Someone once told me that the first job of the church is to pray. Whether we are starting a meeting of the congregation, having a fellowship lunch, beginning worship, the first thing that we do is pray. We turn our attention to God and by doing that we set ourselves in the right frame of mind. By praying we are remembering where we are in the grand scheme of things, that God is god and we are not; we confess our sins and realize our own shortcomings; we are thanking him for all the blessings in our lives rather than taking credit ourselves; and we are asking for help, for ourselves and for those whom we love. This fits the old pattern that they taught us in Sunday School about how to pray: use the word ACTS; A is for adoration, C is confession, T is thanksgiving, and S is supplication. And that's how you pray. Simple, right?

Only I don't get it. There's something I don't really understand about prayer. There's something about it that eludes me. One of the phrases from the funeral liturgy in our Book of Common Worship says, “O God who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking.” Okay, if God knows our needs before we ask, why are we asking? If he knows everything about us, he knows what we are going to pray about, so why do we do it? Why do we pray? We had an intern working with the youth one summer about fifteen years ago here at the church. And when she left to go back to school she gave little gifts to the staff. To me she gave a little plaque that sits on my windowsill today, it says “Prayer Changes Things.” But I wonder, does it? Does prayer really change things? If I prayed for something to happen and it does, did my prayers help make that happen, or would it have happened anyway? I'm not really understanding. And we have this list of people that we pray for. And we could argue that maybe this is one of the most important things that we do as a church, we pray for the sick. James seems to indicate that this is a vital ministry of the church. Does it help these people for us to pray for them? Do they get better sooner
because we prayed? And what about the ones who don't get better? What about all those prayer for peace in the world? Do they help? There's something about prayer that I don't understand.

And maybe I'm not supposed to. Maybe I have mentioned to some of you and maybe you already knew that after L. Frank Baum wrote the classic, the Wizard of Oz, he wrote several other books about the Land of Oz, introducing Dorothy to other characters. One of those characters is a plump, cheerful, energetic king named Rinkitink. He was a foolish man in many ways who laughed too much and talked too much and at moments of stress was apt to burst into unkindly tears, but beneath all that, he gave the impression of remarkable strength and resilience and courage even, a good man to have around when the chips were down. At one time he comes into possession of three magic pearls—a blue one that conferred such strength that no power could resist it, a pink one that protected its owner from all dangers; and a pure white one that could speak words of great wisdom and helpfulness. The first time Rinkitink consults it, the white pearl says, “Never question the truth of what you fail to understand, for the world is filled with wonders.”I And maybe that is part of my answer about prayer. Maybe I'm not supposed to understand it, maybe I'm just supposed to do it.

Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest and author talks about a friend of hers, a professor in a large university, who did everything in his power to ease the suffering of his lover, who was dying. One afternoon she listened to the rawness of his prayers—pleading with God to do something, to work a miracle that would save his partner's life—and when the time was right she asked him to tell her about those prayers. “You want to know whether I really believe God will intervene like that?” he asked. “You wonder if I am really that naive?” Then he said something that Taylor says she will always remember. “Honestly,” he said, “I don't think it through, not now. I tell God what I want. I'm not smart enough or strong enough to do anything else, and besides, there's no time. So I tell God what I want and I trust God to sort it out.”II

Maybe we thing we have to understand something before we do it. We don't have to understand prayer.

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1 Buechner, Frederick. Listening to your Life. p. 11.
We just have to pray. And everyone prays. Everyone. You pray. I pray. But we somehow have never learned that there is a difference between prayers and prayer. Prayers are great. We should do our prayers, along the line of ACTS or any other way. We say the Lord's Prayer every week. And sometimes we even listen. We teach our kids to pray by teaching them prayers. When we give our kids the Worship Bags, it's not to keep them occupied while we worship. It's to teach them to worship and to pray. They have in there the Lord's prayer, so that it can become something that they know by heart. They have the doxology and the gloria patri so that they know those by heart. Because when we sing, we are praying. Do you ever think about that? That the words and the music help you to say your prayers? When you sing, Amazing grace how sweet the sound that save a wretch like me, or Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart, naught be all else to me save that thou art, or Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so, those are prayers. But there is more to prayer than just saying our prayers or singing our hymns.

Prayer, according to Brother David Stendahl-Rast the Benedictine monk and teacher, is waking up to the presence of God no matter where you are or what you are doing. When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment that I am in, then I am in prayer. Frederick Buechner says, “Everybody prays whether he thinks of it a praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! That sometimes floats up out of you as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the sky-rocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else’s pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else’s joy. Whatever word or sounds you use for sighing with over your own life. These are all prayers in their way.”3 Prayer is waking up. It is those times, whether you speak any words or not, that you become aware of the presence of God.

Our response to knowing that God is around us, of being aware that God’s Spirit enfolds us, may be

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word of praise or wonder or supplication, or it may be that we are quiet. Or it may be that we laugh. Or cry. Or sing. Or maybe we are like the people of Israel, when they were in Persia, still there after the long years of captivity in Babylon. And when Esther, their queen rescued them from a plot that would have killed many thousands of Jews, what did they do? Did they pray? Of course they did. But notice how they prayed. “that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.” To this day, the Jews celebrate the feast of Purim, remembering their victory in Persia and Queen Esther. They feast and are glad and send gifts and care for the poor. In other words, they pray—because all those things are prayer. They are awake to the presence of God. When we have a barbeque in the park or care for a homeless man who comes in during the week or sit up all night with our youth at a lock in or sing together in worship or do the things James suggests, visiting the sick and saying prayers for each other, we are in prayer because those are times when we are awake to the presence of God. Much has been made over the fact that in the Book of Esther, God is never mentioned. Not once. How can God be absent from a book in the Bible. I would say that God isn't absent. I would say that God is behind it. I would say that God is there even if we don't talk about him. I would say that we just have to be awake to the presence of God, even when he is not mentioned.

The church's first job is prayer. Yes it is to pray for one another, especially when we are in need. But it is more than saying our prayers, it is to be awake to the presence of God all around us. And it is to wake up those around us.