

Together We Become

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Luke 11: 1-10: He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father,^[a] hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.^[b]

³ *Give us each day our daily bread.^[c]*

⁴ *And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

And do not bring us to the time of trial."^[d]

⁵ *And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.*

⁹ *"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*

So Mary Page likes the genre of horror. Let's just say, I do not. But I really like Mary Page and sometimes you do something you don't necessarily like because you love the person. So a few years ago, I decided to surprise Mary Page with a date night to a Stephen King trivia night at a neighborhood restaurant. She didn't know where we were going and I thought this would be the perfect surprise date. Now, I found out about the Stephen King trivia night because I saw a sign for it at our neighborhood library as they were sponsoring the trivia night to raise awareness to the library and its programs. Now let me tell you what I envisioned. I envisioned walking into a crowded room of the restaurant filled with Stephen King fans. I imagined Mary Page would know the answer to all the questions and I had even studied up as I had googled, "Stephen King trivia cheat sheets" that I had tried to memorize to make up for my lack of knowledge of horror in general and Stephen King specifically. I imagined at one point during the evening, Mary Page turning to me, beaming with happiness, saying, "What a thoughtful date. Thank you so much."

That's what I envisioned.

But here's what actually happened. About 12 people in total showed up and we probably only knew the answer to about 25% of the questions.

But that's ok.

It actually was a lot of fun. But also, because, since only a handful of people showed up, we actually won the prize that Mary Page most wanted, a copy of Stephen King's book, *On Writing*, where unlike his other books, it is not a horror story but is rather part memoir, part reflection on what makes for a good writer. I decided to read the book and one thing King said about writing really really stood out to me.

He said to be a writer does require natural ability – you either have it or you don't, but he believes a whole lot more people have that ability than we think. The problem is that natural ability alone does not a writer make. You have to work at it. King wrote, "To be a good writer, you must read or write six hours a day. If you cannot find the time to do that, you can't expect to become a good writer." I found it fascinating that the only way to become a writer is to write. I think that's probably true about most anything – the only way to become something is to start doing it.

Today, our theme is Together We Become and we're exploring the ways we both as individuals and collectively as a church can become a people who live out our faith in such a way that makes an impact on each other and on the community around us. Over my years of being a pastor, I've met a number of people who started coming to church not because they had everything about God figured out or because they had had a sudden conversion experience. But rather, they weren't sure why they decided to come but felt like there was something to being a part of a faith community. They became a person of faith because they made a choice to try faith. In that sense, I think becoming begins with a choice. We may or may not have faith, but we can choose to try to practice our faith. We may or may not think prayer does anything, but we can choose to pray. We may or may not think we will connect with God in worship, but we can choose to worship.

This idea of beginning to live into faith even when we may not have it is nothing new. In fact, the founder my own Methodist tradition, John Wesley spent many years overwhelmed with doubts. Several times in his journal, he wondered if he even had any faith at all. And in one of those times, one of his mentors told him to keep preaching. "Preach faith until you have it," he said, and then, "Preach faith because you have it." I think like so many things in life, the way we become people of faith is to start practicing faith.

Our gospel reading begins with one of Jesus' disciples asking him to teach them how to pray. Now, on the surface, it seems like the disciple wants to know the best way to talk to God. But that's not what's going on here. It was customary for Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day to teach their disciples a prayer that would be, in essence, a summary of their teachings...sort of like if they were going to boil their theology down to just a few sentences of the most important parts, that's what this prayer would be. So when the disciple says, "Jesus teach us to pray," he's not asking about how to talk to God. Rather, he's saying, "Jesus give us the summary, the most important parts of your teaching."

And Jesus responded with a version of what we know of as the Lord's prayer. I want to read those words again and this time, I want you to listen to it, not so much as a prayer, but listen to it and see what it evokes in you if you hear these words as the essence of Jesus' teaching, as the essence of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and a person of the Christian faith.

Father,^[a] hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.^[b]

³ *Give us each day our daily bread.^[c]*

⁴ *And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

And do not bring us to the time of trial."^[d]

What themes emerge for you: the image of God as parent, worship, God's kingdom coming on Earth, sharing of bread and other resources, forgiving others just as we have been forgiving, and trusting God to be with us on our journey, especially the difficult parts. That's not a bad summary of what it means to be a follower of Jesus – that God loves us as children, that we worship, that we work for peace and justice in the world, that we share what we have with those who need it, that we forgive others, and that we trust God.

But then Jesus follows up the Lord's prayer with a story about persistence. In the story, someone was hungry, so he went to his friend's house in the middle of the night and kept begging for bread until the friend got up and gave it to him. Jesus said that it was more because of the person's persistence than anything else that he actually got what he wanted and then Jesus concluded by saying, *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."*

I think this has been one of the most mis-used verses in all of Scripture. TV evangelists and others have told countless people that God will give us anything we want if we just ask for it and have faith, which usually includes, sending them some money. But the context of this statement is not about people asking God for some sort of new possession or material thing. Rather, the context is Jesus has just given the disciples the Lord's prayer, the summary of his teaching. The context is that the disciples are trying to figure out how in the world they can live into this following of Jesus thing. Jesus is basically saying, "Ask for help to follow me. Ask for help to be a person of faith, and seek it. Just start somewhere. And don't give up."

For several years, I co-led a Bible study on death row in a maximum security prison in Alabama. Every Friday morning, I went with one of my most important mentors to talk about faith and to pray with people that the state of Alabama had declared unfit to live. After getting to know these men and learning their stories, I decided that I not only needed to pray with these men but I needed to stand against a system that was executing them. Every time someone was set to be executed, a group of us would gather in front of the courthouse to protest and to hold vigil. There was probably a group of about 25 of us, but most of us looked to two people as our mentors – Shelley and Jim Douglas. Shelly and Jim have a Catholic worker house, meaning that at any given time, they have one or two homeless families living with them. They are deeply committed to being followers of Jesus and part of that, for them anyway, means that they believe all violence is against the will of God. They have protested war and any form of violence for the better part of 40 years, sometimes being willing to go to jail for their civil disobedience. They have held vigil against war every Wed. morning and every Saturday night for years. They have held vigil whenever anyone was executed for years.

Now, at one point, someone joined our group who had recently changed his mind about the death penalty. He had always supported capital punishment. He was a doctor and respected in his community and the last thing anyone would have expected of him would be to standing on a street corner protesting. But he did. He came to believe that the death penalty went against everything his faith told him, and so he started protesting. And one day, he, like many people in justice work, he was feeling frustrated that things weren't seeming to get better. Alabama was still executing people at a fast pace. And so he simply said out of frustration, I'm sure, "I've been working on this for six months and things haven't got any better. What are we doing?"

And I will always remember, Jim gently saying to him, "And you may end up working on this 60 more years and things may not get better. But the point is to keep showing up."

Friends, to become people of faith, I think we could have a lot worse advice than to keep showing up. Keep showing up to worship. Keep showing up to work for justice and peace. Keep showing up to share with those in need. Keep risking the vulnerability that comes with forgiving others and trusting God to see you through. Just keep showing up week after week, year after year because it is only by practicing faith that we become people of faith.

And yet that is so much easier said than done because we have a personal stake in this. We want to know that if I show up at church, I'm going to be accepted for who I am. We want to know that if we pray, our prayers will be heard. We want to know that if we choose to worship, that we will find a connection with the divine. We want to know that if we work for justice, things will get better. And in virtually every one of these cases, we don't get any proof that we will ever find what we seek. And yet, if we don't seek it, if we don't start somewhere and begin showing up, we know we will never find it. That kind of seeking takes courage and a willingness to risk.

Friends, the life of faith is filled with joy, but that doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, it's profoundly hard. And yet, I truly believe that it all begins by just taking one step forward and another and another. So my prayer for us is that here at First Congregational, together we will become people of deeper and deeper faith. We will become people who boldly work for justice and peace, who persevere in prayer and who cling to trust. My prayer is that we will seek to live into our faith even when we have trouble believing our faith. And my prayer is we will do all this together – that we will love and support and uphold each other so that no one has to take this risk alone.

And friends, one way we show up is by choosing to support our church with our service and our resources. This afternoon, you will receive an email with a list of ways you can serve in this community. As we get close to the new year, our nominations team is working on recruiting people to serve on our committees and to lead us in doing the work of church. But this is about far more than simply filling a slot on a committee. Service is about using your skills and talents in a way that uplift the whole community. And I'm convinced that every single one of you has something to offer that we need.

And secondly, we show up by supporting the church financially. Today is pledge Sunday. While Matthew plays for us, you are invited to come and place your pledge card in the box on our altar table. If you've already pledged, simply take one of the cards that says, "I've already pledged" and put it in the box as your gift. And friends, please know, that no matter what number is written on your pledge card, your gift matters.

Amen.