

I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About... *Does Prayer Work?*

Luke 11:9-13

August 4, 2024

So, I'm out for breakfast with a couple who have been worshiping with us occasionally, off and on, for several months. I know that they are interested in learning more about the church because they accepted my invitation to a meal. But I also know from our brief conversation after worship that church is something new for them, something they are just beginning to explore in this new chapter of life. So, we meet at a coffee shop, tables filled with other young professionals on laptops sipping lattes. We sit down and stare nervously at our avocado toast. The silence is filled with suspense. Well, probably not, but at least that's how I perceive it. Why? Well, because in that very moment, a decision must be made. To pray or not to pray? Do I bow my head and risk being the presumptively pious pastor praying in public? Or do I skip it and leave these potential parishioners pondering the possibility that the preacher is a pagan? For me in that moment, the stakes feel high.

I wonder if you have ever been in a similar situation. The awkward dis-ease. In some ways it's a minor concern. After all, there are many different ways to give thanks, including in the silence of our hearts. But I do think that it demonstrates the discomfort, even among the most faithful among us, with the practice of prayer. Many of us are unclear about what prayer *is*. Or perhaps, more to the point, what prayer *does*. Some have abandoned the practice altogether as archaic, outdated, antiquated, unscientific. Others among us continue the discipline with about as much passion as brushing our teeth. Just a part of the daily routine. Going through the motions. Checking off the to do list as a part of our spiritual hygiene plan.

This morning, we renew our annual tradition of August sermons on questions the preacher often hears. And

it may not surprise you that I already have next year's list in mind. I am blessed with a congregation of deep thinkers! This week we take up a question I have heard from young children and older adults, a question I have heard in hospital rooms and on youth group retreats, a question I have been asked by those struggling with big, life-altering decisions, those processing terrible news, those grieving difficult loss. Does prayer work?

And as with any profound theological question, this seemingly straightforward quandary immediately brings up others. For starters, what *is* prayer?

And here I think we have some important deconstructing to do, because the most pervasive and misguided understanding of prayer in popular culture is as a wish list for God who must either fulfill our demands or risk losing our devotion. Perhaps like me, you've heard more than a few preachers deliver articulate and exhilarating explanations of prayer that simply turn God into a kind of magical vending machine. We deposit our prayers, and God delivers the results for which we pray. Anyone who lives a real life in the real world knows the transparent falseness of this claim, and yet when we hear it—packaged well, shiny, and new—it feels so good to us, so convenient, so comforting, so compelling. Perhaps you've heard it. Whenever prayers go up, blessings come down.

Except that they don't. Not always. Not automatically. Not in the way that we hope or imagine. The problem with a faith dependent on God's customer service record is that it ignores divine sovereignty and human limitation. Perhaps worse, it cheapens the practice of prayer. It sets God up for failure and us up for disappointment.

Perhaps truer to our lived experience, especially for those who have given up on the practice of prayer, is a deep frustration with God's lack of response. We diligently pray for loved ones who do not experience the dramatic healing we hope. We persistently pray for patience, and then we lash out at those who upset us. We passionately pray for peace and then watch as the world careens toward violent conflict. We pray diligently for guidance and then feel no clear sense of direction. We see no answer written in the clouds. No voice booming from heaven. In fact, the silence of God is often more consistent than God's response to our requests.

And so, sometimes we assume that God is not present or does not care. I have to say, however, that this perspective also seems to me to miss the mark or misunderstand the meaning of prayer. Every time I consider the perceived silence of God in the contemporary world, I can't help but think of the amount of noise we create. If God is speaking, how would we ever hear in a culture flooded with the noise of our babble? Perhaps the sense that God is not speaking is rather an indication that we have stopped, or forgotten how, to listen.

I love the story of Mother Teresa. A reporter once asked her (of course, Mother Teresa was known to spend hours each morning in prayer). The reporter asked, "What do you say to God during your time in prayer?" Mother Teresa's response: "I don't say much. I mostly listen." Well, intrigued by the answer, the reporter asked the obvious follow-up question. "Well, what does God say?" Mother Teresa smiled. "God doesn't say much. God mostly listens."

In the verses just before our passage, the disciples have asked Jesus a practical question. Teach us how to pray. What they want is what we want. A method. A manual. A process. A formula. We want the how, the when, and the where.

In our text, Jesus shifts the question. Not how. Not when. Not where. Not even why. Jesus is interested in *who*. He wants his disciples to know *who* God

is. He wants them to know the God to whom they pray. Prayer is rooted in relationship. Prayer is a conversation. We listen. God listens. The practice of prayer, modeled for us in scripture, is one of active listening and genuine vulnerability. Prayer is not about proving ourselves to God (or to prospective church members). Prayer is not about demanding God prove anything to us. We pray because we know and love the God to whom we pray.

Before he was a journalist, Bill Moyers served as Special Assistant to President Lyndon Johnson. The story goes that one Sunday he was invited to the White House for dinner, and since Moyers is an ordained pastor, the President asked him to bless the meal. As he was praying, President Johnson could not hear the words he was speaking and so said to Moyers in that way President Johnson could, "Bill, I can't hear you. Speak up, man! Speak up!" With that, Bill Moyers looked up and calmly answered, "Mr. President, with all due respect, I am not speaking to you." There was a very long pause. The President sighed deeply and lowered his head for the rest of the prayer.

Listen to this. The substance of our prayers depends on our understanding of the God to whom we pray. *Who* is this God? There are many answers. If the recipient of our prayers is a Santa Claus in the sky, then why not make a list of what we want? If we are praying to a divine vending machine, yes, deposit our prayers and make our selections. If we are convinced that this granter of prayers is partial to our tribe and subject to our whims, why not ask God for victory on the court, the field, the election, the war? If we can place the one to whom we pray in a box of our own creation, our prayers will reflect that impoverished theology. We put God on a leash. Our prayers are weak, subject to our personal preference.

If, on the other hand, we are praying to the sovereign Lord whose power is defined by compassion, we will think differently about the prayers we offer. For starters, we will pray with humility. We will ask for

God's wisdom. We will pray with confidence. We may even have the courage to pray for our enemies, recognizing that they too belong to God. That's why I think an authentic practice of prayer should come with a warning label—if you choose to pray, *you* will be changed. Sometimes prayer works by working on us. Opening our eyes. Softening our hearts. Changing our minds. Reordering our values.

I pray because I believe in a God who desires relationship, a God we can know, whose love we can experience. In response to the disciples' request, what Jesus offers is an invitation to approach God Almighty with the same intimacy, boldness, and trust as a child running to her parent for protection and provision. And so, to pray is to lean on God's strength when we cannot rely on our own. Prayer is not about getting the things we want from God but about deepening the relationship we have *with* God. We listen. God listens.

As we raise two sons and do our best to teach them the faith that we have received, I am filled daily with gratitude for the gift of my pastor-spouse and her attentiveness to the practices of faith. A few weeks ago, at dinnertime, Sara suggested that, instead of a spoken aloud prayer, we try sharing a silent moment to listen for God's voice together. We made it 15 seconds. And after that prayer, she explained that the Bible says we can speak to God even without words. She asked the boys what they thought that might mean.

Samuel said it was like when something is so beautiful you can't describe it, but you know God sees it too. Ben, who had a challenging day, said it's like this: sometimes you are angry, and you want to say something nice, but you can't, and God knows what you *want* to say. These beautiful perspectives on the meaning of prayer. We listen. God listens.

Friends, to say prayer *works* has nothing to do with measuring God's batting average. To say prayer works is not to suggest that we get what we ask for or the results we've demanded. The work of prayer is rooted

in relationship, grounded in the trust that the God of the universe is also our loving parent: attentive to our struggle, aware of our deepest need, present in our life, eager to give good gifts. The work of prayer is about getting our priorities into alignment with God's priorities. The practice of prayer means becoming more like the One to whom we pray, defined by compassion, driven by love. Yes, the work of prayer is coming to know God, who gives us *not* everything we *want*, but what we most *need*.

Give us this day our daily bread. Grace enough for today. Hope sufficient for tomorrow. Amen.