

Old Testament Lesson—Exodus 32:7-14

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

New Testament Lesson—Acts 2:37-47

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I probably don't have to tell you that church folks are supposed to take the Bible seriously. Sure, some take it more seriously than others.

Some traditions—other Christian denominations might read it from another perspective, emphasize different parts, interpret its message in ways that seem strange to us.

And that's ok. In fact, I'm glad other groups see Scripture differently than we do. That diversity of perspectives, from where I'm standing, helps everybody. That variety makes all of us smarter. It brings to light ways of knowing Jesus we would've never been exposed to otherwise.

Here's a couple examples. The story of Paul's miraculous jailbreak in the book of Acts lands differently when it's read behind bars...when seen through the eyes of someone serving a life sentence in prison. And I would have to imagine that reading the story of Jesus restoring sight to the blind comes off much differently when it's read through braille.

Lord, I know we're not supposed to covet, but no one would blame you for coveting *those* kinds of perspectives—points of view that open up our worlds and stir our imaginations and kindle our curiosities.

In fact, cultivating lots of perspectives different from our own, I believe, brings us closer to God and brings the words of Scripture to life. Those timeless words are transformed from old stories to *our* story.

And when *that* happens, when we start to see the Bible for what it truly is—not as some old book of rules or outdated source of wisdom or a bunch of weird words—but as an ongoing story—as a creative source of inspiration—as hope for a weary world—and, most importantly, as the best way to get to know Jesus...

What *that* happens...well then, Jesus becomes more than our Lord and Savior...Jesus starts to feel like our friend, our traveling companion...Indeed, what a friend we have in Jesus!

When this happens...We begin to *crave* these stories. We begin to thirst for the promises of God and reminders that we're never alone. We more often take notice of the Spirit's guidance. Our senses truly come alive to Christ's presence in our lives, helping us to taste and see that the Lord is good. (We'll get to that later...)

What a friend we have in Jesus! You know, I really enjoy and appreciate that hymn. What I like most about it is that it really spells out what Jesus' friendship means for us: "What a friend we have in Jesus! Take it to the Lord in prayer." Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Siblings in Christ: Since Jesus is our friend, maybe our truest friend, we can talk to him about anything—no matter what it is. We can and should take whatever's on our hearts and minds to the Lord in prayer. And to be completely honest, it's something we're called to do.

As Presbyterians, we've been outspoken for centuries about how critical education is to our spiritual growth. We've long emphasized the importance of studying the Bible—especially with other people.

And I, personally, am passionate about Biblical literacy. With God's help, I want to help develop your sense of curiosity. I want to help you ask questions and make connections. I want to walk alongside you as you explore this ancient library—this fountain of blessings.

Together, I want us to embrace Scripture as the gift from God it is—to embrace it not as weapon...not as a way to prove yourself right...not to put someone else down or make others feel guilty—but to foster community—to bring us closer to God and each other.

You see, there's something I've noticed about people who've fallen in love with these holy words. Those who really seem to have a hunger for Scripture usually also have deep and devoted prayer lives. The two go hand in hand.

It's the most beautiful cycle, really. We journey into these stories—stories that entice us and confuse us and encourage us. And those stories, by the grace of God, bring us closer to the Source of their inspiration. They transport us to another time, and yet teach us something about our own time.

The more we engage with these stories, the more we want to know and understand this person from Nazareth—this person who lived the most extraordinary life—who left such an impact on his community that generations of people would write down the stories he told—lessons with the power to teach and to heal and to transform.

Scripture points us to that amazing storyteller. And it even shows us how to reach him. Yes, of course we reach Jesus in these pages, but there's an even more direct way to connect with our Savior—not as figure in the past but as the risen Christ who lives right now, today.

Take it to the Lord in prayer. Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Take it directly to your friend—the best friend any of us could ever have: Christ Jesus. Whatever's on your heart. God wants to hear it. All of it—your adoration, your desperation, your joy, your anger, your grief, your frustration, your hopes, your hopelessness, your thanksgiving, your fears, your doubts, your love...all of it—seriously—everything.

Our Creator isn't satisfied with already knowing what's on our hearts and minds. Sure, God already knows what's on our lips before we speak it. God knows what's on our minds before we think it. But that's only a one-way conversation, isn't it?

You see: God shows God's love for us every day. That love is *communicated* to us. We read about it in Scripture. We feel it in our lungs as we breathe. We see it in a sunrise. We'll taste it at the Lord's table surrounded by all the saints.

So I want you to think about something...Think about the joy you feel and experience—that ecstasy and relief you feel and know so viscerally—deep in your soul when the person you love tells you they love you too for the first time. They reciprocate those words. Think back and imagine...There may be nothing greater in this world than that.

That's why our prayers matter so much to God. It's the "I love you, too." And...you see...I believe God hears our "I love you's" just as powerfully and viscerally every single time—as if it were the first time. Our love and prayers are never taken for granted.

Friends: God loves us with a fierceness that never wanes—a love that never gets old or less passionate. God *is* love, after all. Our prayers (whether spoken or cried or signed or lived out in our daily ministries)—those prayers are received and heard with urgency, and warmth, and a love that gives birth to all possibilities.

What a gift! What a precious gift we share! What a friend we have in Jesus.

Is it any wonder why the apostles devoted themselves to prayer? Is it any wonder why the early Church felt called to be good stewards of such an awesome gift? We can and should strive to do the same.

We, too, are called to be responsible stewards of that gift because prayer is powerful. Prayer is powerful not because it changes God, but because prayer changes us. It sends us diving deeper into Scripture. It keeps us closely connected to the Giver of hope and the Prince of Peace.

Prayer builds community and surrounds the sick like a warm blanket. And our prayers hold within them the seeds of change this world needs to overcome any evil.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

As I wrap this up, I can't help but wonder...Well, I've been wondering all week: What were the prayers the apostles devoted themselves to? Which ones, exactly? I wish Luke would've told us.

But, if I were to guess...I'd say perhaps the Lord's Prayer, right? Maybe the famous *Shema* from Deuteronomy: *Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* Could've been the beautiful priestly prayer from Numbers: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.* Good guesses, right?

But I'm almost certain one of those prayers was simply, "God: I love you, too." Amen.