

Praying with Our Lives

sermon

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Luke 11:1-13

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How far back do your memories, your experiences with prayer extend? If you had very much to do with church in your youth or even if you merely grew up in a culture where church and religious experience seemed to permeate the atmosphere, you probably have some early memories. I recall bravely seeking to lay claim to the “whatever you ask in my name” prescription, just in case it really did work. As I recall, the two primary requests I put forward in those years had to do with a baby brother and/or a pony. I never received them, and I am not sure I really believed I would. That, I told myself, was probably the problem. My prayers had failed because I was “of little faith.”

Such childhood memories cause us to smile, but there comes a time (and for some children, it comes very early) when our requests are anything but playful. There comes a time when our prayers are a matter of life and death, hope and despair. What do we say about prayer then? As we wrestle this summer with “speaking Christian,” with seeking to sort out what we really do believe, what we really do affirm about our faith from the very center of who we are, what can we say about prayer, particularly intercessory prayer where we petition God’s help, God’s aid, God’s intervention in those matters that concern us most?

Do you believe that God actually does intervene directly in the world on behalf of us as individuals as well as on behalf of the larger currents of world history? Do you believe that prayer really does change events and circumstances and not just the person praying? Such an affirmation of prayer takes seriously admonitions in the Bible as well as the chronicled experience of God’s people related in the Bible; but frankly, it comes up against serious obstacles. It comes up against general human experience and our own personal experience in particular. It comes up against the reality of innocent human suffering that despite prayer, goes on and on and on to its often tragic conclusion.

Or perhaps you believe that we live in a self-sustaining universe governed by natural law, natural cause and effect. As Jesus himself said, God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt. 5:45). God allows people to suffer from the violence of evil, natural disasters, illnesses and accidents without regard to their virtues or vices. God is personal, but the universe in which we live is not personal. The best we can hope for in prayer is that we ourselves, not the world around us will be changed. Such an interpretation of prayer helps us to account for human suffering; but in the process, it can deliver us into something of a deism where God is remote from human suffering. It is certainly a far cry from the loving, responsive God we see pictured in Jesus and certainly a hindrance to meaningful prayer.

How can we solve our dilemma? How can we recapture the meaning of prayer without selling out what we know firsthand? Despite our most earnest prayers, despite the basic human goodness and often faithful discipleship of both those we love and those we only know from a distance, human suffering continues seemingly unabated and evil world leaders and sick, deranged individuals continue to wreak havoc around us.

Prayer finds its meaning in the nature of God. “Lord, teach us to pray,” Jesus’ disciples asked him. It was not an unusual request. It was common practice for a revered teacher to provide his disciples with a special prayer. John the Baptist had apparently given such a prayer to his disciples. As Luke tells the story, the request of Jesus was more than likely based on the disciples’ own observations. A key theme in Luke is persistence in prayer—both in Jesus’ own example of frequently praying and in his teachings that his followers should “pray always and not to lose heart” (18:1). In response to the disciple’s request, Luke gives his version of the Lord’s Prayer—a shortened version, compared to Matthew’s, which was also noteworthy for its brevity. Prayer, Jesus insisted, was not to be gauged by its “many words” or its magic incantations but by its open honesty before God (Mt. 6:7).

Luke’s prayer has five petitions, compared to Matthew’s seven. The first two focus on what it means to address God as “Father” and speak to reverencing God’s name and the primacy of seeking God’s reign on earth. The next three speak of our physical and spiritual need before God—our continuing need for sustenance or food, for forgiveness and for deliverance. As Alan Culpepper puts it, the disciples asked Jesus for a lesson in prayer; and what they got was a lesson in the nature of the God to whom they prayed [New Interpreter’s Bible, IX, 238]. If we would understand the meaning of

prayer, this, then, is where we must begin: Who is God? We pray because of whom we have experienced God to be. “When you pray,” Jesus tells us, “say: Abba”—“pappa” or “dear father.” The point here is not one of gender, but of intimacy, approachability, gracious care. We could also pray, “Eema,” “loving mother” [G. Hinson, *Review & Expositor*, Fall 2007].

Jesus begins and ends his lesson with an appeal to God as loving Father. We pray, Jesus says, because of who we experience God to be. We can get thrown off course, however, by our reading of the parable that follows. We err in identifying God with the man who responds to his neighbor’s midnight crisis only to get him off his back. The image of God as one who must be nagged to lend aid is hardly inspiring, and it totally misses the point. “But,” Jesus says, “contrary to the unresponsive neighbor, this is who God is, this is how God responds to your need: Ask, and it will be given you. . . .” Contrary to the uncaring neighbor who turns his head in a situation that could desperately shame the man knocking at his door, God, Jesus says, is like a loving parent who readily responds to his child’s needs. “If you know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit (Matthew says “give good things”) to those who ask!” [11:13]. God, Jesus is saying, is thoroughly gracious. God is the loving father who meets us while we are still on our way to ask (Lk 15). God responds “not because of our cajoling, or because we have found the right words, but because of God’s own nature” [Culpepper, 239]. And we pray incessantly, constantly, persistently, not because we’re trying to eke some semblance of goodness from God, but because of the grace and goodness we have already encountered there. To paraphrase Simon Peter’s words, “To whom else should we go? You, O God, have the words of life” (Jn 7:68).

Prayer enlists our hands and feet. We pray to God as loving parent and we pray in all honesty and openness. We pray because we cannot be silent. Our prayers are less about the words, the phraseology we use than they are about the relationship. At times, our prayers may be so intense that they are beyond words. At those times, the Apostle Paul assures us, God’s own Spirit prays for us “with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). At such times we recognize that we are up against difficult, even insurmountable odds and reach out to God and to one another. The answers to the big questions of life, Pastor Joy Douglas Strome assures us,

don’t come in a sweet little song about seeking and finding. They come in the context of a community that is willing to wager—no, willing to stake its life—on the belief that prayers are answered and that God does respond to human need and suffering. To stake your life on this claim means letting God have access to your own hands and feet when they’re needed” [“Prayer Power,” *Christian Century*, 2007].

Prayer is about God, but it is also about faithful community. The Lord’s Prayer speaks of “us” and “our,” not “me” and “my.” It is an “eschatological” prayer (that word again). It is the prayer of a community that lives in expectation of God’s reign and seeks to mold its life in accordance with that reign. It is the prayer of those who would “seek first the kingdom of God” (Mt. 6:33). It is about submitting our own hands and feet, our lives in service of that reality. It is about praying and being led by our prayers to join God at work in the world.

A half century ago at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the esteemed Rabbi Abraham Heschel joined Martin Luther King in the march for racial equality. Reflecting on the experience later, Heschel remarked that it was as if his very legs were praying. And so it is with us. Our prayers on behalf of others, on behalf of suffering and injustice in the world place both us and the depths of our concerns in the presence of God; and in the process, we often find ourselves called and enabled to make a difference.

Admittedly, there are those issues, those concerns before which we feel helpless. Although we may pray with all of our might in the face of the dreaded diagnosis of cancer or the disability of a child or loved one, often times, it seems, the only thing left for us to do beyond seeking the best treatment available is to summon every ounce of strength within us to be a strengthening, supportive presence in the days to come. On other occasions though, it is as if our prayers open our eyes to new possibilities, new responsibilities. I do not believe that we can conscientiously pray, for example, for the hungry, for those who suffer from injustice, for government leaders without in the process becoming more alert to measures we may take, however small, to become a part of the answer to

our prayers.

In the final analysis, then, if we would be honest (and it's good to be honest in church), evil and suffering and prayer remain something of a mystery for us. Prayer, we know from experience and from the example and teaching of Jesus, is not a stroke of magic. It is not the means by which we harness and control God to get our way. It is not about magic words or formulae. It is about faithful relationship in which we speak our deepest concerns, our most critical struggles in the presence of One we know to be faithful to us even if, and perhaps *especially if* the results for which we so desperately pray are not forthcoming.

We come to you, O God, with the concerns of our lives that matter most. We come with the assurance that as you have been there for us in the past, you will be with us for today and all of our tomorrows. And that, O Lord, will be enough. Amen.