

**SLD10.15.09 29<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Tough Questions Series**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Proverbs 3:5-6**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Why Do We Pray?”**

According to a recent survey of my own imagination, 92.4% of people who pray ask God for what they want. 4.6% focus on praise, confession or thanksgiving, 2.2% commune in silence, and the other 0.8% fall asleep.

Okay, I made those statistics up but can you dispute them?

Don't most of us who pray ask for what we want? I do. *We* do. When somebody's sick, we want God to help them get well. I want Jane to get well, for example. And I want God to hold Ann's daughter, Judy, very, very tenderly as she recovers from her double mastectomy. Don't you? Shouldn't God?

People are losing jobs right and left and I want God to give 'em back. I want God to keep Bennett and Bill safe on their nutty road trip to Saskatchewan. I want God to grow this church – not huge or anything; we like our intimacy – just enough to spread the wealth, literally and figuratively, of relationship, opportunity and service.

What do *you* want? What do *you* pray for? I'm confident you've got your own list: your family, your friends, your kids, maybe your faith, your health, your broken heart; your neighbor's marriage, your co-worker's mom, a workable solution to health care in this country, world peace. We may not all pray regularly but we've all got our list of what we'd pray for if we did. And the list goes on. See the back of your bulletins – requests for prayer for me, the Session, our 2010 budget, the Dimmocks, Children's Hospital, Jacob Geerlings, our sick, our homebound. The list will always go on, and so it should.

Didn't the apostle Paul tell folks in Philippi not to worry about anything, but "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God?" (Phil 4:6) Didn't Jesus assure his disciples to "ask, and it will be given; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened?" Sure he did.

So we faithful, we believers, we seekers, even we indifferent, we doubters and we stumblers, we're *meant* to take everything to God in prayer. "Remember me, O God, and make yourself known in time of affliction," goes the antiphon.<sup>1</sup> "Give ear to my prayer, O God, and do not hide yourself from my supplication." (Ps 55)

That we can always turn to God in prayer is our hope, our comfort, our consolation, and sometimes the only choice we've got. As Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." And so are we, many times...driven to our knees by the overwhelming conviction that we have nowhere else to go.

Doesn't mean we get what we ask for, though, does it. Doesn't mean God necessarily delivers what we want. In fact, there are those who suggest that the consistency with which we believers *don't* get what we want, never mind when and how we want it, begs the question of just why we bother to ask. "People say to me continually," laments the psalmist, "Where is your God?" (Ps 42) And I say, the people have a point. Why, even that most faithful of all petitioners, Job, never got what *he* asked for.

Of course, examine Jesus' and Paul's words like an attorney and you'll notice that whereas Paul urges the Philippians to let their requests be made *known* to God, he doesn't say anything about getting what they ask for. And when Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given you," he doesn't say exactly *what* will be given. "Search and you will find"...what? What will

---

<sup>1</sup> People's Companion to the Breviary, the Carmelites of Indianapolis, 1997. P.179.

you find? Jesus says. “Knock and the door shall be opened.” Yeah, but what, exactly, is on the other side of that door?

Still, for those of us who’ve asked ‘til we’re blue in the face, knocked ‘til our knuckles are bloody, and searched ‘til we’ve ‘bout given up, this hardly satisfies. What, really, are we supposed to think about God’s perennial lack of cooperation?!

Well, generally what we faithful, at least we mainstream, western, Protestant faithful, think, is that we should sort of underplay our frequent disappointment in God, chalking it up to some greater plan, better place, or teachable moment. Yet on the odd occasion when God actually *delivers* what we ask for, we make a really big deal about the efficacy of prayer, confidently declaring to one another: “Prayer really works.” “Don’t underestimate the power of prayer!” “God truly answers prayer.”

God’s people have always been that way.

When they escape enemies, win wars and satisfy their hunger with manna, what a production Israel makes about glorifying God! But let their enemies catch up with ‘em, lots of people die, and then get bored to tears with manna and then it’s all about “Why have you forsaken us, Lord?” For surely if God doesn’t deliver what we ask for, God must be taking the day off. Either God’s angry or absent or teaching a lesson or punishing a sin...there’s got to be *some* explanation.

The Gospels, after all, are all about Jesus’ miracles of healing, are they? They don’t say much about the gnarly lady standing right *next* to the bent over woman, who never could get close enough to touch Jesus’ cloak. Or that eleventh leper, hovering next to the ten, trying to get Jesus’ attention. He never did. Or how about the paralytic who *didn’t* have enough friends who’d go to the trouble of hauling him up and lowering him down from the roof

of the house where Jesus was teaching. No question about it but that there were a whole lot more folks in scripture's world who *don't* get what they want than those who do.

Still, as with the state lottery, so with prayer: an occasional big win is all it takes to hold our hope, to activate our anticipation.

You can see, can't you, why many a non-believer finds this rather unreliable arrangement between petitioner and Divine Will somewhat odd, naïve, and unsatisfactory, if not self-demeaning. Even for your average believer, while prayer helps us get through most days, most dramas, most despair, we're hardly immune to suspending judgment, numbing out, or simply giving up on God.

Allow me to point out, though, that later in the ask, seek, knock passage, Jesus tells his listeners what God *does* give to those who pray. It may not be exactly what we're counting on but what God gives those who pray is...the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). Say you ask for your child to get well – God sends the Holy Spirit. Or you pray for the lagging budget of the church – God sends the Holy Spirit. Or you plead for peace in the world, or the end of war, or a certain person to live, or to come home, or to forgive you, or to govern this country, and God sends...you guessed it...the Holy Spirit.

Not that it always satisfies but it *is* what God sends – the Holy Spirit. As though the purpose of prayer and the measure of its effectiveness, at least from God's point of view, is not so much the particular requested outcome as the perception, our perception, and *reception*, of the presence of God.

This is an idea that John Calvin echoes. In the third volume of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin says that when we call on God for help, we “invoke the presence of

God's providence, power and goodness – the providence through which God watches over and guards our affairs, God reveals God's self as wholly present to us."<sup>2</sup>

Ask and you shall receive – the Holy Spirit.

Great. The thing is, that's not usually what we're going for, is it. I mean, the Spirit's nice and all that but most of us prefer an action plan, don't we? An intervention? A miracle or two to straighten things out the way they *should* be?

But followers of Jesus Christ haven't always had that attitude. The 4<sup>th</sup> century desert mothers and fathers of Egypt held a different view. For these intense spiritual warriors, some living in community, some as hermits, the primary goal of prayer was to deepen one's connection, one's friendship, with God. While the Ammas and Abbas agreed that we're meant to take everything to God in prayer, and that we cannot help but hope to receive what we ask for, the real aim of prayer for them was a shared life with God. For the desert mothers and fathers, prayer was less a product of a moment's fervent desire than of a process of relationship and trust building over a lifetime. A continual back and forth movement between humanity and God in every dimension and activity of our lives, throughout all our days.

Not that prayer was considered an easy, or even natural, process. In fact, the monastics frequently spoke of prayer as "warfare to the last breath," an endless struggle in which we come face to face with parts of ourselves we'd rather not see, a battle in which we wrestle with God the way Jacob wrestled with the angel at Peniel. The story is told of a desert brother asking Abba Agathon, "amongst all the good works, Father, which is the virtue

---

<sup>2</sup> The Institutes of the Christian Religion, III,xx,10.

which requires the greatest effort?” Abba Agathan replies, “Forgive me, my son, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer....”<sup>3</sup>

And never, of course, is that labor more difficult than when God seems absent altogether.

But in case you wonder why prayer’s worth the trouble, there’s a more modern body of believers that weighs in on the matter. Alcoholics Anonymous echoes the 4<sup>th</sup> century monastics’ description of as a continual back and forth movement between humanity and God in every dimension and activity of our lives. Hear the eleventh of AA’s twelve steps toward sobriety. It reads, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”

Seek, through prayer and meditation, to improve our conscious contact with God – the wisdom not just of 4<sup>th</sup> century monks and monettes, but of generations of present day folks who have stumbled through and emerged from the valley of the shadow. And I’ll tell you, the warriors of AA are real clear that there’s no reaching Step Twelve, spiritual awakening, without it. In his book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*<sup>4</sup>, Bill Wilson, after spelling out all the reasons why *not* to pray – that prayer is unconvincing, unprovable, unreliable, illogical, demeaning, and generally better left to clergy – writes, “those of us who have come to make regular use of prayer would no more do without it than we would refuse air, food, or sunshine. And for the same reason,” he says. “When we refuse air, light, or food, the body suffers. And when we turn away from meditation and prayer, we likewise deprive our minds, our emotion, and our intuitions of vitally needed support. As the body can fail its purpose for lack

---

<sup>3</sup> Roberta Bondi, *To Love and To Pray*

<sup>4</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill Wilson, AA World Services, pp 95-105.

of nourishment, so can the soul,” cautions Bill W. “We all need the light of God’s reality, the nourishment of God’s strength, and the atmosphere of God’s grace.”

So there it is again – the purpose and product of prayer – not getting what one wants, but sharing one’s life with the light of God’s reality, the nourishment of God’s strength, and the atmosphere of God’s grace so that, not God, or outward circumstances, but we, ourselves, might be changed. Praying is for sharing our lives with God

After all, as Calvin writes, it’s not as though “God were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until aroused by the sound of our voice.... No, the Lord instructs his people to pray, not so much for his sake as for ours...so that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love and serve God.”

This is the first reason Calvin gives to pray. Never one short on advice, he offers five more: to pour out our whole hearts before God, to prepare ourselves to receive God’s response with gratitude, to meditate more ardently upon God’s kindness, to take delight in what we do receive, and finally, to be assured that God never fails us but ever extends a divine “hand...in present help.”<sup>5</sup>

So why should we pray?

Well, we’ve all got our reasons, our wants and hopes and desires. And ready as we are to lift them, God is that ready to receive them. But according to Jesus, Paul, the 4<sup>th</sup> century desert Ammas and Abbas, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century adherents to AA, there’s more to prayer than plugging in to a heavenly vending machine. Prayer is living hope. That is, hope that is living, dynamic, at work in our lives. The act of praying is living into that hope. Share your life with God, align yourself with God’s will, surrender to what you don’t understand yet dare to trust, and what’ll change is not God, not outward circumstance, but *yourself*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., III, XX, 3.

As to when should we pray, the writer of the book of James weigh in with a word: Are any among you suffering? he asks. They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:13-16) Pray for one another, says James. And, I would add, for yourselves. And pray without ceasing, chimes in the Apostle Paul (I Thess. 5:17)

And, oh yeah, when you can't? (For who of us can pray without ceasing?) Just pray as much as you can. And when you don't feel like it, have somebody pray for you. (Me, I often go to Roz Hardin.) And when you can't even be bothered to do that, recall that Paul also says (Ro. 8:27) that the Holy Spirit is ever interceding for us with sighs too deep for words. That is, whether or not we're *personally* "plugged in," we're being prayed for all the time.

Only it looks like something different happens when *we* pray, when we *do* plug into that "atmosphere of God's grace" and open ourselves towards a will beyond our own. Something life changing and life-sustaining. 19<sup>th</sup> century British Baptist evangelist, F. B. Meyer, remarked, "The great tragedy of our lives is not unanswered prayer, but *unoffered* prayer." Because prayer is how we share our life with God.

There are as many ways to pray as there are personalities on this earth; it hardly matters when, where, or how you do it. For those who long for God and seek a life of peace through faith, the Abbas and Ammas have only this advice: pray. Share your life with God. Acknowledge God in *all* your ways, and it will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

To the glory of God. Amen.