



What Are We Doing Here?

Week 5: Paying Attention

Heather Blair—03/22/2026

Good morning. During Lent this year, we're talking about prayer. We were inspired by our very own Jack Mattson—who, when Pastor Brian asked him if he'd like to pray one night before bed, said "I don't know, Dad. What are we doing here?" We love those kinds of questions around here. The ones that invite us to take a more intentional look at some of the parts of our faith that can get a little stale and dusty.

So, this Lent we've been working at providing some answers to that question. Not by trying to get us all to think one specific way about prayer. Instead, what we're trying to do is throw the doors wide on prayer—saying, well, we could be doing lots of things when we pray. It's not just this very narrow, "I ask God for what I want and God gives me what I want." or "God tells me what to do and I do it." If that's the only way we think about prayer—no wonder it gets shallow and stale.

I have a house just about a mile south of here. Next door is a rental house. For the first 10 years, my neighbors were a couple who traveled for a living. I almost never saw them. I think we spoke to each other one time in those 10 years. In the summer of 2005 they moved out and the house sat empty for a couple of months. That September I got some

new neighbors. A family of four with two of the cutest little girls. "Now this is what it will be like to have neighbors!" I thought.

It turned out that they were from Louisiana. They had lost their home to Katrina. They didn't have jobs or a car or any family around here. They needed a lot of help. So I did what I could. I crowdsourced a bunch of furniture from my friends. I gave them rides to job interviews and food banks and doctor's appointments. It turned out that they'd lived a lifetime in poverty. Need wasn't something new to them. I started to dread their knock on my door. It became a daily habit for one of them to come ask me for something. And the something was NEVER, "How are you today?" or "Is there something we could do for you?" So, I got resentful. I said yes a whole lot of times when I should have said no. And one day it exploded on us.

The woman had come over to ask me for a ride. I had plans to go out with friends, but she'd made an appointment for some housing help and she couldn't miss it. So, grumbling, I canceled my plans and took her. But she could tell I was mad. On the way home from the appointment she said, "You're mad at me, aren't you? What did I do?"

And in one of my lesser-good episodes I let her have it. Months of pent up frustrations about feeling used and unappreciated. I could tell she was shocked.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I thought we were friends."

"Friends?! Do you realize that every time you come over to my house, it's to ask me for something? You have never once come over just to visit or to see how I am. That's not how friends act!"

“I didn’t realize,” she said—and I could tell she meant it. “To be honest, I’ve never really had a grown up friend. What do grown up friends do?”

Well, that took all the wind out of my sails, for sure. How do you, from scratch, teach somebody to be friends? What do adult friends do? What would you have told her?

I bring that story up now, because whatever answers you have to that question, they probably also start to answer, “What are we doing here?” in a more robust and satisfying way. Prayer, in its simplest terms, is interaction with God. If those interactions are all transactional—what can you do for me, here’s what I can do for you—then what you end up with is a shallow sort of nothing. That is not a relationship. So, we’re throwing the doors of prayer wide open this Lent. We’re not so much asking “What must we do when we pray?” but more, “What *can* we do when we pray?” We’re not asking, “What *must* God do when we pray?” and more, “What *can* God do?” ...and then “What *can* we do together?”

So, in the past weeks we’ve talked about Jesus’ model of what we can do in prayer—the Lord’s prayer. We’ve talked about airing our strong emotions together with God—about lamenting, grieving. We’ve talked about how we *can* ask God for what we want—we just need to do it with our hands a little more open, and our feet a little more ready to be in action. We’ve talked about the power of giving thanks in prayer. Last week we talked about connecting with each other in prayer. That in a very real way, one of the things we’re doing when we pray together is creating an us.

Today, I’d like us to consider another something we *can* be doing when we pray: and that’s paying attention.

How do we have more than a transactional relationship with God? We get to know God. We let God respond, or even initiate. We challenge ourselves to remember there is someone on the receiving end of our prayers. Someone who is the creator of all of this. When we are in dialogue with God, it's like having our own personal guide for all we can and cannot see. In paying-attention prayer, God can show us God's self—but also God can reveal things about *ourselves*, each other, the world around us. That's a whole lot going on in prayer!

In week 2 of this series we spent a lot of time in the Psalms, and with a scholarly expert on the Psalms—a fellow named Walter Brueggemann. The Psalms are helpful in our investigation of prayer because they are prayers. Prayers that the ancient Israelites found so beneficial that they put them in a collection and used them in corporate worship like this.

In his book *Praying the Psalms* Brueggemann says,

“I am struck in powerful ways by how the praying voices in the Psalter are passionately *dialogical*. ...and God is shown to be a full participant in a life of lively dialogue.”

Now, I know we might be venturing into tender territory here. Because, if prayer is a dialogue, that implies that God takes part. And usually the way someone takes part in a dialogue is by speaking. And the notion that God speaks might make some of us cringe for a couple of reasons.

1. We don't know what we mean when people say that. Does God speak audibly? In English? Or only in Latin? Or Ancient Hebrew? Does God speak with a male voice or a female voice? Those are cheeky questions... getting at the idea that a whole lot of us would say we've never heard God speak audibly. So, what does that mean? Is there

something wrong with us? Or do we just not know what we're listening for?

2. Another reason that the idea of God speaking might make us cringe is that The Church has a pretty rotten history of presuming to speak for God but not having that speech align with what we see of God's character. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that today. But I am going to acknowledge that one of the reasons whole generations of people wonder if God speaks is that people have abused that phrasing. Used it to further their own power, prestige, or personal gain. And, I'm so sorry if you have been injured by that.

I'm sorry for your injury. And I'm sorry if it's made you doubt that God participates in our prayer dialogues. Because I do believe that God is participating. I have experienced it. But not in any ways that are all that prestigious. I shared with you all back in May of last year the one time—one time—that I came close to what one *might* describe as audibly hearing God. And it was about... a traffic cone. Seriously. You can find it on YouTube if you want to know more. But the point for today is... 50-some years of life, seminary, 25+ years of vocational ministry, and I've almost sort of maybe heard God speak audibly once. About a traffic cone.

So, I can't say I have "heard" God a lot. But, I would say that I experience God's dialogue all the time. Daily. I wouldn't call what I'm doing to "listening" because it's not an auditory experience. I would call it paying attention—because God's part of the dialogue comes in all sorts of ways. Some people would describe what they do as listening, and what they experience as "hearing"—but I don't. Those words don't really resonate with me. But I'm not bothered either way. In the same way that we're broadening our thoughts about what we *ourselves* might be

doing in prayer, I also want us to broaden our thoughts about what *God* might be doing in response.

And in case you think that's just a cockamamie Heather scheme, let's return to our collection of prayers in the Psalms and see what their examples show.

The Psalms are littered with complaints like this from Psalm 13 in the Message:

**Long enough, God—you've ignored me long enough.
I've looked at the back of your head
long enough. Long enough
I've carried this ton of trouble,
lived with a stomach full of pain.
Long enough my arrogant enemies
have looked down their noses at me.**

But, then at the end of that Psalm... a mere two verses later, there is this affirmation of God:

**I've thrown myself headlong into your arms—
I'm celebrating your rescue.
I'm singing at the top of my lungs,
I'm so full of answered prayers.**

And between those two sentiments, you know what there's not? There's no record of God speaking in the traditional sense. In fact, the times where God speaks in the Psalms are few and far between. It happens in five or six of the 150 Psalms. And yet Breuggemann calls the Psalms *dialogue*. A conversation between two parties.

And even with all the complaints in these prayers, you do see a dialogue. In Psalm 13 the writer accuses God of ignoring him, but he addresses that complaint directly to God. **“You** have ignored me long enough.” So, even in a moment of feeling alone, the Psalmist acknowledges that God is present.

Hearing God speak in the Psalms might be rare, but experiencing God being active and participatory happens in every single one of them. Even in the bleakest of Psalms, God shows up.

But if not by speaking, then how?

Sometimes in reminders of the things God has already done or said—like in Psalm 42:

**When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse
everything I know of you,
From Jordan depths to Hermon heights,
including Mount Mizar.
Chaos calls to chaos,
to the tune of whitewater rapids.
Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers
crash and crush me.
God promises to love me all day,
sing songs all through the night!
My life is God’s prayer.**

Sometimes God shows up through the witness and work of other people like in Psalm 16:

**Keep me safe, O God,
I’ve run for dear life to you.**

**I say to God, "Be my Lord!"
Without you, nothing makes sense.**

**And these God-chosen lives all around—
what splendid friends they make!**

The Psalmist is in trouble, but is also seeing God's provision of support through the people around him.

And then there's my very favorite Psalm for helping us to broaden our concepts of how God participates in our dialogues... Psalm 19:

**God's glory is on tour in the skies,
God-craft on exhibit across the horizon.
Madame Day holds classes every morning,
Professor Night lectures each evening.**

**Their words aren't heard,
their voices aren't recorded,
But their silence fills the earth:
unspoken truth is spoken everywhere.**

**That's how God's Word vaults across the skies
from sunrise to sunset,
Melting ice, scorching deserts,
warming hearts to faith.**

**The revelation of God is whole
and pulls our lives together.**

I think many of us would say we have experienced a connection to God through looking out over the world God created. A sunrise. A sunset. Flowers. Oceans. Madame Day, Professor Night—teaching us the things of God. Their words aren't heard, but their silence fills the earth.

Unspoken truth is SPOKEN everywhere. The revelation of God is WHOLE and pulls our lives together. Revelation in so many ways—creation, our history, our bodies, our thoughts & feelings, Scripture, other people—their silence fills the earth! It's the revelation of all of it that pulls our lives together.

Look, I know many of us go to God looking for a certain answer. Desperate to hear God speak—about which job we should take, or how to deal with a hard relationship, how to treat a frightening illness... “should we do this or that, God? We so desperately don't want to get it wrong. We don't want to disappoint you. We don't want to screw up our own lives or someone else's. So, please, just tell us this one little thing if you're there. I'm listening so hard.”

Meanwhile. The silence of God's presence fills the earth. It's all here for us.

Maybe that seems like a dirty trick. We just want this one thing, we need it, even. But God is not transactional. Not because God doesn't love us. Not because God doesn't respond. But because God *is* loving us, God *is* responding. It's just so much bigger than one particular transaction. So we have to widen the range of what we're paying attention to when it comes to God. That's one of the things we *can* do with prayer.

Look, I believe that God can and does speak to us. I also believe that it takes some practice and a whoooooooooole lot of humility to get the hang of listening. If we want to listen to God, we have to let God speak in the way God speaks.

You know how our ears pick up certain frequencies? But we also know that there's way more noise out there than we can pick up with our

ears. I think that might be a bit of how it is with God speaking. And—this is just me hypothesizing here—tuning into God’s frequency might have a lot more to do with pace than with pitch. God is so rarely in a hurry. Eugene Peterson—the translator of *The Message*—says, “Hurry is a form of violence practiced on time.”

A form of violence practiced on time. We are so often in a hurry in our culture. Whether we’re in crisis or not. But God takes God’s time. We may be able to listen to podcasts at double speed, but we can’t do that in real life. We can’t do that with God. Not even when we’re in a crisis. Prayer doesn’t demand us to say the right thing so that we can hear an answer. Prayer invites us to slow down and pay attention to God however God may show up. Hearing God takes practice, effort—but you know what’s ready right now? Paying attention.

I’d like to close with a poem called “Prayer” by Mary Oliver. In it she captures what *can* happen as we pay attention in prayer:

**It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but a doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.**