

What's Prayer Got To Do With It?

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Hosea 1.2-10;
Psalm 85;
Colossians 2.6-15(16-19);
Luke 11.1-13

When I was in college, a lot of Christians around me were reading a novel by Frank Peretti called *This Present Darkness*. The novel was a sort of fantasy about spiritual warfare and the Christians who were trying to do battle with these evil forces that lurked in every corner. I read it during a time when I was having a lot of questions about prayer. I lived with some Christians who were incredibly passionate about prayer. I admired that in them. And at the same time, there was something about their prayer that left me unsettled. There seemed to be an almost desperate quality to their prayer as they pleaded with God to intervene in the world. I can remember reading that Frank Peretti novel and suddenly it all clicked into place. There was an assertion in that book that captured the heart of why I was struggling with prayer in my community at the time. The author claimed that the problems in the world were because people were not praying: the world had fallen into darkness because God's hands were tied if the saints weren't praying.

There were two pieces of this way of viewing prayer that seemed a bit off to me. The first is how distant God seemed. Jesus is very clear in this text that God is not distant from human life, judging human beings to see whether they are spiritual enough to deserve blessing. Jesus uses an analogy here where God is like generous and loving parents who are eager to give good gifts to their children. We don't have to plead with God in order to pry blessings out of God's hands anymore than I hope our children don't have to plead and beg with us to provide the things that

they need. Even more problematic than that was viewing prayer as a kind of religious vending machine. And you don't have to be into spiritual warfare to fall into this trap: you put your prayers in, you take your blessings out. Prayer becomes the mechanism by which we get the things we want.

If you think of prayer in that way then this passage from Luke has some false advertising. We have asked and it has not been given. We have looked and have not found; we have knocked and the door was locked tight. And it's not because our prayers were selfish. I don't think any of us have ever seen prayer as the way to get the red sports car we've had our eye on. We've prayed for other people. We've prayed for healing for people who then die. We've prayed for peace in a world that continues to be at war. We've asked and God has not given. Clearly prayer does not work in precisely that way: prayer in = blessing out. So what is prayer for?

I think this is one of those moments Pastor Andy Fierro was talking about last week when he shared his tortilla theology with us. If there's some teaching, some piece of theology, that just doesn't sit right you've got to take that ball of dough and pound it down and roll it out and make it bigger. To use a different image from photography: switch focus from the zoom to wide angle view. What is Jesus doing in Luke as this gospel story is told? And how does this teaching about prayer fit into the whole?

I've been reading a book by Paul Borgman¹ on the gospel of Luke that continually drives that point home. You have to read each piece in light of the whole. In particular Borgman identifies this center section of Luke's gospel as unfolding what Jesus means when he talks about the kingdom of God. What Jesus wants for his disciples both then and now is for us to follow him in what Luke calls The Way – the way of God, the way of salvation, the way of the kingdom.² If you want to participate in the salvation of God and enter into God's realm, then you need to understand the Way and you need to walk in the way – you need to hear God's Word and you need to do God's will. Jesus does not mean this to be a condition

¹ Paul Borgman, *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eedmans Publishing Company, 2006).

² Borgman, pg. 3.

of entry. It's not as if the kingdom were a destination that awaits you on the other side of a faithful life – do your time here so that you can enjoy the good stuff there. The idea in Luke is that when you live your life according to the ways of God you discover that this way of life IS the realm of God. You live in this way and join with communities of faith who live in this way, you will experience the abundant-full life God intends.

Over and again we are encouraged in Luke's gospel to listen well. This is what Mary was doing in last week's text. Jesus affirms in Mary her eagerness to sit and learn at his feet. This is the posture for us who live in the Way: to have open minds - eager to learn and grow. We are to listen well. And then do what it is we hear. That's the companion piece. That was Jesus' word to the lawyer two weeks ago whose question triggered the story the Good Samaritan. We are to offer mercy without regard to the all the categories that divide us. (It is interesting to hold that particular teaching of Jesus in mind as you read the full page ad in the Holland Sentinel yesterday about why the city government should not approve antidiscrimination policies.) When Jesus gets to the end of that story about offering mercy without distinction, he concludes by saying: "do this and you will live." Each of these stories unfolds another aspect of life with God.

That's the larger context. What it is like to live life in The Way: listening well to the Word of God and then doing what it is we hear. If that is what we are to be about then what does prayer have to do with it? The disciples watch Jesus praying and wonder about that very question. Jesus gives them this model prayer that we have come to call the Lord's Prayer. And then suggests that prayers like these be offered over and over again.

We are to be persistent in prayer not as some mechanism to pry out of God's hands the things that we want but rather as a means to pry open our hearts to make space for the things that God wants. Over time as you live in the Way the things that you want and the things that God wants intermingle and become one and the same. And prayer is a significant place where that happens.

Persistence in prayer is about acknowledging how hard that work is. Just living human life can be hard, let alone trying to live in the ways of God.

Just take one of the petitions in this prayer: the one about forgiveness – this alone makes clear why prayer is a lifelong enterprise. Forgiveness is not the way of the world. Whether it is letting ourselves be immersed in the forgiveness of God or learning to offer that forgiveness to others - this is a lifetime of work.

Or look at this image here of the door upon which we knock. This image invites us to wonder “what is the next threshold that is standing in front of me right now – where is God inviting me to go next?” I’m just starting a wonderful book by Joyce Rupp called *Open the Door* that I hope to use with a small group this fall. It is based on this rich image that Jesus uses here to suggest that life is a series of doorways that need to be opened and walked through. We persist in prayer because of how complex the life of faith can be and because we need - on a daily basis - the mercy and grace of God to find our way through.

We pray because of our great need on the one hand and because of God’s great goodness on the other. When we pray it’s a way of acknowledging all of the resource and power and beauty that opens up to us when we turn toward God. There is a real paradox in prayer. It grounds us in realism on the one hand about how hard life can be and how much we need God. And then it can also lift our spirits to embrace optimism on the other hand, so that you begin to see the goodness of God alive at every turn.

Put very simply: Prayer is our way of connecting with God so that we can be empowered by God. Jesus says in verse 9, “Ask and IT shall be given to you.” You have to follow the passage down and take note of what the “IT” is. It’s not a specific request. When you get to the end of the passage, the gift that God is so eager to give to us is the Holy Spirit. Ask and the Holy Spirit will be given to you. That’s a pretty compelling reason to pray.

It really doesn’t matter what form that prayer takes, where it happens, when it happens, how it happens. Whatever supports you in connecting to God and opening your life to the Holy Spirit so that you can listen well to the Word of God and then do what you hear....that’s the kind of prayer you should pursue.

If you think of prayer in that way, then the promises **do** ring true:

Ask, and it will be given to you.

Search and you will find.

Knock and the door will be opened for you.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.