

“Making Sense of our Varied Experiences with Prayer”

Luke 11:1–13

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Prayer is one of the most central aspects of faith in any tradition, just the mention of it stirs strong emotions for many of us, yet people have different thoughts about and varied experiences with prayer.

Some of us can remember a time of great need when prayer — either ours or someone else’s — was the only thing that kept us on our feet. A noted evangelist told a story about a speaking tour that seemed to be falling flat until one evening when everything turned around and the Spirit was let loose. He later discovered that an elderly woman who was unable to attend his services began praying for his ministry that evening.

In like fashion, my spirits were bolstered in one setting when a woman in a skilled-care facility informed me that she prayed for me every Sunday morning at 11. She could not come physically, but she was there in spirit. Simply knowing that was encouraging.

But it’s not just when we know someone is praying for us that we are aided. Years ago, a professor at the medical school at Vanderbilt University, not exactly a marginal institution, shared with a gathering of clergy and physicians at the church I served in Winston-Salem data on outcomes for patients prayed for and not prayed for; the former did better, even when they did not know they were receiving prayers.

And yet, while many people have benefited in numerous ways from prayer, others have felt like prayer accomplished nothing for them. We all know people we have prayed for with passionate devotion who suffered and died anyway, seemingly without any benefit at all. Mark Twain’s memorable character Huckleberry Finn put it this way (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, p. 11).

Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed,
but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day, and
whatever I asked for, I would get it. But it warn’t so. I tried

it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it.

Is prayer the breath of life, the one thing that keeps us going? Or is it an utter waste of time?

Part of our challenge here lies not just in our varied experience but in our view of prayer and faith itself. Rabbi Harold Kushner once said that we often confuse God with Santa Claus. We have our wish list and assume we have been nice, not naughty. Another way of saying the same thing is that we think of God as a great cosmic vending machine and thus prayer is the coinage we use to push a certain button and get what we want, even if we have to bang on the machine a little bit...

It is perfectly appropriate to ask God for what we need. A retired minister in another setting said we should never pray for our health or anyone else's, we should only pray for greater faith, because that's what early believers did. I don't agree. God desires honesty from us and we have many needs. Anne Lamott once said she had two basic prayers: "Thank you, thank you," and "Help me, help me, help me (referenced in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 289.)". We often need help, God knows this, so it's OK to include such needs in our prayer.

But prayer does not end here. In *The Golden Bough* anthropologist Sir James Frazer said that the difference between magic and religion is that magic is an effort to manipulate God while religion is an attempt to serve God. The distinction applies to Christian faith, and prayer, as a central part of our faith, is not simply an attempt to talk God into giving

us what we want but an opening of our lives to God's intent. It involves us, it depends on our honesty, but it is also our access to the Holy. It is about more about God than it is us.

All of this is reflected in Jesus' teachings on prayer in Luke 11. After observing him at prayer, one of his disciples asks him to teach them how to pray, as John taught his disciples. It is not a simple request. This is not like learning how to play an instrument or starting a new exercise routine. Prayer involves more than habits and disciplines. It is an ongoing conversation with the Creator of the universe, an intimate encounter with the Holy, and Jesus' reply points to these realities. It may seem like he gives a simplified version of the Lord's prayer which we share each week, and he does, but notice the content of this prayer.

It begins with adoration of God, a calling to revere God's name as holy. It is more about God than us. It then expresses a desire for God's kingdom or realm to come. The first petition is for what God desires, not for what we want. Next, there is a request for daily bread which is ultimately a statement of trust. Rather than asking for a guarantee for a lifetime of security, Jesus suggests we trust God enough to ask for our basic needs to be met one day at a time. There is a request for forgiveness, acknowledging our frailty and calling to forgive one another. It is a request for God to change us. Finally, there is a plea to avoid the time of trial, *peirasmos*, which is not simply temptation but rather all circumstances that imperil faith, especially persecution.

Notice what the prayer includes and what it does not. There isn't much self-interest or presumption. There is a great deal of reverence and humility. This isn't everything Jesus teaches us about prayer, even in this reading, but it is where he begins, it is what he says first, it is what he chooses to underscore, and this is worth noting. It is a calling to broaden our understanding of God, faith, and prayer; to think not just of our needs and concerns but also of what God wants; to view prayer as an opportunity not to sway God but to be swayed by God.

It is true that Jesus goes on to tell a story about a persistent neighbor and ultimately says that we should ask God for what we need,

and it will be given us. Furthermore, in the reading from Genesis, Abraham seems to persuade God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, at least for a time. So, we need to acknowledge that not everything about the future is set in stone, even the future actions of God. On several occasions in the Hebrew canon, God changes God's mind in response to human conduct and/or a persuasive argument from one of God's servants. So, making our petitions and intercessions known to God is appropriate, a part of what prayer involves.

But this is not all there is to prayer, and we do need to ask, "Does Jesus really mean that if we ask for something, anything, God will give it?" When my New Testament professor, Alan Culpepper, was young, he prayed one night that, if God was real, when he woke up in the morning, his top dresser drawer would be filled with fish. He did not get what he wanted... but he still came to embrace God in his own personal way to the benefit of all his students over the years. It is simply not true that we get whatever we pray for; so, what do we do with this teaching?

For one thing, the focus here is on our persistence, not the Providence of God. Jesus is urging us to keep at it, which is not to say keep demanding that we get what we want, but rather keep spending time in God's presence expressing our concerns and listening for God's voice speaking to us in return.

Then we need to note what Jesus says at the very end of this passage. "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Jesus doesn't promise that we will have every desire granted. He promises the Spirit, God's presence with us, which is what we need most.

In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner says that for Jesus the most important thing about prayer is to keep at it. The images are comic as God is like a friend to whom you go to borrow bread at midnight and who gives in only when you won't go away (Luke 11) or a crooked judge who refuses to hear the case of a poor widow until she hounds him so much that he hears the case just to get her out of his hair (Luke 18). Keep at it, Buchner says is Jesus' advice, believe in miracles, trust in God, believe Somebody is listening as Jesus told the father who

asked him to heal his epileptic son — all things are possible to those who believe (Mark 9). Then, Buechner concludes with these words.

What about when the boy is not healed? When, listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? Who knows? Just keep praying, Jesus says. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge. Even if the boy dies, keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if (God) does not bring you the answer you want, (God) will bring you (Godself). And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for (pp. 70-71).

Indeed! That is what we are really praying for, underneath our specific requests; whether we realize it or not, what we need most is God.

The good news is we will not be disappointed. We may have different understandings of and divergent experiences with prayer, but there is one thing we all have in common. We will meet the God we seek because even if our seeking is imprecise, God is seeking us too.