

Immanuel United Church  
October 23, 2022  
Proper 25 – Peace Sabbath

**Welcome & Announcements**  
**Centering Music**

**Call to Worship:**

God's Spirit is poured out on all people!

**All of us!**

We shall all dream dreams!

**All of us!**

We shall share our visions.

**All of us!**

We all search out God's peace.

**All of us!**

Let all of us worship God!

**Opening Prayer:**

**God of healing and wholeness,**

**We come in worship,**

**Earnestly desiring peace in our world, not war;**

**Peace within our families and communities;**

**Peace in our hearts and in our relationship with you.**

**Grant us peace, O God,**

**And help us to remember and honour**

**All who have worked for,**

**Who have yearned for,**

**And who have died for peace.**

**May it be so,**

**Amen.**

**Hymn:** VU#375 Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness

**Prayer Seeking Reconciliation and Words of Assurance:**

Loving God, when we see ourselves as being a cut above others,

**Bring us down to earth.**

Loving God, when we insist on our own way,

**Enable us to understand what that means to those close to us.**

Loving God, when we ignore the crying needs around us,

**Wake us up to respond to them.**

Loving God, when we are full of our self importance,

**Put a child in our midst.**

Loving God, when we trumpet our own greatness,

**Show us the paths that lead to humility**

**And ultimately to peace.**

*(silent prayer and reflection)*

## Words of Assurance

**Sung Response: VU#951 Santo, Santo, Santo/Holy, Holy, Holy**

**Scripture:** Joel 2: 23-32  
Luke 18: 9-14

## Choir Anthem      The Everlasting Arms

### Reflection

Can any one name the topic of the day found in our scriptures today? Anyone paying attention? Well, the most obvious one is prayer, right? We all know that we are called to be prayerful people, taking time in our everyday lives to offer up prayers of thanksgiving, concern, desire, forgiveness... whatever. And we are reminded time and again, by scripture and by what we hear said in church that God hears our prayers, and in God's wisdom offers us answers. Although, the response we get isn't always what we wanted.

But this morning, our two characters ---the Pharisee and the dreaded tax collector (whom we know all about) --raise the question of "how on earth are we supposed to pray?" For this morning we have a story of contrasts. The Pharisee, the holy temple priest, went up to the temple to pray. He struck a pose, in a place where everyone would see him, looked up to heaven and prayed: "*Oh God I thank you that I am not like other people --robbers, crooks, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week, and tithe on all my income.*"

That's a pretty succinct prayer: here's how good I am and wow, look at all the great things I do.

Meanwhile, the tax collector was somewhere in the shadows, slumped, face turned downwards beating himself in the chest, praying:

*"God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner."*

Again, short and to the point. And of the two, we are told that it is the tax collector, not the holy Pharisee, that goes home right with God. The moral of the story, the teaching that we are to take away with us is not to be haughty in prayer, but to be ourselves. For if we are content to be simply ourselves, we will become more than ourselves.

We are to pray as ourselves. What does that mean for us, folk who gather every Sunday in our chairs, and communally close our eyes when the minister says: "let us pray"? How many of us try to pray as who we are rather than how everyone else is doing it? How are we supposed to pray?

Anne Shirley, the quirky main character of the book *Anne of Green Gables* speaks quite candidly about how she thinks prayer should happen. She says:

"Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to prayer I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go our into a great big field all alone or into the deep, deep woods, and I'd look up into

the sky –up up up up into the lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness  
And then I'd just FEEL a prayer.”

Anne simply brings herself to her prayer. No worries about being right or doing the proper things. She is simply standing in creation, open to its beauty and feeling a prayer. It is a true openness to God.

Prayer is the most universal expression of the presence of God. We express devotion, rage, submission, despair, hope, joy, and other emotions in prayer. Often we plead in prayer. While I was ministering in Walseley I ran a bible study called the Gospel According to the Simpsons where a multi-aged group of people gathered to watch an episode of the Simpsons and then have conversation about certain aspects of the show. In one such gathering we watched an episode called “Bart Gets an F”. In this particular episode, Bart faces the reality of being held back in 4<sup>th</sup> grade if he doesn't pass a history exam. Desperate, Bart prays:

*Well, old timer, I guess this is the end of the road. I know I haven't always been a good kid, but if I have to go to school tomorrow, I'll fail the test and be held back. I just need one more day to study Lord. I need your help! A teacher's strike, a power failure, a blizzard...anything that will cancel school tomorrow. I know its asking a lot, but if anyone can do it, you can! Thank you in advance Bart Simpson.*

At some point in our praying careers, most of us have prayed a prayer similar to this. Maybe not using those exact words but still searching for God's help regardless.

We most often think of prayer as something spoken. Bart's prayer is done kneeling at the side of his bed. But Anne Shirley speaks of feeling a prayer. She helps us to see that prayer can happen in different ways. What we say, what we do, and how we do it all expresses God's presence, when we are prayerful, when we are open to God.

When asked to picture prayer in terms of where it happens, most people imagine it arising inside of the. And be clear, there is an ancient precedent for this. The sixth century Christian Mystic St. Isaac the Syrian wrote:

“Enter eagerly into the treasure house that lies within you, and so you will see the treasure house of heaven. The ladder that leads to the kingdom is hidden within you.”

We continue this tradition every time I encourage you to take time for silent prayer.

Our modern understanding may be somewhat more literal. We often see prayer as happening like this: an emotion or an idea wells up inside of us that needs words to express it; the emotion or idea somehow transfers to our brains; there we process the language needed to put it into words. We have been conditioned to think that prayer is mostly a mental activity –that it is in some way located in our brains alone.

There are exceptions of course. Many of us who pray believe with the psalmist of the Hebrew Scriptures that there are time when we cannot give words to our feelings –when only sighs alone are possible. We may experience prayer this way, especially when faced

with a great loss. When the hurt runs too deep that there are not enough words. But even this view of prayer pictures the process in the same way –as a mental process. Our brain either finds the right words for our feelings or it doesn't.

Aside from whether or not our feelings, ideas and brains work this way, aside from following the “prayer formula”, this common view of how prayer should or ought to work does not take into account how our bodies are or are not involved in prayer. We use our bodies to express ourselves in spiritual ways –and these physical expressions can be prayers, too. For example, one way to show humility to God's presence is to prostrate oneself, or bow at the waist, or simply bow the head. Are these expressions any less meaningful than a spoken prayer, such as “Lord, have mercy?”

It may be as simple as holding your hands open during the prayers of the people, an action symbolizing your openness to God's presence. Several years ago, I had the privilege of attending the committal service of a dear friend and her partner. During the prayers of the people, the worship leader invited us to cup our hands together, for by doing so we transformed our hands into cups of blessings, hope and love for the couple. We embodied the prayer, adding more than words alone could or would express. Think about grace said around a family meal. We often join hands together, enhancing the feeling of connection we have to one another. In our household, we hold hands and say what we are thankful for. No formal “O God” s or “Dear Lords. Just the simple act of holding hands and words of gratitude. Crying, laughing, sighing, singing...these are all bodily prayers and responses to our spoken prayers. And these physical responses or body prayers add another dimension to our prayer life...a dimension that may not have been easily expressed through words.

Just before ending, I want you to consider for a moment, a statement made by Jewish mystic and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, author of the book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Anyone heard of him? Amazing man. In describing his experience of marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in Alabama, he said: “My feet were prayer.” I want you to sit with that for a moment...My feet were prayer.

The meaning in our heads, in our words can become the meaning in our bodies. When we use our bodies and our minds with spiritual intent, with a willingness to be open to God's presence in us, then both words and actions become sacred. Sometimes there bodily actions accompany spoken prayers; sometimes they are prayers in and of themselves. No matter how it is done, prayer is the constant conversation we hold with God, an open, direct, vulnerable connection with the Holy. A connection that goes both ways.

May it be so,  
And let us pray:

**Hymn:** VU#661      Come to my Heart

**Offering**

**Offertory: MV#191          What Can I Do?**

**Offering Prayer**

**God, we dedicate these gifts  
In honour of the gifts you bestow on Creation.  
You visit the earth and water it,  
You greatly enrich it;  
You provide the people with grain,  
For you have prepared the world for abundance.  
Let our gratitude be our promise  
To speak your peace to all  
Of the earth,  
So no one suffers.  
Amen**

**Prayer of the Community & The Prayer of Jesus**

**Hymn: VU#418      Go Forth for God**

**Commissioning and Benediction**