

DATE: June 21, 2026

TEXT: Proverbs 2:1-6; Matthew 7:7-8

THEME: Transition is an opportunity for growth and transformation.

SUBJECT: Transition

TITLE: Curiosity, Love and Transformation

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How might we pray during this transition time?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

You've probably noticed that I start with that same prayer each week. I started praying this prayer when I became a transitional pastor - as I thought about what I'd learned in my transitional training and about what I hope to inspire congregations to think about as they experience transition. I thought I'd dissect it today and offer some further insight into what I'm praying about.

"Gracious and loving Spirit"

I've struggled with this, and it's the one part of the prayer that I've altered over time. How shall we address God? What's the purpose of identifying God as we begin to pray? When does prayer really start? For that matter, when does it end? The whole idea behind what prayer is all about is a topic for another sermon, but for now I'll just invoke the words of author and theologian Diana Butler Bass: "The ancient Christian tradition 'Lex orandi, Lex credendi' or 'The law of prayer is the law of belief,' means that praying shapes believing" (Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening (2012)).

How we address God shapes how we think about God and how we think about God's presence in our lives. I shape my thinking about God whenever I say, "Gracious and loving Spirit," as I live into life in all its certainty and uncertainty. During times of (relative) stability, I say with confidence that God IS gracious and loving. But I'm also reinforcing and affirming that idea within me so that, when life doesn't feel so stable - when it's in transition - I can lean into the words I've been saying all along, words that have become internalized, so that they can sustain me in the uncertain times.

I'll just mention at this point that our family is experiencing one of those uncertain times right now. On Monday night, some of you know that our house caught on fire. The cause is yet unknown, but it started in the back yard and only our daughter, Ellie, was in her room at the time. She and several neighbors called 911 and the fire engines arrived before too long. Thankfully, the blaze was mostly confined to the back yard, but much of the siding of our house is completely charred and a pergola that I had built right next to the house is a burnt remnant. Windows were broken out to ventilate the structure and so smoke permeated the inside of the house so that we can't live in it right now. My wife and I, our two adult children and our two cats stayed in a hotel last week and then we moved into a Residence Inn on Friday. Moving around, living in unfamiliar surroundings, negotiating with insurance and not knowing when this will all be resolved makes this a very uncertain time for us. As yet, we have no timeline for getting back to stability, which is one characteristic of transition. We trust that such a timeline will emerge as we work with contractors, but, in the meantime, we're waiting and wondering, wrestling with feelings, asking questions about what happened, what could have happened, what will happen. In all of this, we feel surrounded by prayers and acts

of support from so many. Thank you! I've always found the words of Matthew 7 comforting and I've found myself turning to them again in our time of transition now and I offer them to you in your times of transition, personally and corporately. In the words of the song that's based on this particular scripture: "Seek ye first the kin-dom of God and God's righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. Alleluia." I believe we're on a soul journey and that we're in this temporary state with a body and material things all around us. We hold onto things like houses, traditions and familiar things, but we do so for the sake of the body and not the soul. The soul yearns for connection with Spirit, with Ultimate Reality, and therein lies our ultimate fulfillment. So I start my prayer by centering my thoughts on Spirit, one that I understand to be gracious and loving.

"fill our minds with your Word"

I don't know about you, but all kinds of helpful and ... less helpful things go through my mind every day. I may be reading and then I get distracted by all kinds of thoughts: "I should have said ——" rather than "——" in that conversation with a friend. We live a block away from a hospital, so sirens regularly slice through the relative peace of our quiet neighborhood. Our cat's in a biting stage and it's really distracting to be attacked when I'm trying to write a sermon. Or I may think about a relationship I've struggled with - a middle schooler when I was a teacher or a politician whose views on life and public policy are quite different from my own. When I told a friend recently that I find myself thinking about past relationships that have long since ended or about people I don't even know personally but somehow still make their way into my thought stream, he said, "Stop giving them free rent in your head!" Blunt advice

and short on solutions, but I took his point to mean that I have a limited amount of brain space and that I would do better to sublet to thoughts and ideas that are more uplifting and edifying. I know this is a common human challenge because Paul addresses it in his letter to the Philippians. I don't know exactly what prompted the text in Philippians 4, but I think Paul had heard from the early Christian community in Philippi that they were arguing, maybe not assuming best intentions; perhaps they were concerned about how to live in a very wealthy, patriotic Roman city as they were learning how to live the way of Christ. Paul wrote: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. ... And the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:8, 9b). I appreciate how this verse ends with "the God of peace" rather than "the peace of God will be with you." I do my best to focus on true, noble and right things, but it can be hard. A feeling of peace can be elusive, particularly in times of transition, and I find it helpful to remember that God is seeking me even when I don't feel at peace. So whether I find my center or not, I rest in the understanding that God is with me no matter what. I pray that my mind will be filled with the Word but, even more, I affirm God's ever-abiding presence no matter what.

"help us to be curious"

In my first sermon here, I cited an article in *Psychology Today* from 2023 titled, *How Curiosity Can Help Ease Anxiety*. In the article, the author, Jud Brewer, makes the point that, while medication certainly has an important place in dealing with many kinds of anxiety, we already possess another tool that also helps lower anxiety. That tool is not sheer willpower, nor is it knowledge and understanding about how anxiety is

caused. That tool is simple curiosity. People worry about all kinds of things — big things that may seem overwhelming: the future of the church, the state of the world, the well-being of our children. Brewer says, “Worrying makes people feel like they’re in control and can act as a distraction from the unpleasant sensations of anxiety. Despite a sense of false control, worrying isn’t helpful in taking charge of the future. Ironically, it makes it harder for us to think and plan.” I think curiosity offers a way to say, “I’m not in control, but I still care and I still want to stay engaged. And so I’ll ask questions and try to be present - even to the uncomfortable feelings. I may not have direct power to make change, but through authentic curiosity I can focus on lowering my own level of worry and possibly lower the anxiety of my community so that they’ll be better able to think and plan.” As Southminster works through this time of transition, I know it’s uncomfortable. I know that people want a roadmap and a timeline out of this unknown place and away from feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. That’s normal and understandable. However, I also want to challenge this congregation to stay present. Learn all you can about yourselves during this important time because, once things feel more stable, people tend to get back to normal living - a little less, attention; a little less willingness to reassess. May you be curious and may God inspire us to ...

”Increase our love for one another”

This one’s a general prayer, not just one for transitional times. Jesus once said to his disciples: “A new command I give you: love one another.” Really? New? Had we never been told to love one another before? In fact, we had been told to love God. Deuteronomy 6:5 holds a central place in Jewish theology and thought: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Another

central Biblical mandate called the Hebrew people to take care of widows, orphans and strangers, but that was often interpreted to mean just widows, orphans and strangers who were also Jewish. But Jesus calls us to love everyone, no matter their race, ethnicity or country of origin. Who, I ask you, could possibly argue that we should not be taking care of widows, orphans and strangers no matter where they come from? Who?

I also think it's significant that the two disciples mentioned in scripture in close proximity to this "new" command are Peter and Judas: the denier and the betrayer. By focusing on them, the scandalous, unmerited nature of this "new" love becomes clear. Jesus loved not only those who are easy to love, but also those who are hard to love: the fearful, the fallen and those whose actions may cause harm. To drive the point home, Jesus followed this "new" command with the words, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Here's the challenge for us today: are we known by the same scandalous, unmerited love that Jesus demonstrated? How do we talk about those who live in fear and may cause harm, possibly to us? How do we respond to nationalist messages that masquerade as Christian? With anger and counter-hate, or with compassion? May God inspire us to increase our love for one another and

"inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves"

I thought about Paul's words here in Romans 12: "be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is." In context, this passage speaks of repentance within a Roman context. From what follows shortly after this, Paul is concerned about specific behaviors and attitudes present

within that context: arrogance (12:3,16), destructive competition (12:4-5), retaliation (12:17, 19-20), and judgmentalism (14:1ff). These same attitudes are present in our own culture, of course, and their effects can be widely seen. How does arrogance get in the way of reaching across political and ideological divides? Do Christians focus more on unity or disunity? Cooperation or competition? One body with many parts or disembodied parts with no connection - no belonging - to the others? If we're injured, how do we respond? With verbal jujitsu, physical or legal retaliation? How does judgmentalism eat away at the fabric of trust within our world, our nation, or within our family? Transitional uncertainty can heighten our anxiety and tempt us to gravitate toward the worst angels of our nature. A better way - a healthier way, a soul-enlivening way - is to fill our minds with God's Word, focusing on our own transformation, and to try not to be distracted by the siren songs of competition, retaliation and judgmentalism.

I know this is hard. I get it. Don't listen to me today and believe that your pastor has it all worked out. So let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24) during our transitions - and especially in our transitions - so that we may allow God's light and love to shine through us and create a transformed world.

Amen.

