PRAYER: RESPONDING TO GOD

Good morning! Today we are going to begin a five-week sermon series on prayer. Since most of us are done with summer vacations and long trips, we are now focused on our jobs and on our work of faith in the church. Second, I believe that God is calling on the hearts and minds of people in this community and they are going to be coming to our church over the next couple of months as the holidays begin again around the end of this month...which is October already.

Therefore, since God is returning our focus on Christ, and God is introducing grace within people of our community, we need to have some basic training on prayer.
So what is prayer? Let me read to you three quotes about prayer:

First, the famous Methodist evangelist E. Stanley Jones said this about prayer: "Prayer is surrender--surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God." E. Stanley Jones, Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome, K Hughes, Tyndale, 1988, p. 73.

Second, the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote this about prayer: "The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it
all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in."

Finally, our founder John Wesley had this to say about prayer: "God's command to "pray without ceasing" is founded on the necessity to preserve the life of God in the soul, which can no more subsist one moment without prayer, than the body can without air.

Whether we think of; or speak to, God, whether we act or suffer for him, all is prayer, when we have no other object than his love, and the desire of pleasing him, this is prayer.

All that a Christian does, even in eating and sleeping, is prayer, when it is done in simplicity, according to the order
of God. Prayer continues in the desire of the heart, even though our focus is employed on outward things.

In souls filled with love, the desire to please God is a continual prayer. (From A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend John Wesley.)

So let me get this straight: prayer is not only words spoken or silently lifted to God, but prayer is also the heart of a Christian that desires only God. That's what I hear from these Christian saints of the past...that prayer is aligning our will with God's will, listening for that otherworldly voice coming from the throne of God, and doing what God has called us to do in loving God and neighbor.

So prayer can be a big part of worship! I'm not only talking about taking time in worship to bow our heads in
prayer, but our whole liturgy this morning as a congregation, our work together, is to align our heart with the heart of God. Every song, every scripture, the offering, the Sacrament, everything we do in worship is an act of prayer...because we are focusing on the Holy Spirit of God. Does that make sense to you? So when people talk about prayer, you will know that prayer is not only about fancy words spoken by the pastor or some chosen person out of a group; prayer is not about telling God a heavenly honey-do list of things we need, neither is prayer something you do to get God's attention.

Prayer is turning our hearts and attention toward God, focusing our eyes upon Jesus, unstopping our ears to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us... and as the gospel
reading today suggests, prayer is being faithful to our calling in God because we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. This is who we are...we must understand that we lose our identity as disciples of Jesus if we do not pray. Or as John Wesley put it, just as we cannot physically live without air, so the soul cannot live without prayer.

Finally, as the sermon title says, prayer is the response to God. I wrote "response to God" because it is God who first turned His attention and heart upon us. From the first moment of our existence, God loved us, you and me, this world, all of creation. "For God so loved the world"...John 3:16 says. Do you believe that God loves you?

The rest of John 3:16 says that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, Jesus.
Jesus was the incarnate love of God, God's love for you and me in the flesh. Everything about Jesus was God's love and mercy demonstrated powerfully in word and deed. Jesus healed the sick, ate meals with outcasts and sinners and by doing so named them as his family. He taught people about God; and how they should pray and respond to that amazing love. Jesus final demonstration of love was by taking his horrible torture and execution on a cross and turning that into an act of love for humanity. "This is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for all people for the forgiveness of sins." God first loved us, turned His attention upon us fully through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and offers this gift of mercy and grace to all of us today.
What is our response? How can we respond to such love?

Prayer! Prayer is turning our eyes upon Jesus, prayer is aligning our heart with God's heart, prayer is listening to that other world, that larger, stronger, quiet life, and prayer is desiring to please God, with no other object of our love, prayer is thinking about Him, talking to Him, reading about Him, and serving Him in everything we do and say. Amen!