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Luke 11:1-13
July 28, 2019

“The Real Power of Prayer”
The Rev. Dr. Brandon Perrine

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will our heavenly God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!"

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Two men were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Frustrated by their situation one man began to pray, “Dear Lord, I know that I haven’t been a very good person. In the past I have lied, cheated, and hurt people with my behavior. I drink, smoke, swear and gamble. But God, if you get us out of this mess, you’ll see a changed man. I’ll...” At this point his friend shouted, “Hold it. Don’t say another word. I see a boat and it is coming in our direction.” It is interesting how some people view prayer.¹

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It is interesting, right? How do you view prayer? What is prayer? Think about that for a moment...

This morning, we’re going to talk about prayer—what it is, when and how it is done, what it does, and why we may choose to do it...or not. Then I’m going to be a bit vulnerable with you and tell you my own feelings about prayer. We’ll see if you find them compelling. And we’ll consider all of this against the backdrop of the prayer Jesus’ taught his disciples in this morning’s reading from Luke’s gospel.

Christians often interpret prayer to be the act of petitioning God on behalf of themselves or others. Prayers may be said aloud or simply thought. Often, praise, thankfulness, and repentance are also interwoven in prayer. Some people pray in the morning when they awake, some people pray in the evening before they sleep, some people pray before meals, before tests, or in the midst of challenges. And some people don’t pray much at all.

Once, before a meeting, a participant asked me how I learned to pray—if there were classes on it in seminary. I sort of chuckled, but the truth is, no, there were no classes on praying in seminary and there is no “right” or “wrong” way to pray. Jesus’ friends too thought there must be a “right”

¹ Cited from: *Emphasis: A Preaching Journal for the Parish Pastor*, Vol. 25, No. 2, July-August 1995 (Lima: OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc.), p. 36.

way to pray and they asked Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray.” So he did, though I sincerely doubt that he thought it was the *only* way to pray. Honestly, it’s pretty easy to define prayer, to prescribe times for doing it, even to give a template for how it can be done. It’s more difficult, however, to explain what exactly prayer does. What does prayer do? What do you think?

Some people believe that prayer changes God’s mind or spurs God to act on behalf of someone or some situation. Some people believe that prayer changes the outcome of a medical test or course of treatment. Some people believe that prayer secures God’s favor for their favorite sports team or their home country. Some people even believe that prayer can help them find their keys or help them win the lottery. Are they right? Does prayer really do those things? I don’t think it’s my place to say, but I do believe that prayer does something else.

I believe prayer’s greatest power is its ability to change us—to challenge, to empower, to embolden, to change...me. 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard put it this way: “Prayer does not change God, but it changes [the one] who prays.” 20th century author Wilferd Peterson stated that, “Prayer does not change God, it changes us. It deepens insight, increases intuitive perception, expands consciousness. It transforms personality.” Prayer changes us and that, I think, is a very good reason to pray.

Reflecting on why he prays daily, bishop John Shelby Spong once wrote that, “I do expect to be made more whole, to be set free to share my life more deeply with others, to be enabled to love beyond my boundaries and to watch the barriers that divide me from those I once avoided lowered.” He goes on to state that prayer, for him, “is the practice of the presence of God, the act of embracing transcendence and the discipline of sharing with another the gifts of living, loving and being.”²

² Spong, John Shelby. *Unbelievable*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019, p. 254.

Whatever else prayer may or may not do, I believe prayer changes us. It attunes us to the needs of others, inspires awe and gratitude, provides for the possibility of a new perspective, and prompts us to act on behalf of all those we promise to keep in “our thoughts and prayers.” Prayer changes us.

The 14th century theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart once said that, “Some people want to see God with their eyes as they see a cow, and to love [God] as they love a cow—for the milk and cheese and profit it brings them.” It’s true, isn’t it, that many approach God in prayer as some sort of cosmic Santa Claus waiting to receive their wish-lists and decide if they’ve been naughty or nice enough to get what they’re asking for? Is that really all prayer is? I don’t think so, and I don’t think Jesus did either.

As he taught his disciples to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom, for daily bread, for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus was actively working to bring about heaven’s realm of justice, peace, and plenty on the earth; he was providing daily bread for others; and he was proclaiming forgiveness to others. Jesus was living as though he was the response to his own prayer! And I think that’s what prayer does for us, too. It attunes us to the needs of others, inspires awe and gratitude, provides for the possibility of a new perspective, and prompts us to act on behalf of others and the earth itself. Prayer changes us and that, I think, is a very good reason to pray. Amen.