

“A Few Words about Prayer”
Psalm 138 & Matthew 6:7-13
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Prayer! What do we know about it? How do you pray? When should you pray? Does it matter how long I pray? Are there selfish prayers and does God care if my prayers are selfish? Does God care about my prayers? I have been asked a myriad of questions about prayer over the decades now of ministry. Some I think out of curiosity. Others out of a concern of how they might pray. Some just want to explain to me why I should never call on them to pray. “I don’t pray in public reverend!”

In a previous church I had an individual who was elected an elder. He made an appointment to come see me and sitting in front of my desk said, “The one thing that really scares me about being an elder is people are now going to call on me to pray in public.” I thought, yes there are a lot of reasons why you should be scared about being an elder, but I don’t think prayer is one of them. He continued, “So I want you to write out two prayers for me, one of a general nature that could be used to open a meeting and the other of a more personal nature.” I said, “What are you going to do with these two prayers?” He said, “I am going to carry them around in my wallet and when asked to pray pull one of them out.” I don’t know how that turned out. He never prayed in front of me. In telling that story to others someone spoke up and said, “I didn’t know you provided that service.”

We pray because the Bible is always talking about prayer. In Psalm 138 the psalmist wrote, “On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.” The disciples asked Jesus about prayer. Jesus it seemed was always going aside in the early morning or late in the evening for some quiet time to pray. For some of you, your parents taught you to pray as they tucked you in at night. For some who are involved with a recovery program you are encouraged to spend some alone time with your “higher power.” Some programs even ask, “have any of you spent time on your knees at bedtime praying?”

Lord, teach us to pray, teach us to pray! As much as we talk about it and listen to prayers by others and read about praying, we claim to know very little about it. Some think of prayer as a problem when in fact we are the problem and prayer is the answer.

Remember John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress? It has been overshadowed today with books like *Harry Potter* and C. S. Lewis’ The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. But it is still a classic, Pilgrim’s Progress. It is one of the most significant Christian allegories. Bunyan started it while in prison in 1678 and it has never been out of print. In one episode about the power of prayer, the pilgrims had been locked in a dungeon by Giant Despair, master of Doubting Castle. In the dark hours of night all seemed lost. But they refused to despair. Instead they spent the night in prayer. Suddenly Christian, the leader, remembered that he had been given a key named Promise. With this key they were able to unlock the dungeon door, although it was very hard. They made their escape from the dungeon of Doubting Castle and, as free people with glad hearts, reached the

King's Highway. Prayer was a power reminding them of God's promise and opening the way to freedom from doubt and despair. How sad that for so many in our day prayer should become not a promise but a problem.

God wants us to pray to him. Jesus tells us that repeatedly. God is ready and even eager to answer our prayers. Such a promise is difficult for us to understand. One man told me, "I prayed all night and God never heard me." I am reminded of the little boy who was heard saying to God, "O Lord, Aunt Laurie still is not married, Uncle Jack is still out of work and Daddy's hair is still falling out. I am tired of praying for this family and not getting results."

Another man prayed, "Lord, I haven't bothered you for twenty years and if you get me out of this one I promise I won't bother you for twenty more." We often come petitioning the King of Heaven for our wants and needs without identifying who we are or to whom we are speaking. Remember the TV series "All in the Family" from the 1970's? Archie Bunker often prayed on that program and he always started with, "Lord, A. Bunker here, I don't mean to bother you but we got a problem down here on earth."

Karl Barth wrote, "We do not know what proper prayer is." He goes on to say it is actually a sign of our faith that we run to God in prayer with "haste and restlessness." To do so reveals a trust that we are in communion with God, who intercedes for us with sighing too deep for words, who hears and answers prayers, "quite apart from our weakness or strength, our ability or inability to pray. In prayer," said Barth, "we stand beside God as friends."

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray in the model prayer Jesus started by saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." It addresses God first before we get on with the substance of our prayer of need ... "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts ..."

One perception is that God only wants to hear from us when we are in trouble. It's a little bit like sending a wedding invitation to someone we don't know but expect a gift anyway just because we sent the invitation. God doesn't want to know just about the bad times. God wants to get to know us and how better than a conversation with God every morning or evening? Remember God would walk with Adam and Eve, our ancestral parents, in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden. God does want to know about our joys and our sorrows.

I know it is difficult to comprehend or take in that God answers our prayers. We have enough trouble just understanding the needs of people closest to us. How, can a God "away out there" approach us and answer our little prayers?

In an essay "God of Power and Might," Cambridge theologian Janet Martin Soskice suggests that contemporary problems with prayer include the assumption that prayers are addressed to a Wizard of Oz kind of God, a divine "occasional fixer." "This is a God," she wrote, "Who would strike York Minister with lightning, a God who could be cajoled or flattered by prayer to reach into the natural order and make adjustments." But she continues to say, "This is not the God of the Christian tradition, the God of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas. This divine fixer, who stands outside of creation ready to intervene when summoned, was ironically both demolished by the

Enlightenment and invented by it. The God of Christian faith is not merely one force among other forces, one creature that is more powerful—among other creatures, and God’s power is not a ‘tinkering with the causal order’ but instead ‘the holding of the whole thing together, in overwhelming, all giving love.’”

And, she goes on to write, “What if God created a world in which a man was raised from the dead or in which intercessory prayers were answered? Then prayer and resurrection would not be interruptions of creation or external divine manipulations but a part of God’s ‘eternal act of creation.’”

The thought is profound. Resurrection and prayer are not violations of the so-called laws of nature but are woven into God’s ongoing act of creation, as fully as gravity or the tides. Our prayers, then, far from being naïve, are a participation in the very life of the ever-creating God. God, as the psalmist says, is “enthroned on the praises of Israel” and sustains the world in part through the prayers of the faithful. (“Desperate Prayers”, Christian Century, Dec. 12, 2012)

Over in Luke’s gospel, chapter 11, there is the same verses that we heard read in Matthew 6 about the model prayer Jesus taught his disciples. However, in Luke’s gospel it comes with a funny story. Jesus tells the story to encourage his disciples to pray constantly. It is midnight at the house. All is quiet. The family is settled for the night. Suddenly the peace of the household is shattered by a violent pounding on the door and the shouting of an urgent voice. It is a neighbor. He has company and he needs 3 loaves of bread. The man of the house refuses to get up. In a loud stage voice he asks the neighbor not to awaken the children and to disrupt the night’s rest. But the neighbor is not to be thwarted. He knocks and knocks and calls and calls until the man of the house gets up and gives him the bread.

What would you do in such a situation? Would you have the energy of the man pounding on the door? He is very much in earnest. He will not be denied. He will not cease to seek until he finds. It is this energetic earnestness that God asks of us when we pray.

I had that kind of energy one night. It wasn’t over a loaf of bread. I locked myself out of the house taking our dear dog, now gone, for one last walk before bed. Ginny was out in Seattle, I didn’t have my cell phone, it was almost midnight. There wasn’t a light on anywhere in the neighborhood. Where do you turn? Who do you try to awaken at 11:45? Googe! Bob and Deborah live in our neighborhood. I walked to their home and started ringing the doorbell. Looking through the glass window in the door I saw Bob on the 2nd floor go from bedroom to bedroom and then back to bed. He told me later he was checking to make sure his 2 girls were in and they were, so he went back to bed figuring whoever was at the door, a disgruntled customer or worse a disgruntled employee would go away. But I kept ringing the doorbell, I figured this was my last prayerful hope before spending the night out-in-the-cold with my dog. Bob’s quiet night was shattered, the bell kept ringing. I rang and rang and quietly knocked and knocked until “Ah ha” I saw the man of the house coming down the stairs. His prayers were answer too, he said, “You will never know how glad I was to see you standing there at the door.”

The whole point is the earnestness. The fact I was not going to be denied. I was seeking until I found. It is this energetic knocking that God asks of us when we pray. God wants our prayers.

They may become building blocks to build a new humanity. For God will give us the Holy Spirit in answer to our prayers. The same Spirit that was in Jesus. A little girl kept bugging her father: “I want, I want, I want” ...she seemed never to stop. So he scoops her up and holds her tight and whispers “why?” Isn’t it because our deepest need is love? Though we poke at God with child-like “gimmies”, he answers with himself, with love.

Tom Long wrote,” *So when we are in distress or need, we cry out to God in prayers born of friendship. Fretting about whether such prayers are worthy—whether they are for rain, for the health of a family member or that our child might not be lonely and left out at school—may be a misplaced anxiety, as well as a touch of hubris, as if a wrongful prayer from our lips could send a robotic God careening out of control. We are not God, and the wisdom of God will not be compromised by our foolish cries.*

Indeed, every prayer is silently surrounded by the deepest prayer of all, “Not my will but yours be done.”