



Building Bonfires

Week 1 Prayers & Presence

Brian Mattson - 10/12/2025

We are starting a new series today called *Building Bonfires*. It's a series about how the things that we bring together are so much more than the sum of their parts. And what we are trying to build here, as a church, is a bonfire. Not a little campfire to cook a couple hot dogs on. A massive bonfire that everyone can cook their own food on. A bonfire with enough warmth to share with anyone who stops by. A bonfire that has been carefully constructed so there's plenty of fuel for it to burn for a long time. And trust me, I know a thing or two about fires. I'm an Eagle Scout, for goodness sake!

And not just a run-of-the-mill Eagle Scout. An award-winning Eagle Scout. You see, one year I went to a cold weather campout called the Klondike Derby, and at this event, each troop performs a skill at a series of stations. One of those rotations was fire building and my troop absolutely dominated the competition.

There was a string about 36" off the ground that was tied between two stakes. Each troop had to build a fire whose flames would rise high enough to burn through the string. Whichever troop did it the quickest was the winner and got the points for that station. While we were waiting, we watched another troop carefully build a log cabin out of small sticks they found and they added larger ones to grow the flames and eventually burn

through the string. We heard they registered the fastest time so far—just over two minutes.

We decided that they had a good model for how to build the fire, but with a few tweaks, we thought we could do it quicker. We were given the instructions: we could only gather what was around, we only got three matches, and there was no blowing on the flames to increase their size. We made a plan to build more of a pyramidal structure to increase the height and when the timer started, we broke up and started assembling.

Some gathered larger sticks, some got kindling, while a few others got some dried leaves. As we lit the first match the flames jumped off the dried leaves, but quickly fizzled before igniting the sticks. One astute adult leader mentioned maybe we should try those dried out pine needles close by. Some people say there are no shortcuts in life or success, but there are most definitely shortcuts in Scouting. The first handful of pine needles hit the quickly dwindling flames and the flames jumped again. Higher and hotter and longer than just dried leaves. We quickly abandoned our plans of building a proper fire and sent everyone to the pine needle stockpile and we just started dumping them onto the fire.

Those flames grew quickly and in less than a minute, we snapped that string and the cheers from our troop pierced the air. There is no joy like a bunch of Scouts stoking a fire and finding loopholes in the system. Just as quickly as the flames grew, they diminished. It was a fire built for one thing, and one thing only.

Maybe a year after that, I was at Scout summer camp at Camp Arrowhead. On one of the evenings, all the scouts gathered before sunset at the amphitheater for a sunset ceremony. The focal point of the amphitheater was a giant fire ring with the largest and most well prepared bonfire I've ever seen. The sticks, logs, and kindling had been carefully constructed into a proper log cabin fire. Perhaps it was because of my age or my inexperience,

but this memory is seared into my brain and is probably where my love for outdoor fires was cemented.

I have no clue what the leaders talked about that night, but I remember that fire. My troop was sitting near the back and I was bummed we weren't closer to the fire, afraid we wouldn't get to see it that well or feel the heat and hear the crackle. As the sun was dropping and darkness overtook the light, a scout wandered out from the trees with a few things in his hands: flint and steel to produce a spark, a piece of felt, and a ball of shredded sticks, dried grasses, and other fire starting materials. Envision something that looked like a deconstructed bird's nest. He made his way through rows and rows of scouts with rapt attention. Scouts like fire, you see. He knelt down near the fire. The darkness and distance construed just exactly what he was doing, but we heard a clink then saw a spark. He caught that spark in the felt cloth, placed it inside of the bird's nest, blew on it and shook it in the air and the ignition of flames was astounding. If our attention was rapt before, we were now spellbound, awestruck over this magician in our midst.

As he blew on the flames, he placed the bird's nest into the log cabin, and in a matter of minutes, those small flames grew into a roaring campfire. A bonfire, large enough to be seen and felt at the back of the amphitheater. We were no longer squinting in darkness, but our wide eyes were glued to the dancing flames that lit up this clearing in the woods. This was a fire built for everyone, providing light and warmth for a long time. As we walked back to our campsites that evening, we could still hear the bonfire crackling for quite some time, and the glow from the flames danced off the trees as we walked.

That's exactly what we're trying to accomplish at The Downtown Church. We aren't building a fire that burns fast and dies out. No, we are doing our best to carefully construct a bonfire that burns for a long, long time. A bonfire big enough to provide light and warmth for anyone who needs it.

In this season of generosity, we are going to be talking about the things we bring to the church to add to the fire. These are the things we agree to in our membership covenant: **to faithfully participate in the life of the church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.** You might be thinking, *boy, I'm glad I haven't placed my membership here, that's a lot of things.* You're right, it is! Though, I hope that if you consider this place your church home, regardless of an actual membership certificate, you do your best to participate as well. Because it takes a lot of us—*all of us*—to change the world. And that's a big part why we're here, right? To change the world? Though we say it this way: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So today, we are going to be talking about those first two ways to participate in the life of the church: our prayers and our presence. What does it mean to fully embody them? What are the practical ways we can live them out so they aren't just a Sunday morning kind of thing?

Praying seems like a no-brainer type of church practice. But praying is one of those church practices that takes many forms. You can do it individually or as part of a group. You can read a prayer from the book of prayer, a guide, from the hymnal or even the Bible. We pray from a place of fear or joy, in times of sorrow or when we feel stuck. We pray silently or aloud.

Many of us pray when we gather with our families to celebrate a holiday or birthday. We've all anxiously waited through a family member trying to figure out the right words to say at the family Easter lunch. The cause is a noble one, but the execution is often lacking. Mixed in with the "Dear Gods" and the "Thank you for Jesuses" we hear "uhhs" and "uhms" and the awkward pauses that cause the rest of the family to wonder if Aunt June is having a medical episode or has just had her heart arrested by the spirit. Even at our board meetings, among church regulars, praying aloud in front of other people is a bit dreadful for many. As the famous Seinfeld bit goes, public speaking is our number one fear, even ranking ahead of dying. And as he relays it, having to

choose between giving a prayer or eulogy at a funeral or being dead, most of us would rather be in the casket.

But praying doesn't look just one way. It doesn't have a specific set of words we have to utter for God to hear us. It doesn't even have to be words. In Romans, we read:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

- Romans 8:26-27

And when we don't know what to pray for or the worries of life seem to be overtaking us, Paul reminds us:

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down.

- Philippians 4:6-7

If you can't summon the words or you feel lost when you sense the urge to pray, open up the Psalms. This is the church's prayer book. It's full of words expressing the full variety of human emotions, from the depths of despair to the heights of joy. These are the prayers of people like you and me, passed down through generations because they are real and resonate within us.

Jesus reminds us in Matthew 6 that your prayers don't have to be fancy or eloquent. You are just chatting with a family member. Your parent who already knows you and what you need. Just talk. Jesus gave us the model in the Lord's Prayer, so if you don't know what to pray, just say that. And as the

Message translation summarizes Jesus's words after that prayer, it says: **In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do.**

So how do you make prayer a regular part of your routine as you live out these vows to participate in the life of the church? I'll give you three easy to remember ways. You just have to look at your hand.

You've got five fingers, so let's use them as our memory device. An easy 5-letter word to remember is PASTA. Each letter in that word represents a word to pray for: P-praise, A-ask, S-sorry, T-thanks, and A-action. The PASTA prayer is an easy way to help guide your prayers.

The next way to use your hand is to look at your fingers. This 5-finger prayer was popularized by Pope Francis a few years ago. If you hold it like this, the thumb is closest to you, so pray for those closest to us: our family and friends. The pointer finger is for those who point us in the right direction: our teachers, mentors, bosses, or doctors. The middle finger is the tallest, so those who hold positions of power: our leaders and elected officials for wisdom, guidance, and compassion. The ring finger is the weakest, so we pray for those who need the most help among us. And finally the pinky is the smallest, so we might pray for ourselves and our needs last.

The last and simplest way to use your fingers as a prayer guide is to just count your fingers. Most of us have five, so that's how many times we can pray each day at easy to remember times. We pray when we wake up and start our day, once at each meal, and once more as we go to sleep.

Our prayers are meaningful and important, not because they change the world with a few words, but because they change us. When prayer becomes a regular practice, we begin to notice those things that cross our mind. The people we need to text or call. The issues that affect us or our loved ones. And the more often we pray about these things, the more likely we are to act as the Spirit leads. Prayer is one of those Means of Grace that enables our

relationship with God to grow, and by offering our prayers, we add our own log onto the fire.

Now what does it mean to offer our presence to the church? Obviously, attending worship regularly is a huge part of the equation, but it's not the only part. Yes, we want you here because Sunday mornings are the beating heart of our congregation, but a body is not sustained and thriving if it is only active one day a week. When we gather here, we are strengthened to then take our presence, our church, God's love, into the world.

So what does offering our presence, besides attending worship, look like? In its simplest form it is just showing up. Woody Allen was famous for coining the phrase, "80% of success is showing up." If 80% of success is showing up, let's just start there.

United Methodist Rev. Mark Stamm says this: **"I'm all for showing up on Sunday morning, (but) being present with and for God also may mean being present with and for God in other places, with those who are ill or who need advocacy or who simply are lonely and need someone to stand with them."**

I got to witness this in real life last week. We lost one of the matriarchs of this church, Nancy Woolford, last Sunday night. She was a beloved member here for many years, and she and her husband, Shep, were instrumental in starting what The Downtown Church has become. In her last couple weeks here, I heard of so many of you who went by to see her, to talk with her, and to just show up.

When I went to visit her on Sunday afternoon, I walked into her room, expecting it to be empty. But as I opened the door, two women were in there. A friend named Marlene Mason was in a chair and Nancy's longtime caregiver, Laura, was on the love seat. They weren't chatting or talking to Nancy. They were just there. At some point, I'm sure they didn't think what they were doing was important, but to Nancy's kids, Paul and Kelly, who were

miles away, what they were giving to the family was priceless. To know one of your beloved family members was not alone is such a comfort.

Marlene and Laura had been there for hours, simply reading their books and showing up beside someone in a time of weakness. Occasionally, they would put some cool water on Nancy's lips or adjust her blankets and pillows. They were living out the words of Colossians:

Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

- Colossians 3:12,14

Our prayers and our presence are holy things. Sacred promises we offer to God and each other. Whether you've said these vows in front of the congregation or choose to live them out here as part of The Downtown Church family, I thank you. I cherish the work we do together. Because it's true, we do this work *together*. These membership vows, rooted in the grace of God and instituted at our Baptism, are not a solitary promise. We say these words in the connection of community. This bonfire we are building is not for me or you, but for everyone, for all of time.

A life of faith and our connection to each other is not a momentary burst, like that fire made of pine needles. It's not a loophole to heaven. Our prayers and our presence are important and necessary components of a proper bonfire. It's just some logs and sticks, some kindling and leaves. But the bigger and higher we stack our fire, the longer and hotter and brighter it will burn.

So this week, this season, for the rest of your life, look to your hands to guide your prayers. Then clothe yourselves with love and show up for one another. Because we will gather here again next week to be strengthened for the work at hand, building a bonfire together to offer light and love to the world. Spirit, lead us where you may.