but I don’t know enough about it.” Or some say, “I can’t pray. I don’t know how.” For some reason, there seems to be a different expectation for faith. The general attitude seems to be either you have it or you don’t. And if you don’t have it, there is nothing you can do to get it.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell examines the lives of some of the most creative and talented people in our world, people like Bill Gates, Mozart and the Beatles, and attempts to uncover the secret to their success. Whatever “it” is, these people surely have it. But the interesting thing that Gladwell shows is that “it” is not simply one thing, but a combination of factors. Each success story is a mixture of really good timing, the right circumstances and something called the 10,000 hour rule. That is the amount of practice time researchers believe it takes to become a world class expert. That, obviously, is a lot of time. You have to start early, practice a lot and really stick to it for the long haul; which is part of the reason that circumstances and timing play such a significant role. Interest too is a key factor; otherwise one would quit way before 10,000 hours.

Surely though, there are naturals, people who are just born with innate talent or God-given ability. Not really, according to Gladwell. The common thread linking Mozart, Bill Gates, the Beatles and so many others is practice, practice, practice. If you look into each of their stories you will find that to be the case. Bill Gates spent most of his youth in a computer lab, even dropped out of Harvard because classes were interfering with his screen time. And before the Beatles hit it big in 1964 they had already played 1200 live concerts, some of them as long as 8 hours. But what about Mozart? If anyone was a prodigy it was Mozart, who is reported to have started writing music at six. In his book *Genius Explained*, Michael Howe writes, “By the standards of mature composers, Mozart’s early works are not outstanding. The earliest pieces were all probably written down by his father, and perhaps improved in process. Many of his childhood compositions...are largely arrangements of works by other composers. Of those concertos that only contain music original to Mozart, the earliest that is now regarded as masterwork was not composed until he was twenty-one: by that time he had already been composing concertos for [over] ten years.”

So, how many hours have you spent in prayer? Anywhere close to 10,000 hours? That's an intimidating thought, isn't it? According to this rule, to become an expert in prayer, we would have to constantly devote ourselves to prayer and, nearly, pray without ceasing. These two phrases are, of course, drawn from our two passages today.

I Thessalonians is thought to be one of the earliest pieces of Christian literature. The author, Paul, ends the epistle with an exhortation to prayer, as he does in all of his letters. *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.* While this all sounds well and good, it hardly seems to be a realistic model of prayer. We cannot possibly pray without ceasing, can we?

In the first chapter of Acts we get what seems to be a more realistic example of prayer. The disciples regroup following Jesus' ascension. They go to an upper room and pray together. Then, they realizing that since Judas is no longer with them, they need another disciple to have the desired 12, so they decide on two candidates. How do they decide? They pray for God's guidance, then they roll the dice, literally. That is what it means to cast lots. They left it to chance. Now I could do a whole tangent here on relying on randomness, but that is a whole other sermon. The simple fact for us to know is that at that time casting lots was a common way to determine God's will. It was their version of a committee meeting. The point for today's sermon is that at this momentous time in their ministry and mission, they relied heavily on prayer. We tend to rely heavily on prayer at momentous times in our own lives too, don't we? It seems to me that we tend to rely most heavily on prayer when we feel that we have the least amount of control over our lives. And while there is nothing wrong with turning to God when we need something, I wonder, is

that the most effective way to think of prayer or should we, as Paul suggests, pray without ceasing. But that is a standard most of us would not like to measure ourselves against.

In her most recent book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than talk about my prayer life.” From this confession she goes on to describe what prayer is and what it is not. She describes prayer as “the practice of being present to God.” She writes, “In the same way that I am willing to thank my husband for a gift even before I have opened it—because I know him, because I trust his love for me, because I have faith we will survive even if he has given me a pneumatic nail gun for my birthday—I am willing to thank God for my life even before I know how it turns out. This is brave talk, I know, while I can still pay the bills, walk without assistance, and talk someone into going to the movies with me. My hope is that if I can practice saying thank you now, when I still approve of most of what is happening to me, then perhaps that practice will have become habit by the time I do not like much of anything that is happening to me. The plan is to replace approval with gratitude.”

In the same way, we can understand prayer as the practice of paying attention to God in our lives and in our world. Just last week I was flipping through the radio stations and there was an interview on NPR’s *All Things Considered*¹ about how prayer can reshape your brain and your perception of reality. Apparently there is a whole new field emerging that is being dubbed “neurotheology,” where scientists study what happens in the brains and bodies of people who believe they connect to the divine. And what they are finding is that the brains of people who spend significant amount of time in prayer or meditation are different. The technical explanation is “The more you focus on something—whether that’s math or auto racing or football or God—the more that becomes your reality, the more it

¹ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104310443>

becomes written into the neural connections of your brain.” This provides for an interesting twist on the old adage, “prayer does not give us what we want, but prayer helps us want what we need.”

Now I am not trying to make a scientific argument for the way prayer works or anything like that, I am merely suggesting that like almost anything else, prayer takes practice. It would seem that this most basic act of faith should somehow be different, that it should come easier than all this, but the fact is that it isn't and it doesn't. At the same time, its not rocket science. Christian mystic Thomas Merton writes, “The great thing is prayer. Prayer itself. If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is to start praying...You start where you are and you deepen what you already have.” There are no magic words or secret stances. You don't have to be in a special space to pray. You do not have an advanced degree in theology. You just have to be willing. Prayer is about learning how to pay attention to God in our lives and in our world. It is about presenting our lives to God and perhaps, little, by little, casting our lot and letting go of our need to dictate the outcome. It is about learning to replace approval with gratitude. It is a tall order, I know. But it need not overwhelm us. We are invited to start where we are, with the promise that wherever we are, God will meet us there.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not put out the Spirit's fire. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. [I Thessalonians 5: 16-24]