

Message: Come in, the water's great!**Do you like going to the beach? What do you like to do there?**

Some of us go for the sun, some for the relaxation, some to watch people, some for the exercise and some go for the family time; there are a lot of reasons. I have another question: what's one activity that you see people of all ages and types doing? Spending time in the water. Everyone likes to go in the water in some way.

For some of us, it means walking on the beach, getting our feet wet, and running when the waves come in so our clothes don't get wet. For toddlers and young children, it's often their first experience of the ocean with Mom or Dad close by, introducing them to it. For older children, it means playing on the beach and in the surf, in the shallowest water under the watchful eyes of their parents or guardians.

For our teens, it means going deeper into the water, past waist deep, out to where the waves lift and carry you for short distances. At some point, you graduate to swimming further, surfing or snorkeling, out in deeper water. Those are good experiences, but that's not all of them.

If you go to the beach early in the morning, you'll see boats loaded with people and scuba gear. There are a variety of destinations. Some are headed to shallow waters and underwater sights, like kelp beds or other attractions. Others go out further, exploring deeper vistas like wrecks. Finally, there are those who go out to the “deep blue,” to swim out over the abyss, where the ocean floor plunges down out of sight, where we struggle to grasp the vast expanse before us.

For those who are on the beach, enjoying and exploring the surf and waves, the idea of deep water may be scary and seem threatening. It's not something they're familiar with. That's what prayer is like.

Entering into prayer is like going into the water. God is the source of the living water that gives eternal life (John 4:13.14). When we go into the presence of God, even if it's to ask “are you there?”, we're entering the stream of living water that flows from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1). We're changed by the experience. Being ourselves in God's presence is refreshing, cool and invigorating, just like water at the beach. Going further into God's presence takes us further and further away

from shore, out of our comfort zone. That kind of prayer is scary and feels risky, but the experience changes us in ways that’s hard to describe to those who haven’t had the experience. That’s why it’s hard to understand the writing of the mystics; those mothers and fathers of faith who spend a lifetime devoted to deep prayer.

There’s another way our trip to the beach teaches us about prayer. I’m thinking about how we’re stewards of prayer. What we do when go to the beach is similar to the way we pray in our personal life, with our family, in church and in our neighborhoods.

I can hear what some of you’re thinking: pastor’s lost it. Maybe he had a little too much whipped cream last night? I’m fine. Just hear me out. In the first century, a steward was a manager in the household. The steward wasn’t the owner. In the Bible, the word steward refers to a servant or even a valued slave. The steward was the one the owner left in charge, the one who helped with the important matters of the house, freeing the owner to be able to focus on other matters.

I invite you to think about what it means to be a steward in God’s house. Some of you’re groaning right about now. That’s because the word stewardship is typically synonymous with a request for giving or pledges. Giving is important for us to do ministry. That’s one aspect of stewardship, but it’s not the only one. Stewardship isn’t solely about money. It’s about our whole life. Please look at your bulletin. Let’s read the line that appears below the date together. As members of Corona UMC, we “dedicate to God our prayer, presence, giving, service and witness.” This is what we promised when we were baptized or joined the church. What’s first on the list? Prayer is. As those who’re part of God’s house, we’re called to be good stewards of our prayer life.

What does stewardship of prayer mean? Here are a few questions to consider: how do you manage your personal prayer life? Why do you pray? When do you pray? How and where do you pray? This applies to all of us, regardless of our age, spiritual maturity, income or ability. There’s no grade. God wants you to be yourself and be willing to open yourself up to the presence of the Holy Spirit. No matter whether you’re walking in the surf, floating on the waves or headed out to deep water, God’s inviting you to come in and have fun: the living water’s great!

How do you manage the prayer life in your home? All of us are family members or have roommates and friends. If you’re a parent, grandparent, guardian, aunt or uncle, or godparent, we have a responsibility to those who’re younger or less spiritually mature. We need to introduce them to prayer, making it a fun and meaningful experience. Once those who’re spiritually immature learn it’s safe to go into the living water, they’ll be more open and willing to try new experiences, expanding their comfort zone. Note: this isn’t a “do as I say” situation. We have to lead by example.

How do we manage prayer in our community of faith? Are you always the person who refuses to participate in prayer or who always abstains from prayer in a group? For some of us, the idea of praying out loud is scary, so we hesitate. We’re afraid we’re going to make a mistake. We’re afraid we’ll forget something. We’re afraid we’ll say someone’s name wrong. We’re afraid of speaking in public because we feel vulnerable. Paul teaches us, “*My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians 12:9). We may not feel up to it, but the Holy Spirit always is. Trust God. Pray. You’ll be amazed at the positive way it lifts others up.

Some of us feel prayer is only meant to be private and personal.

Jesus said, “... *where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them*” (Matthew 18:20). Acts 2:42 shows us how the disciples lived: “*The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers.*” And in the Old Testament, the common practice was to come together to pray to God. There are many stories about what God told kings, prophets and every day people through prayer. Others overheard and serve as witnesses. For example, Jesus didn’t write the account of his prayers in the garden of Gethsemane, did he? There’s a time and place for prayer when we’re with others who believe. It may feel like we’re getting pretty far out in the water – the waves lift us and we can’t feel the bottom, but it’s a good, healthy experience. It teaches us to rely on God together.

Finally, there’s the “deep blue” experience of prayer. When we’re stewards of prayer outside our congregation, it means going into our neighborhood and community to intentionally pray for others, for God’s

creation and for the problems and challenges of the world. That means praying for who may not believe, those who have another faith and even those who're opposed to our beliefs. Paul teaches us, “*the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit pleads our case with unexpressed groans*” (Romans 8:26).

Prayer is the simplest way to touch another person's life. It's the easiest way to be a blessing without putting the person on the spot. And as we grow in faith and confidence, the Lord will give us opportunities to be a blessing to others in prayer.

There's one, last question to ask: what do we pray for?

“I think our dreams and prayers are too small. I don't mean we should be asking for bigger houses, new cars or nice vacations – those are the dreams of those who have forgotten they're stewards, not owners. I'm not suggesting we should sink ourselves deep into debt ‘in faith’ – that's doesn't honor God any more than puny prayer requests do.

What would a big, God-sized dream be?”¹

- How about asking God if we could establish a “life center” for families in Corona or perhaps Eastvale? And then planting a new church there?
- How about praying we could start a new annual mission trip to another country? Perhaps a group of adults and youth could spend time working with our missionary Mozart Adevu in Africa?
- How about praying God would turn Corona UMC upside down with teens who're following Jesus in bold and radical ways? Or asking that a dozen of our youth go into the ministry as youth leaders, pastors, and missionaries?
- What if we made a significant investment in family ministries, which is something we don't really know how to do very well, yet it's something that would change our lives and our neighborhoods for the better, investing in the future?
- What if we made the investment to bring in trainers and send our youth leaders to conferences to learn how successful churches reach and engage middle school and high school students, their parents and

¹ <http://www.livinglifereformed.org/stewards-prayer/>

families? And then expanded our worship services, added small groups or even built a coffee house for ministry? Or asked our youth what they need to experience God’s presence and share it with other youth?

If those dreams sound impossible, then you’re catching on. A

steward makes requests based on the master’s wealth and power – not on his or her own ability. If our dreams are too small, then it’s clear we’re expecting to accomplish them with our strength and resources. If we’re not praying at all, then we need to ask if we’re acting like stewards.

Consider this bold prayer by Paul in Ephesians 3:19-21,

“I ask that you’ll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen” (CEB).

Where do we start? How do we learn to become better stewards of prayer? I think it’s simple: spend time with God. The first and best place to find God is in Scripture. That’s why pastors through the ages ask, “are you reading your Bible regularly?” The second, best place to find God is in prayer, whatever form that may be.

John Owen said, “In the divine Scriptures, there are shallows and there are deeps; shallows where the lamb may wade, and deeps where the elephant may swim.”² When we meditate and pray on God’s Word, we’re like those who go to the beach. Some of us go to remain safely in the shallows, while others go to explore the mysterious depths that are beyond our knowledge, imagination or experience.

Here’s an expression you may have heard: when we read God’s Word, God’s Word reads us. Hebrews 4:12 teaches, *“the word of God is living and active, ... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* Sometimes we read a verse in the Bible over and over and never really feel anything different. Then, one day, perhaps when we’re in a different situation or frame of mind, we read the same verse and – wham!, the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a new way, revealing something

² https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/johnowen193467.html?src=t_elephant

new to us. It’s an amazing, even a startling thing when it happens. The best way to experience it is by meditating on the Bible through prayer.

Our prayer movement for today is lectio divina or divine reading.

It’s a form of prayer we can use to meditate on specific Scripture passages or, for those ready for a deeper dive, to pray through the Bible. It helps us, no matter what age we are.

Experience is the best teacher, so I invite you to join me in the spiritual practice of divine reading.

[spiritual exercise – see lectio divina guide]

Gracious God, we thank you for opening our hearts and minds and feeding our spirits in a new way this morning. In Jesus’ name, amen.

1 John 3:2 (NRSV)

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Philippians 4:4-9 (NRSV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.