



“WHAT ABOUT PRAYER?”

Luke 11:1-13
Pentecost 7 C
July 28, 2019

Our Savior Lutheran Church
West Lafayette, Indiana
Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

It is disappointing when we call someone on our phone, get a recorded answer and have to leave a voicemail. We have good news to share. We wanted to tell them in person.

It is different when we call on God in prayer. God is always there to personally take our call, listen and give us an answer.

Jesus encourages His disciples to pray. He says, “Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for your. For everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Really???

Jesus seems to be saying that prayer can actually make a difference, that prayer can change God, that because we have prayed, God will do things differently. Really???. Does God change his mind? Or would God have given it to us anyway?

Many object to the idea that prayer could change God. Prayer cannot change God. God is immortal, all-powerful, almighty and all-knowing. We are mere mortals. Who are we to think that we can influence God? That seems utterly presumptuous.

Some say that if prayer changes anything, it changes us. We pray so that God would help us to accept what God is going to do anyway. We must pray for the faith and the courage to accept the inevitable will of God, the great computer chip in the sky, even though at the moment God’s will seems quite unacceptable.

Therefore, we must be careful how we pray. We must not pray for too many material things like rain, a better job, a new bike or healing from cancer. To pray like that would sound like a baby clamoring for more candy when Mom has already decided it is time for bed. Instead, we must pray modestly, humbly and reverently.

Others say that prayer actually can change God. IF we only pray the right kind of prayer. IF we pray fervently enough, seriously enough and faithfully enough. IF we use the right words, ask for the right things and get the right people to pray with us, THEN God can be changed.

God is this big Coke machine in the sky. If we just put in enough quarters, we will get what we want.

Praying is like rubbing your lucky rabbit's foot, picking the winning lottery numbers or knowing the secret password. IF we only do it right, THEN we will get what we want.

For as appealing and persuasive as these two understandings of prayer might be, both are faithless. They contradict what Jesus has to say about prayer in today's Gospel.

The first kind of prayer is a kind of "fatalism." This kind of prayer is no different than trying to "buck up" and "grin and bear it." Since we mere mortals cannot change the unchangeable God, prayer is like talking to ourselves. God has already determined what will happen. We can do nothing to change it. Therefore, we pray for the strength to accept the inevitable.

The second kind of prayer is nothing more than magic. Magical prayer assumes that, IF we can only learn how to say the "magical words," THEN we can get God to give us what we want. THEN the rabbit will pop out of the hat. THEN we can get the secret door to open and like some adventurous Indiana Jones find the lost treasure.

Both kinds of prayer leave us wanting. Fatalistic prayer leaves us asking, "Why bother to pray if everything is set in stone any way?" Magical prayer leaves us wondering, "Have I done enough? Have I got it right?" and never being sure that we have.

This is not how Jesus talks about prayer. When the disciples ask, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus begins with the promise of God. Jesus reminds us that prayer is a conversation with God. PRAYER IS PART TWO OF A CONVERSATION STARTED BY GOD, who will do anything to convince us that God is our loving Father and we are God's beloved children. We do not have to get God's attention as if he has forgotten about us or is asleep at the wheel.

Prayer is a gift. Jesus doesn't give us some complicated formula or practical 12-step program to show us how to pray more effectively. Prayer is not something that we HAVE TO do in order to get something from God. Prayer is not some way that we resign ourselves to the inevitable. Prayer is something we GET TO do because of what God has already done for us. God has already

started the conversation with the wonderful announcement that God is our loving Father and we are his beloved children.

Just in case we will not know what to say, Jesus gives the Lord's Prayer, an incredibly short and simple prayer that makes it abundantly clear that we do not need to impress God with our many words. God just wants us to talk to him, like a child talks to their loving parent . . . with complete confidence and certainty.

Jesus illustrates this with a short story about a man who visits his friend at midnight asking for some bread to feed his unexpected houseguest. However, it is midnight and the friend is tired and asleep with his family. He does not want to be bothered. However, the neighbor is persistent. He will not stop asking. So, his friend finally gives him some bread just to get him off his back. Jesus' point is simple. If the friend is willing to give his neighbor bread merely because he is persistent, how much more then will our heavenly Father respond to our prayers and give us that for which we ask.

Remember, PRAYER IS PART TWO OF A CONVESATION STARTED BY GOD. God started that conversation when God claimed us in the waters of Baptism. In those baptismal waters, God assured us that Jesus' fate would also be ours. God sent Jesus to love sinners like us. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to prove it. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God made it clear that nothing could separate Jesus and those he loved from the love God.

Jesus says that praying is like what happens when parents love their children. Parents are not going to give their children a snake when they ask for a fish or a scorpion when they ask for an egg. If we earthly parents, who are flawed and imperfect (Jesus even calls us "evil"), can do this much for our kids, how more will our heavenly Father do for us!

Praying is like this.

Little Johnny comes to his dad at 3 a.m. He is hungry. He wants dad to wake up and give him a dish of chocolate ice cream. But it is the middle of the night! This is not good for Johnny or for his dad. However, whatever dad decides to do, he will to do it in a way that will keep Johnny coming back to talk to his dad regardless of the time of day or night.

Most of the time that will mean that Dad will gently lead Johnny back to bed. This is not the time for chocolate ice cream. But then, there is that night when he looks at his son, sees that cute face, that smile and those big eyes and remembers how much he loves this little guy. Therefore, he decides that this is the night that things will be different. "Sure! Why not? You asked. I love you. Let's go have a dish of chocolate ice cream!"

Yes, prayer can change God. Things can be different because we pray. It is not because our prayers have earned it. It is not because we have been so good that we deserve it. God is free to change His mind and give us that for which we ask, even the most ordinary and down-to-earth of things, . . .
.BECAUSE GOD SO LOVES HIS KIDS!

The Bible is filled with examples of God changing his mind and doing things differently just because His kids have asked. In today's First Reading, Abraham repeatedly asks God to show mercy to the wicked city of Sodom and God does. In the book of Exodus Moses begs God to not to turn His back on His people, the disobedient children of Israel. God changes his mind and decides to rescue the Israelites anyway. Repeatedly Jesus responds to the pleas of the deaf, the blind, the paralyzed, the leprous and even parents grieving the death of their children . . . and reverses the inevitable. He shatters what seemed to be set in stone and works a miracle. God's love will not be thwarted. Even a stone sealing Jesus in a tomb can do it. God raises Jesus from the dead to prove it. God is free to love and do whatever God pleases. God promises to do whatever it takes for us to keep on believing and praying.

So, pray, ask, search and knock, whether at midnight when an unexpected guest has arrived or at 3 a.m. when we are hungry for chocolate ice cream. We may get that ice cream cone or we may not. However, our heavenly Dad will always give us what we need . . . to keep on praying, . . . to keep on asking (nothing is out-of-bounds) . . . and to keep on believing that Our heavenly Dad will always give us what we need . . . to keep on praying, . . . to keep on asking . . . and to keep on believing that He is our loving Dad and we are His beloved kids.

Every prayer is a prayer for faith. That is why Jesus said at the conclusion of today's Gospel that God will answer every one of our prayers with the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the faith to keep us praying like this. It is the Holy Spirit that will help us to enjoy prayer as a gift from God.

Therefore, Lord, Dad, heavenly Father, . . . "teach us to pray" . . . like this.