

## THE PROBLEM WITH PRAYER

Luke 11:1-13

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There are two questions I am asked most often, and they are related. “Why does God allow bad things to happen?” And “Why doesn’t God always answer our prayers?” I have been asked variations of these two questions hundreds of times. If you haven’t ever uttered one of these questions, in one form or another, I’d be surprised. It came up just this week in my family as we said goodbye to my husband’s stepfather, one of the sweetest men I’ve ever known. He lived his last few years with a neurological disease which gave him a terrible quality of life, yet he never complained and was unfailingly pleasant to the nursing staff in his facility. I heard more than one family member this week say something like, “Why did such a great guy like Bill have to suffer like that?”

I know Bill prayed; I prayed with him many times. I don’t know if he prayed to be relieved of his illness, or for the strength to endure it.

Today’s sermon is in response to a request from a parishioner who has asked me to help her understand prayer better. She is a thoughtful person, who struggles with the paradoxes of prayer.

Our scripture for this morning gives us one of those contradictions. This passage of Luke begins with a version of the Lord’s prayer - and before we move on, I want to read again this version; we’re reading from the Common English Bible. The Lord’s Prayer is so familiar that we often say it without thinking...today, by sharing three different versions in different languages, I’m hoping we shine a light on this prayer and what it can mean for us. Personally, I like to pray using all different versions of the Lord’s Prayer...when we pray using words that are new and fresh, we wake up and pay

attention. "Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation." I encourage you to read different versions of the Lord's Prayer and see what new insights new words bring you.

Then Jesus tells us two stories about prayer. They're strange little stories; both of them with the same point. In the first story, a friend knocks on another friend's door in the middle of the night and asks for three loaves of bread to serve to an unexpected guest. The friend is tired, but gives the person at the door what he needs. In the second story, Jesus reminds his listeners that parents give good gifts to their children. These are stories with lessons, and the lesson is this: "How much more will God give you...". A friend will give a friend loaves of bread in the middle of the night - how much more will God give you what you need...which is the kingdom of God, God's way of life, God's reign of peace and justice and love. A loving parent gives a child what the child needs...how much more will God see to it that you have what you need? Which is the gift of God's spirit.

These stories are a little strange, but they don't present a problem. We have a God who gives us the spiritual gifts God knows we need.

In the middle of this passage, though, are a couple of verses that can lead us down a thorny path. "Everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened."

Really? Everyone gets what they ask for? And that is why I entitled this sermon, "The Problem With Prayer." Because we have all prayed for people to get well and then attended that person's funeral. We have prayed for relationships to be restored and ended up with broken hearts. We have prayed for the strength to overcome an addiction and found ourselves stuck in a cycle of bad decisions. We have prayed for

the needs of the world and ended up feeling overwhelmed and defeated. We have to argue with the gospel of Luke and say, "It's just not true, we do not get always what we ask for." So why do we pray?

A few summers ago, a church-going man named Frederick Niedner found himself in need of prayer like never before. Several members of his family were diagnosed with cancer, including his granddaughter who had a leukemia diagnosis. He asked for prayers from his wide circle of Christian friends, and then he began thinking about what he was asking. He wrote this, "I can't help wondering, however, about the details and unspoken assumptions implicit in all those prayers, including my own. How exactly does one pray about cancer? Do we ask for miracles, hoping that God will somehow make cancer cells suddenly cease acting like cancer cells? Do we pray, even if only to cover our bases, that God would provide special guidance to the efforts of oncologists and surgeons?"

What would happen if we didn't pray? Would the doctors' efforts prove less effective? Does God have a supplication meter that provides prayer-intensity readings that dictate whether and where divine intervention is warranted or for whom chemotherapy will succeed? Does an army of prayer warriors prevail upon God even as a solitary, faithful child's prayers go unheard?

Sometimes it seems as if we unwittingly treat God like some kind of cosmic concierge or super Siri who stands ready to do our bidding, whether we're praying about misplaced files and crucial ball games or cancer cures and climate change. Can even God keep track of all this incessant begging and beseeching?"

Niedner is a biblical scholar, so he knows that the Bible gives us confusing and contradictory messages about prayer. One of the most problematic, in my opinion, is

James 4:2, which says, "You do not have because you do not ask." Really? But many people ask and still do not have. So what do we do about prayer?

Some of my most painful moments as a minister have come when people have sat in my office, aching with grief, pain so raw I could barely breathe, and said to me, "Why did God do this to us? Are we being punished? Should we have prayed harder?"

If you would like to read one small, easily-accessible book about prayer, one I would recommend is entitled Help Thanks Wow by Anne Lamott. She shares this story that describes her approach to prayer: "One of my lifelong friends has asked me to pray for her daughter, Angie, who has young children and a diagnosis of aggressive lung cancer, the kind that continues to grow tumors in the midst of chemotherapy. I close my eyes and say in silence, 'I hold this family in Your light. I pray for them to get their miracle, and to have stamina, for them to be okay today, for their love and amazing senses of humor to help them come through.'"

"I wish I had a magic wand and could tap Angie on the head with it, and the cancer would be gone and her kids would get to grow up with a mother. Even better, I wish God had a magic wand. I've never seen evidence of it. But I have seen miracles. I have seen many people survive unsurvivable losses, and seen them experience happiness again. How is this possible?

Love flowed to them from their closest people, and from their community, surrounded them, sat with them, held them, fed them...I know Angie and her mother will get a miracle, although it may not be the one they want - the one we pray for, in which the doctors break the grip of the cancer and help Angie live. But the family will come

through, even if Angie dies. The little ones will need their grandma on board; time will pass. Death will not be the end of the story.”

What Anne Lamott is suggesting is a prayer that says, “God, your will be done, and then help us to face what life brings with grace and strength.” It’s a good prayer which reminds us that prayer can be transformative. It can help us become more accepting, more trusting, more calm.

If you would like to experience prayer that is transformative, let me suggest a new understanding of prayer — it may be new for some of you, anyway. Many of us grew up thinking that prayer serves two main purposes: giving something to God ( our praise and thanks) and getting something from God (like forgiveness and answers to our requests). This way of understanding prayer is very common especially in the western world, because it’s the way our lives work - it’s transactional.

But God is not a vending machine. Grace isn’t given as part of a bargain. If our prayer life is only based on a transactional understanding, it will be ultimately unsatisfying and problematic.

What if, instead, we think of prayer as relational? What if prayer isn’t about getting something from God — or even giving something to God — but simply a way of drawing closer to the essence of God, which is love.

We are in relationship with God, not a business relationship, but a real intimate relationship. I’d like you to think for a moment about someone you love. Picture that person. Now imagine that you are preparing to have dinner with this person. Maybe you have dinner with him or her every night. Maybe this is someone you haven’t seen

in a long time. What are your hopes and expectations for your time together? When we are in a healthy relationship with someone we love, what we long for is communion — a deep sense of connection. We long to be in one another's presence, not just physically, but emotionally. We want to have conversation that matters, where we speak naturally and honestly, where we listen well to each other and know that we have been heard and seen. We want to laugh together. We want to understand and feel understood. You don't sit down to dinner with the person you love most in the world and think, "Now what can I get out of this person tonight?" You are relational, not transactional.

What if we were to think of prayer — our communication with God — in the same way? As an opportunity to achieve real connection?

That time you spend with the person you love changes you, and prayer can change us as well.

One writer says that prayer is a constant movement in three parts. First, we leave our selves. We consciously, intentionally decide to try to encounter the presence of God and move towards God. Then, we return to ourselves but we are changed. We have been in the presence of pure love and it has changed us. We're prepared for action. We feel more fully alive.

When we think of prayer this way, the question is not, "Does prayer work?" but "Do I feel more fully alive? Am I prepared to live in this world as a more loving person?" We are not trying to change God, other words - or to bribe, beg or cajole God into doing something for us. Rather, we are entering into God's presence so that we are transformed.

Pope Francis puts it even more simply: “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.”

In these days, I’m hearing from many of you that you want two things. One, you want to be able to endure this pandemic time with courage and strength, and two, you want to be an agent for change in our broken, troubled, divided, hurting world. Prayer will help. Prayer that centers and grounds you, prayer that you think of as a journey back and forth into the heart of God, to draw upon God’s unending abundant source of love. You can pray with or without words, indoors or out, while being still or while walking, you can pray while listening to music...the technique doesn’t matter - just experiment until you find what works for you.

I close with this story from the brilliant writer Kate Bowler. When her son Zach was little, and Kate was going through cancer treatments, her mom stayed with them often to help. One day, Kate writes, “My mom threw a blanket over the dining room table, and the two of them crawled under to talk in whispers. His little face, so close to hers, was full of wonder. She wasn’t tall anymore, but small and enclosed with him in the semi-darkness. Their tent was a holy place where secrets were shared. The mystery of prayer is this - we are drawn into an intimacy with a God who sees us and hears us.”