

Prayer...

Luke 11:1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Let me start with a little story about prayer. A local bar in a small conservative town began construction to expand their building to increase their business. In response, to block the bar from expanding, a local church started a campaign with petitions and prayers. Work progressed right up until the week before the grand re-opening when lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground! After the bar was destroyed by the ensuing fire, the church folks were rather smug in their outlook, bragging about the power of prayer. That was until the bar owner sued the church on the grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building, either through direct or indirect actions or means. In its reply to the court, the church vehemently denied all responsibility, accountability, or any connection to the building's destruction. The judge read through the plaintiff's complaint and the defendant's reply, and at the opening hearing commented... "I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but it appears from the paperwork that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer, and an entire church congregation that now does not." [I was not the pastor of that congregation!]

I will admit I believe in the power of prayer. I always have. It's just that I'm not quite sure what it is I believe about prayer anymore. What I, you, or anyone believes about prayer is actually a direct reflection upon what that person believes about the nature and character of God. Therefore, as one's understanding of God changes, so, ultimately, does one's understanding of prayer. And I'm referring to prayer in the traditional sense, knowing, of course, that everything we do can be considered a prayer.

My own understanding of traditional prayer has certainly changed since the early conservative and evangelical days of my journey of faith when I believed that everything that happens, happens for a divine reason. The journey into progressive Christianity had led me, and many of you, into new understandings.

I looked back this week on previous sermons I've preached on prayer. Back in 2010, nine years ago, in a sermon entitled, *Keep Praying – Even when you don't feel like it!* (July 25, 2010) I stated, and I still believe: "There are a lot of misguided understandings concerning the purpose and nature of prayer itself – reflecting, perhaps, a misunderstanding of the nature of God. I'll preach some other time [I continued] how I believe that God is not like Santa Clause or a divine vending machine, that all we have to do is drop in our prayer coin, make a selection, and wait for the desired product to drop out. Rather, prayer is a way to express our deepest concerns and convictions. And in the process, it can be one of the best tools in our spiritual toolbox to help us connect with others. Prayer can function in a way that deepens our compassion for the ones we love and for the world around us. Prayer does indeed, then, have the ability to help transform hearts and minds, and it is that transformation which in turn has the power to make a difference in the world."

Then six years ago, back in 2013, I addressed the nature of prayer the Sunday after a devastating F5 tornado caused such horrific damage in Moore and Shawnee, Oklahoma. In a sermon provocatively entitled, *Can God Intervene?* (May 26, 2013) I questioned the nature of an interventionist God, addressing that issue in response to a common notion by some that *if* enough people had prayed for God to intervene, *then* God would have done so. I wondered, cynically, just how many praying people does it take in order for God to stop or divert a tornado. How many for a hurricane, how many to stop the epidemic of senseless mass shootings in this country, how many to recognize and overcome our own deep-seated racism?

Having the gall to even question why and if God allows, let alone causes tragedy to happen is considered heresy to many – many who claim that it's just God's will, and we are not meant to understand. So, I stated in that sermon: "I am deeply aware that when some of our core religious beliefs – the ones we were taught from an early age and continue to hold dear – are called into question and challenged, that a deep sense of discomfort, perhaps even fear, enters into the equation." But I continued, "If, and yes I still say 'if,' we have a non-interventionist God, then a logical question to ask is: What, then, is the purpose of prayer?" Here is the response I gave at that time.

"Perhaps our prayers should not be ones of intercession, as we have all been taught to pray to God to intervene, but rather simply prayers of thanksgiving and appreciation, and prayers of concern for others and ourselves. Perhaps the purpose of prayer is simply to make us a more grateful people, and a more compassionate and empathetic people when others are hurting. Perhaps our prayers are not for God's benefit, in order to act, but for our own benefit. These prayers, then, inevitably draw us closer to God and to one another."

I must admit, I'm basically at the same place now in my own understanding of prayer as I was six and nine years ago. **I encourage you to seriously reflect upon your understanding of prayer, and by connection, your understanding of the nature and character of God.**

In reflecting on the nature and purpose of prayer, perhaps it would be helpful to take a look at what the gospel writers recorded about Jesus' understanding of prayer. With that frame of mind let's take a look at today's Gospel reading from Luke 11, where one of Jesus' disciples states, "Lord, teach us to pray" (v. 1). What follows is Luke's version of what we now call **The Lord's Prayer**. The differences between this and Matthew's more common version likely stems from various ways the prayer was used and evolved through the earliest years of Christian worship. When looked at closely, instead of just repeating as a rote recitation, we see it is a deeply human prayer that comes from a vulnerable place of real necessity.

Notice the verbs in the traditional version of this prayer, "Give us...Forgive us...Lead us...Deliver us." The imperative, "Give us," recognizes our dependence on God. It's a recognition of the need to transcend ourselves. "Forgive us," confesses our sin and guilt. "Lead us," and "Deliver us," acknowledge that we are lost and vulnerable. **This prayer, at its most basic level, does at least two things. It recognizes how hard it is to be human, and it acknowledges that there is a power outside of ourselves that can help.** It also connects us with countless others – past, present, and future – who also pray this prayer.

Luke follows this prayer with Jesus' **parable** of a person who goes to a friend at midnight asking for help. The person who is awakened is initially unresponsive. But after

persistent knocking at the door eventually gets up and gives his friend what he needs. By analogy, in this context, it suggests that sometimes only *because* of human persistence will God eventually wake up, get up, and answer the door on which we have been knocking. **Persistence, then, seems to be the order of the day when it comes to prayer.** But I ask in all seriousness:

- How many of us, I wonder, have followed this teaching by praying for something until we were blue in the face?
- How many of us, I wonder, have thought there must be something wrong with what or how we prayed when met only by divine silence?

Hold onto those questions. Luke continues with Jesus' command, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (vv. 9-10).

- How many of us, I wonder, have asked, searched, and knocked countless times and still found that our prayers have gone unanswered?
- How many of us, I wonder, have done one or more of the following:
 - Blame ourselves for not having enough faith;
 - Blame God for not listening or caring;
 - Turn away from God altogether;
 - OR, come to a new understanding of the nature and character of God, and therefore the meaning and purpose of prayer itself.

This last option, coming to a new understanding of God and the role of prayer, is often (as poet Robert Frost put it) the road less traveled. **I know far too many persons of faith who blame themselves for not having enough faith. Ultimately, however, this can be very damaging to our spiritual well-being, as of course, is the path of thinking God is deaf to our needs, or the path of turning from God altogether,** which seems to be the path of many in our day and age.

In the conclusion to her 1999 book, *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey Through Silence and Doubt* (Simon & Schuster) the Rev. Renita J. Weems, who grew up in what is still referred to as the Black Pentecostal tradition, and is currently a religious author, an Old Testament scholar and professor at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, and an ordained parish minister, writes what she learned about God and prayer through her experience of divine silence.

I had to learn how to pay attention. I had to learn how to perceive the divine in new ways and in new places. I had to stop peeping behind altars for epiphanies and learn to let the lull between epiphanies teach me new ways for communicating with God, for reverencing the holy, and for listening for God.

For all of you here this morning who may be struggling with your prayer life, or are questioning the very purpose of prayer, or are experiencing a similar case of divine silence, I hope that these words bring some comfort, hope and new understanding. If that is the case for you, I echo Renita Weems' advise to keep praying - even if you don't feel like it. For even if we don't always have a good handle on what

communicating with God is all about, I think we can all say that we instinctively believe that there is indeed *something* to this thing called prayer.

I encourage each of you, and all of us together, to continue to ask, search, and knock.

Amen.

Resources:

Renita J. Weems, *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey Through Silence and Doubt*, Simon & Schuster, 1999.
Feasting On the Word Lectionary Commentary