



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

On Prayer

January 13, 2019 **Baptism of Christ Sunday**

Text: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with ^{*}the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' ²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. A voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; ^{*}with you I am well pleased.'



Sermon:

Do you have a movie that's remained your favorite for decades? It may even be a movie that's changed your life and the way you look at the world. No matter how many times you have seen it, whenever you revisit it, does that movie still evoke wonder and awe? For me it's the movie *Dead Poet's Society*. If you haven't seen it, then the next time we have one of those wonderful freezing cold days, make sure to watch it. It is set here in New England at a prestigious New England Academy that is fictitiously named *Wilton* for the movie. At Wilton among ivy-coated brick walls, uniformed young boys are sent to a place dripping with history and tradition that they might grow up and become leaders, doctors, lawyers, senators, titans—their path laid out for them both by their parents and their teaches. Their attention is focused on a time-honed curriculum, moving along paths that have been well traveled, but there was one class taught by someone who had also attended Wilton Academy, that was distinct from the others. It was not Latin or business, literature or mathematics, but rather a class of poetry that would change the path and the lives of all those young boys.

The teacher is played by a young and vibrant Robin Williams, who at the time was at the peak of his craft and career. In their very first class together we run headlong into the issue at hand. The boys know that taking poetry is one of the school's requirements; they know that poetry is important because they have overheard their parents talking about poetry and waxing poetic at cocktail hours. But reflected in their faces in that very first class are signs

of resistance, confusion and boredom. Unlike mathematics, logic or Latin, poetry is a subject that defies their collective grasp. It is an intimidating subject that eludes full understanding and yet cannot help but beckon you forward. Rather than controlling, this subject demands that we release our control. Poetry is a class in contradiction to everything else that Wilton is teaching. And yet, it would be that gifted professor—Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams, who brings poetry to life not through understanding but rather because he invites them into the midst of poetry to experience it. Where poetry runs amuck in who they are, it takes them to where they might yet be. The rest of the movie *Dead Poet's Society* demonstrates how through mistake and misstep and sometimes small events and sometimes tragic—those boys in defiance of tradition and even of the highest administrative powers, find a new path and define new ways of thinking, what they value, and the ultimate path they're willing to sacrifice for. Poetry invites them in and compels them forward, even at considerable risk and cost. In today's reading, this is in some ways the first "class" that Jesus conducts. It does not take place in some bucolic New England hill town. It is not in the comfort of brick buildings and roaring fireplaces. Instead it is out along the Jordan River, a shallow meandering kind of river that extends life to its semi-desert shores, fleetingly before it disappears. Jesus is coming to this first class much as Mr. Keating did. It is a class where Jesus comes to take his place among the tradition of his people. Luke writes that Jesus gathers there side by side with all of the people. Luke writes that Jesus came to be part of their hopes and expectations. Jesus came to participate in John's baptism.

You will notice in this morning's reading that Luke gives scant attention to the baptism itself. He says nothing about the ritual or the process; in fact, the only mention of Jesus' baptism is to say that it was done. You see, Luke wants to focus on something else—and that is the theme of his entire Gospel. Luke focuses on the gift that Jesus the teacher invites us to receive; it is the power that will invite us in and compel us forward; it is not poetry that is offered; instead Jesus offers and models for us the gift of prayer. Unlike Matthew, who spells out the details of this event in detail, Luke wants us to focus on this moment when Jesus was praying. The text says that it was when Jesus was praying that the heavens were torn open. It was while Jesus praying that the spirit (not in the form of a flickering flame) but rather in the bodily form of a dove literally descended upon Jesus. Luke tells us that it was while Jesus was praying that the voice of love and affirmation called forth from the heavens claiming Jesus as the beloved.

Luke points our attention to prayer not just to learn what it did for Jesus but instead to see what it might do for us today and now. Here at the first class of Jesus. Luke introduces us to something that will show up time and time again—Jesus going off to pray. It is only in Luke's Gospel that when the crowds pressed in seeking miracles that Jesus retreats to pray. It is in Luke's Gospel that Jesus sneaks away in the middle of the night to pray all night long before choosing the twelve disciples. When he asked the disciples the most fundamental question—who do you say that I am?—Jesus was actually praying. Jesus was praying on top of the mountain when suddenly he was transfigured and the voice called out from heaven. At the last supper, Jesus was praying for Peter that he might have faith; Jesus was praying so hard in the Garden of Gethsemane that his sweat fell like tears; Jesus prayed on the cross for those who crucified him; Jesus prayed at the end of his life—are you getting a bit of a theme here?

At every critical moment in the Gospel of Luke—in matters of joy or pain, in matters of new beginnings or endings, Jesus prays repeatedly over and over again. Eventually the disciples come up to him saying, “Jesus, we see what you’re doing, but we don’t get it. We know that it’s important but it escapes us. Teach us how to pray.” Friends, do we know that prayer is good for us? Have you heard Sunday school teachers talking about praying? And have you ever heard me inviting you to pray? In the middle of our worship at the height of all that unfolds, do we take time to pray? Of course we do, and yet sometimes I think we’re like those boys at Wilton or the disciples in Luke. We hear about prayer so much that we know we should pray and yet sometimes when we get the courage to try, we may obsess over whether we’re getting it right. Finally, if we do settle into a prayer where the whole world fades away, I don’t know about you, but often I find all sorts of extraneous thoughts creeping in that disrupt that moment of peace.

It is intimidating to think about a sermon on prayer, which is so big and has grown into so many different shapes—private and communal, silent and spoken, and confessional or petitional. But today I simply want to stay with Luke and see how his answers through Jesus ministry illuminate how Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. Remember that the disciples first asked how to pray and not *what* to pray. Jesus tells them that praying is not in order to measure up to nor to take control of but rather something to wade into and guide us, nurture us and let us take shelter in. Of the four Gospels, Luke’s portrays the most human side of Jesus. He is at his most vulnerable, and thus Jesus approaches prayer like that of a child crawling up into his parent’s lap. It is in Luke’s Gospel that we receive the words *Abba* for God—a word that connotes Papa or Daddy and a sense of intimacy, closeness and gentleness. Luke’s Gospel provides an invitation to bring the fullest of ourselves, the good and the bad, the proud and the ashamed, into the presence of God, who already knows the fullness of who we are. Looking at Jesus, we see someone who brings everything to God—the connection at the River Jordan, the new beginning offered in the calling of disciples, the exhaustion of healing and the fear or anguish of the road ahead, and even giving over to God what is already God’s in his final breath.

The first thing in learning *how* is letting go of this idea of boundaries of right and wrong. If you read the Psalms, you will encounter the raw and uncensored cries, agonies, and joys of God’s people at prayer. What Jesus wants his disciples to know is just pray—pray—pray—in fact, the apostle Paul will say that your job is to pray unceasingly. Now before you get all worried that I’ve set a bar so high that you can never measure up, and that there are many other things in your day to complete, Paul would say, “Amen.” But the notion doesn’t refer to using every breath to pray—but rather to praying without end. There is nothing in your life—what you have done or left undone—your fears, your worries, your anxieties, your hopes—none of that is off limits for God. In fact, the only thing Jesus wants you to know in Luke’s Gospel is to be fully transparent with who you are, what you’re dealing with, and bring it to God, letting it go that God might point you in a new direction. I can already sense that people are thinking to themselves, “Brent, you’re missing the point. How is it that we’re supposed to pray?” So I want to offer you three very quick things: If you look at Jesus’ example, the first thing you need to do is to find a definite time to pray. How long do you think you should pray? Five minutes? Ten minutes? Thirty minutes or an hour? Yes (to any of the above). But you should pray.

Shane Claiborne leads an inner city ministry in Philadelphia and his newly released book, *A Common Prayer for Radicals*, sets you in a time, place and liturgy for prayer every day for three years. It sets a priority for doing it. Talk to the people who've sat in on the Advent Small Group. They will tell you that reading a devotion every day at the same time matters. So pick a time—no matter how long—and set it aside to pray. The second thing Jesus teaches us in Luke's Gospel is to pick a place. Although this is called a house of prayer, prayer can take place anywhere. Jesus often went to high and holy places like mountains to pray, but Henri Nouwen offers a different idea; he says, 'Pick the same place.' Pick a corner of your living room; better yet, a corner of that den you never use. Set up something that will help guide your focus into the moment, such as a candle or a book, and pray in that place. Over time when you come into that space, you will come into the space of prayer, building confidence that praying works. Jesus would go where no one could find him. But it's not just the absence of distraction; it's a place to be apart, alone, and with God. Finally have a single focus in your prayer. And quite simply—that focus is God. That focus is simply remembering the majesty of something bigger than ourselves, and pour out everything that you have; bring everything, and then what you will notice is what Thomas Merton observed—that once we get used to saying everything on our mind, then we get used to leaving a space for God to respond.

In a book I read several years ago, the author said, "You're going to think I'm crazy, but God talks to me." Jesus wouldn't think he's crazy. Jesus would think the author knows how to pray. Finally, remain faithful. There are a number of stories that are unique to Luke's Gospel, and many of them are about persistence—seeking out God time and time again, even if you don't get it right because it's in the seeking that God will eventually come. The gift of practice is that you will hear less of your own voice and more of God's. The power of prayer is not a transaction. It is not the act of wishes requested and wishes granted. It is the very power of merging with the eternal power of God and allowing a new road to open before you. In closing, I want to offer this prayer that Henri Nouwen thinks might help us to pray:

***"Oh Lord, you search me and you know me, you know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar. You mark when I walk or lie down;
All my ways lie open to you. Before ever a word is on my tongue, you know it,
O Lord, through and through." (Psalm 138)***



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