Introduction:

Prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness are foundational in being a part of the United Methodist Church, and over the past 4 weeks, we have been looking at what they mean for us. Through our witness, service, gifts, and presence, we have been able to see the diversity of what it means to be committed to God. Today, we finish our series by looking at Prayer, and what better way, then to start with prayer.

Let's pray:

O Creator and caretaker of us all, we call you many names, yet none describe you fully. As we think about prayer today, we are reminded we need to stop to share our sorrows, our petitions, our thanks, and our praise to you each and every day. In these moments, we can be rest assured that you renew us. Let us worship you today in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-6

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **5** Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Sermon: The Stop that Keeps Us Going

Throughout the United States, there are many of us who struggle to understand the differentiation of United Methodism from any other Protestant Christian Church. Many mush everyone together as Christian, and for most of us, it's good enough. Being a United Methodist really means something. Part of WHO we are is based on our vow when we were baptized AND when we became members. In that vow, as you may remember from last week when I mentioned it, we agree and proclaim: "we renew our covenant to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

Going backwards, we've looked at what it means to witness or share Jesus with the world in what God is already doing. We looked at what it means to be in service in our area through care and compassion with those who are homeless, have food insecurity, clothing insecurity, are incarcerated, or have

depression, anxiety, loneliness, and so much more. In our remembrance of gifts, we learned that we are asked to not only give financially, but with what God has given us, like teaching, discerning, sharing wisdom, speaking, and more. Presence brought us to a place of remembering why our physical presence within our church makes a difference. When we are together, we are whole, and we are better together.

As we approach prayer today, we may find ourselves wondering how this topic could be anything more than we already know. And some may go as far as to think that there are plenty of times like before meals and before meetings that prayer really doesn't influence much or make a difference. Maybe it is the way we approach conversations with God?

Throughout Christian tradition, we have traditionally learned to fold our hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes. It's interesting that we bow our heads down, while God is up, BUT the reason is because we are showing our humility by giving God the most vulnerable part of our heads as we pray. (Fun tidbit for you this morning.)

I know that it wasn't until after seminary, when I felt comfortable doing anything else than folding my hands, bowing my head, and closing my eyes, even small changes. Now, you may notice, I open my palms upward while I pray. A simple gesture that shows my openness to God to fill me with wisdom, words, and for me to send my prayers not only through my words but my hands. No matter how we choose to be in an attitude of prayer, it's important for us to see the deepness of what prayer is.

Praying is about taking the time to **let God recreate us**, and I don't mean in the sense of starting something completely new. In a song in our hymnal, we sing, "Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me." As an artist who sculpts, paints, composes, God is constantly trying to shape us as the curveballs of life hit us. God isn't one who says, "Well, I guess that will have to do." And he doesn't say, "Well, I guess I will need to destroy that one and start over. That was a mistake." Instead, we are never given up on. We are wonderfully made, and constantly shaped. God is recreating us through prayer.

Prayer is not only about letting God recreate us, but it is also a **form of thinking**. "It is yearning for the presence of God, for a personal understanding of God's word, for knowledge of God's will and for capacity to hear and obey." **"Prayer is an intense inward openness."** Not only to give desperations and praise, but to receive. Receive understanding, knowledge of will, and a push for what we are doing next. God is recreating us and we are accepting God's guidance through prayer.

Prayer is **wandering**. Author David Hansen even reminds us, "We only control our thoughts with people we don't trust. When we stop telling ourselves what to pray about, then a less organized resource of thought can transform our prayer." Prayer then becomes less self-centered and more God-centered. In another sense, prayer is wandering because we can recognize that we may pray best while we are moving; after all, King David, in the book of 2 Samuel, danced, rather than falling asleep to the drudge that we call 10-minute prayers. Take, for instance, prayer walks. The prayer will be longer because walking keeps the body alert. The prayer will be broader because moving past homes, churches, schools, and businesses reminds us to pray for individual persons and community concerns that never would have entered the mind otherwise." **God is recreating us, we are accepting God's guidance, and we can engage authentically as prayer wanderers.**

There are other aspects of prayer that we could also go over, but I want to shift us into one other aspect about our vow of prayer: the answering of prayers. I know that when I think about the idea of answered prayers it makes me a little squirmish. I think about all of the people who either live by their answered prayer or wonder why God didn't answer their prayer. To that extent, I just say, sometimes God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we want God to answer them.

I am very excited about the way God is answering our prayers at Reedsburg United Methodist Church, and because of our Exploding Hope campaign, I'm going to focus on the financial ones this morning. Over the last month or so, we have been expressing our excitement about our Bridging Tree. This tree represents our efforts to bridge the gap between our budget deficit and the

important ministry that we are doing. So far we have raised $760! Let's keep taking those leaves off, and bridging more of the gap. Remember our pledges go towards our tithes and offerings which is our bare bones budget.

On Memorial Day weekend, we passed out and then mailed a letter about our Exploding Hope campaign, which I mentioned just a moment ago. The Exploding Hope Campaign is a way for our leadership to best anticipate where we will be financially at the end of the year AFTER we announced our financial reserves update. By participating in our Exploding Hope campaign, we are saying yes to ensuring that the dynamic and powerful ministry that we are doing within and outside of our building explodes in the ways that God is calling us to. God can do miracles, but expects us to work with him.

Of the 35 pledging families in our church, nine have turned in an Exploding Hope updated pledge card which increases our tithes and offerings for the rest of the year by $6,755! That's amazing! On top of that, we have recognized that out of our 35 pledging families, 15 have increased their giving even though we haven't received Exploding Hope Cards yet! But, don't fret. We have them in the bulletins today! If you have not already pledged, we still would love to see your Exploding Hope pledge as it helps us to anticipate what needs we may have in the second half of this year. Pledging helps us figure out what the future holds.

God is answering our prayers for continued ministry in Reedsburg. So, as we see our vow of prayer, may we be reminded God is recreating us constantly. We are accepting God's guidance consistently. We can engage authentically as prayer wanderers. God is answering our prayers in ways that we can't imagine. Amen.