This is the second message in the series “God of Wonders!” as a part of our Stewardship Campaign 2023. As I shared last week, the idea of this theme reflects the many stories in the Bible and our lives where we see God moving in amazing ways.

Last week we learned how wonderful things happen when we offer ourselves to serve selflessly. We learned the story of Esther and how she acted bravely to save her people, offering herself in service on their behalf. We said that through service, we experience fulfillment and create a healthy environment of mutual care that blesses us and those around us.

Today, we are learning how wonderful things happen when we pray. To pray is one of the vows we make when we profess our faith and join a United Methodist Congregation, “As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?”

Just as service, prayer is a tenet of Christian teaching. Here is Jesus teaching us how to pray,

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Evidently, in this prayer, Jesus tells us that through prayer we praise God, ask for his will to be done, and provide for our needs; we also confess our sins and ask for strength to overcome sinful behaviors.

What else is prayer? How does it work? What does it do to us? And why is it central to our discipleship? Let’s start with a Scripture from the letter of the apostle James,

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

In this letter, James addresses Christians who are experiencing many challenges. In the broader context of the letter, he talks about temptation, hypocrisy, discrimination, gossip, the secularization of faith, judging others, pride, and other causes of contention and suffering. James was instructing and encouraging the church to be responsible stewards of their faith. He told them, “Manage your faith responsibly and don’t fall back into old behaviors or give in to sinful ones.”

So, as James ends his letter, he emphasizes a critical element for healthy faith development: prayer. James wants us to pray. Why is that? Because whether we are struggling with temptation, with how we treat people, or with our hope about our future, one thing holds everything together: Prayer. James says: are you suffering, happy, sick, committing sins? Pray, for “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Prayer is what brings us closer to God. Prayer is what helps us experience God’s presence. Prayer affirms our faith by nurturing our minds, hearts, and spirits. Prayer is what makes our relationship with God tangible. Prayer aligns our lives with God. That is why Jesus says, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This is the same as if we were praying, “Whatever is happening in heaven, make it happen here and in my life.” This is the power of prayer.

James has this in mind when he says that prayer is a powerful gift to overcome our challenges when we are struggling, suffering, and in need. Aligning our lives with God is what makes things right. And to do that, we must act on our faith and pray.

Nevertheless, as I read the letter, some things are missing. What about praying for stuff? I want my stuff! Right? James seems to be forgetting that often our concerns are not about aligning our lives with God but getting the stuff we want. Well, he knew we would be thinking like that, so he also said in 4:3, “You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.” I wouldn’t say I like that, Mr. James. I feel seen!

There is nothing wrong with asking for stuff; we just need to be honest. I mean, we can’t fool God. It is like when Jesus prayed asking to be spared from dying on the cross, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39)

I love this prayer of Jesus because it teaches us that we don’t have to pretend we are ok when we are not or that we don’t want something when we do. It shows us that we can truly be ourselves when we pray and let go of all pretension. Let’s just not make the mistake of thinking that prayer is like a Genie’s lamp. When we treat prayer as a Genie’s lamp, it makes our relationship with God transactional, sayings things like, “If you do this for me, I will do that for you. Promise!” And then, when we don’t get what we want, we get upset and turn away, saying things like “God is not real, God does not care,” etc. Don’t make that mistake.

As is said before, the evidence that prayer is powerful is not in always getting what we want but in getting closer to God so that we experience heaven in our lives—even while here on earth with all the lackings, struggles, and diseases.

James makes this point when he describes some life’s circumstances, saying, “If you are suffering, then you should pray to God. If you are cheerful, then you should sing praise to God. If you are sick, call for the elders to pray. If one has committed sins, pray to be forgiven.” The point of these verses is that God needs to be central in our lives, no matter the circumstances. Whatever is happening in your life, God is in the middle of that, whether good or bad—and prayer is what makes it happen. When God is a part of your life in such a way, you can overcome anything.

Does this sound like a transaction or a relationship?

Let me tell you a story about my prayer life and what happened to me when I was a teenager—just a few years ago.

One day, I was walking in a park, praying and conversing with God about what was happening to me. During that time, I was experiencing a revival in my faith and was passionate about serving God, so I sought God in solitude. I think I was 17 years old then. I remember it was a cold, cloudy day. There was no one near me, I could not see anyone as far as my sight reached, and it was quiet.

So, as I was praying and thinking about my newfound faith (meaning, faith just got real) with joy and excitement, I asked God: “If you want me to serve you, give me a sign. If this is you putting these desires in my heart, show me.” I am sure I said a lot more, but that was the basic conversation.

And then, something happened. Someone pushed me forward as I was praying in my mind and mumbling words as whispers. I turned and looked all around me, and there was no one. I could not understand what had just happened but quickly realized that God was answering my prayer, pushing me forward, letting me know, “The path is set. Step on it, act on the faith I have given you.”

Through that experience, I experienced encouragement, hope, and confidence about my future. Soon after, I met my wife, and the rest is history. Thank God for prayer! When I aligned my life with God, everything started to fall into place. My only concern was to remain faithful. It was like when Jesus said, “Your heavenly Father knows what you need. So, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6: 32-33)

I am a witness to that. I have had struggles. I have failed. I have made mistakes. But I also have experienced miracles because I care about the relationship more than the stuff. I have been blessed in so many ways. But most importantly, I have kept the faith. Without prayer, I could not have done it.

So, this is what prayer is: Prayer is an attitude and behavior that help us to relate to God and keep our faith. Prayer connects us to God and gives us the ability to see ourselves and the world through God’s eyes. Prayer gives us wisdom as we read the Bible and listen to God speak to us, and this wisdom is what rearranges our lives to be blessed. Prayer gives us courage in the midst of adversity and makes us stronger when we are falling apart. Prayer makes wonderful, even miraculous, things happen.

When we understand prayer like that, we are transformed, our thoughts change, our attitudes change, and the way we talk and treat people changes. Then, we begin to have glimpses of true joy and contentment. Our concerns are not about what we have but who we are because prayer is not a means for personal gain but a source of life. And, paradoxically, when we become less attached to stuff, often, that is when we have more of everything.

Here is the invitation and good news: Pray, keep God central in your lives, align yourselves with God’s kingdom, nurture your relationship with God, and focus more on who you are than on what you have. If you do this, you will gain confidence, trust, and bravery to face any challenges before you. You will get a new sense of direction, vision, and purpose for your lives. And you will get the clarity and wisdom to choose the right path before you for your family and yourselves.

Now, I will not leave you without some practical advice on how to pray. So, here are three ways of praying that I practice: (1) Talk with God, have a conversation about anything; (2) Pray on behalf of others, this is called “Intercession;” (3) Pray with the Bible, as you read the Bible, pray the thoughts that come to mind, what you are learning and experiencing.

Prayer is one of the wonders that God has given us as a gift when we act on our faith and do it. So, pray.