

Spiritual Practices-Praying with Intention

Luke 11: 5-14
(October 14, 2018)

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Are these hard words to believe? Few things make us uncomfortable in the United Church the way prayer does. Prayer is a pebble in our denominational shoes. For the most part we are a liberal and progressive denomination. We’ve grappled with all the challenges science and empirical rationalism have thrown at Christianity and we’ve found a way for them to co-exist. We don’t see a conflict between science and religion. We don’t believe that God’s revelation ended with scripture. We believe that God is constantly revealed to us. God is in evolution. God is in astronomy. God is in quantum physics. But prayer? How do you integrate prayer into a life of faith that takes the intellect seriously? Especially in light of some of the facile ways prayer is used and abused, to claim that some are spared tragedy because of prayer while others are not, to claim that riches are tied to faithfulness.

But then again many of us can probably point to examples of answered prayer as well, times in our lives when we felt certain of divine intervention. My parents were on that airplane a few years ago, that while on its way to Portugal ran out of fuel over the Atlantic. My mother, a Roman Catholic swears that in the midst of her fervent and desperate prayer she received a vision of Mary that filled her with peace and assured her that everything would be O.K. I have a colleague who struggled with his call to the ministry. He is a gay man and this was before the 1988 decision to ordain all people regardless of sexual orientation. He prayed for clarity. He is not given to the supernatural and flights of fancy. I know him to be a very practical grounded person, but he swears that in the midst of a Sunday service he experienced a vision of Jesus at the front of the sanctuary, arm stretched out waving him forward. How do we reconcile this, how do we make sense of prayer?

Lets start by saying something about prayer in general before moving on to the kind of prayer that asks for things. First off, I have no idea how prayer works. As a Minister I was feeling inadequate about this until I started doing some research and found that the most learned people on the subject say the same thing, they just do not know, prayer is beyond technical explanations. Episcopal Priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor says, objective study of prayer that leads to meaningful answers is impossible; the only way to answer such questions is to engage in a long-term practice of prayer, to heed Jesus’ advice, to be audacious and persistent in asking, searching and knocking.¹ Prayer is a relationship issue. Getting your questions about prayer answered without engaging in prayer is like trying to get all the answers about raising children or being married by asking a friend. Prayer is a way into a relationship with the divine. Getting our questions about prayer answered is the same as getting our questions about relationships

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 181.

answered; it's a process of engagement and reflection. I invite you to reflect on what you have learned about prayer over the years.

Here is what I have learned so far. I'll start with one of my favourite quotes about prayer from the writer Anne Lamott, who says there are only three prayers: help, thanks, and wow. Prayer is an act of surrender; you ask for help, you give thanks, you sit in awe, you give up control. The basis of fruitful prayer is powerlessness. Prayer is a way of saying, "God is God and I am not"; it is a way of acknowledging that there exists a power beyond self, that there is mystery. If powerlessness is a source of distress for us, it is likely that we will want to hang onto control. You cannot pray in any meaningful way and hang onto control, because you're still in charge, dictating the terms of the relationship, not completely open to what Love might be offering you or calling you to do. A sense of powerlessness however, whether it comes from a deep faith or desperation puts us on the road to meaningful prayer, as we start looking beyond the needs, wants of the ego, and open ourselves to possibilities we have not yet imagined.

A good bit of advice might be to pray not so much with our hands clenched but rather open, relinquishing control and open to what may come. When prayer is rooted in surrender then prayer is not a test to see if God will deliver, rather prayer is the opening of our souls so that God's purpose might become apparent and clarify itself to us. We trust that grace will be given in a way that best expresses love's purpose in our world and in our lives.² In our scripture today, Jesus says a parent would not give a child a snake when fish is requested. A child raised in a loving home knows it will not always get its own way but the love of a child for a parent does not depend on wish fulfillment for the child knows at some deep level, rooted in trust, that the parent will only do what is good for the child.³ How much greater then is the love of God.

Those are a couple of general learnings about prayer. Let's talk about the kind of prayer that asks for things. The first learning here for me is to be attentive to what comes your way. The answers to prayer are often surprising, unexpected and disruptive. If we are not paying attention, we might be scared off and miss them altogether. I remember one particular time really struggling with my faith and praying for God to help me live the life Jesus would have me live. Shortly afterward, my family and I were having a picnic in a park and I saw a homeless person rummaging through the garbage a short ways away, I felt the call to go over and offer some of our food but I also felt the anxiety of relating to someone whom I perceived as so different from me. I didn't do anything. It reminds me of that line by Lutheran Pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber when asked what she does to get closer to God and she responded impulsively and honestly, "What? Nothing. Sounds like a horrible idea to me, trying to get closer to God." Half the time, I wish God would leave me alone. Getting closer to God might mean getting told to love someone I don't even like, or to give away even more of my money."⁴ Later, as I reflected on the

² Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, p. 39.

³ Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 43.

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*.

situation, I made the connection between my prayer and the opportunity that presented itself to me. I missed it; I was scared and not paying close enough attention.

Here is another of my learnings. If you're looking for a clue as to whether your prayer has been answered consider the ways in which you have been invited into relationship. Answers to prayer, in my experience usually involve a call to be in relationship with others. A prayer for help in your marriage might be answered with a friend who tells you about a great therapist. A prayer for help with an addiction might be answered by an ad you see for a twelve-step group. A prayer for help with loneliness might be answered by a volunteer opportunity. God's power is love, which means that it is fragile and vulnerable; the answers to prayer often call us into relationships where we will be asked to admit our fragility and show our vulnerability.

I am sure you have your own learnings on prayer. Ultimately, it's up to each one of us to decide what meaning we give to the events in our lives. Only we can say whether God has answered us. It is a choice, what one person sees as the answer to prayer another sees as pure coincidence.⁵ But, to choose to see life as an answer to prayer brings us a great gift; our lives become holy ground, the place of Divine activity. We stop seeing life as a series of problems to be solved or overcome—pain, loss, death—and more an adventure to be lived, an adventure that calls us to grow, to change, to deepen, to mature in wisdom, to become more Christ-like.

As we come to see life as an adventure, we stop questioning life and expecting answers and instead concentrate on how life is questioning us and on what life expects from us⁶. Perhaps that liberation of the soul, the liberation from our own self-centredness and importance is the ultimate answer that prayer gives us. Prayer is a practice, it takes effort, maybe that is why Jesus insists on persistent and audacious prayer, ask, search, knock and you will get to that place where prayer is always answered; not in our heads, but in deep and loving engagement with the world around us.

⁵ Taylor, p. 182.

⁶ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 62.