

OF PRAYER  
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First Baptist Church

The scripture readings for this morning focus on the life of prayer. There are two parables, remarkably alike — the parable of the friend at midnight and the parable of the unjust judge. The one is introduced by the disciples' request — Lord, teach us how to pray; the other by the statement that Jesus spoke the parable to the end that men ought always to pray, and not to faint. Both point to the primacy and priority of prayer and face the question whether prayer availeth ought, makes a difference. Together they suggest that religion and prayer go together. And yet there is always the question in our secular age whether prayer has any role in a world ruled by natural causes, or, granting the existence of a divine Power or God, we ask how can our petty petitions have any effect in the divine economy ruled by God. Let us turn to the parables for illumination.

The first parable is a homely and amusing illustration that very probably springs from Jesus' own experience. Here is the situation. A traveler wandering alone at night comes to the house of a friend at midnight. The law of hospitality requires that the friend be given shelter and bread. But the would-be host is embarrassed because he has no bread to serve. And so he goes to the home of a friend at that late hour, explains his predicament and asks for the bread. But it is late, very late. The household is settled for the night, and the friend makes it clear that he cannot be bothered at that hour to upset the household to get some bread for his friend. But the man will not be quiet; he pounds away at the door until the friend finally decided to open the door and give him what he wants. The point of the story seems to be that the man would not get up to give the bread to the other man because he was his friend, but rather just because the man was so shamefully persistent.

The text reads, "Though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will arise and give him as much as is needed." The word translated "importunity" means "shamelessness" and indicates that the man is being hounded out of his bed by the persistence of his friend.

Now we cannot apply this story directly to God. This would-be host has to beat on his friend's door to make him respond to his need. It is not suggested, I think, that we have to beat on the doors of heaven in prayer to make God pay attention. We don't have to ring bells or clap our hands to get the attention of God as they do in Japan in Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines. Nor is it suggested that God is reluctant to hear the need of someone. No — this is the familiar general argument that takes the form of — if we will respond to the pleading of a friend, surely God will be even more responsive. If we, being evil, know how to give good things to our children, surely God will much more so give good to the children of men. The friend may be reluctant to get up in the middle of the night to help a friend, but God who neither slumbers nor sleeps shall be alert to the needs of us all, and freely give all things needed.

The moral seems to be: man must be shamelessly persistent in prayer not because God requires this to be moved, but rather because man must be clearly motivated by a sincere desire, an earnest quest, a passionate sense of urgency, as exhibited by the persistency of his pleas. He must hammer his fists not at the walls of heaven to make God hear; but he must hammer his fists against the walls of his own making which shut him off from God by means of casual or insincere petition. Prayer must above all be sincere. Persistence implies this sincerity. Prayer must represent one's dominant desire to be effective. In the words of James Montgomery: "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed; the motion of a hidden fire that trembles in the breast." The parable, then, points to a basic teaching of Jesus: if one is to approach God, he must do so with the intensity born of urgent need and dominant desire. This is required not because such persistence, such intensity is needed to make God hear, but rather because it is required to make clear what we really want and pray for, what our dominant desire is, and then we may be ready to hear what God has to say to us. Prayer, you see, — persistence in prayer — results not so much in changing God or the objective situation; prayer results in changing ourselves, in clarifying our goals and values, in balancing our strengths and weaknesses, and in giving us a sense of direction. The persistence which symbolizes the struggles of prayer, represents the struggle with ourselves, not God. It is not our struggle with God but rather His struggle with us — our pride, our weakness, our vacillation — that needs to be resolved by the persistence of prayer.

If there is any doubt about the meaning of the persistence, importunity, in this parable, the second one serves as valuable commentary and support for it, making the same point. The introduction to the parable makes its meaning, its point, clear. Luke says, "And He spake a parable unto them to this end that men ought always to pray and not grow weary in praying."

It is tempting to think that this parable might have a biographical base. Tradition has it that Joseph died when Jesus was quite young leaving His mother a widow. It is clear that Jesus had a concern for the plight of the widow and orphan. His anger blazed out against those who devoured widows' houses and ignored the need of the orphan. At any rate, the story tells of a widow who has a case and needs a judge to support it. But the judge in the parable is an unjust one; he fears neither God nor man. There was no way in which the widow could move him. She had neither money to bribe him nor power to coerce him. The only thing she could do was to wear him down by persistent pleading until finally the judge said, "Although I fear not God, or regard man, yet because this woman keeps troubling me, I will avenge her lest she wear me out by her continual coming."

The same argument form is being used here. If with all his unrighteousness this unjust judge can be moved to respond to help the widow, how much more will the loving God in Heaven respond to the persistent prayers of the faithful. It may well be the original hearers of this gospel needed this assurance in a time of adversity when God seemed far away, and Roman cruelty very near, and they needed reassurance. The story closes with a darker note which betrays Jesus' anxiety for the sincerity, persistency, and faithfulness of his followers when He asks, "Nevertheless when the Son of Man comes, shall He find faith on the earth?"

Putting these parables together, then, if we are to answer the question how should one pray — or the question how can one be effective in prayer — the answer is be persistent — urgent — sincere. This persistency is reflected in the famous verse “Ask and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” The verb form is present imperative. In the Greek it means, “Keep on asking, persist without pause in your seeking, keep on knocking and you will have a response.” Again, persistence, faithful seeking — even importunity — seems required as a measure of sincerity.

Prayer, then, is ineffective when it is not sincere, when it does not reflect what we really want. There is a nice saying that makes a nice sampler — as a matter of fact, my wife has embroidered it on a pillow for our daughter — it reads, “O Lord, grant me patience — but I want it right now.” There is a logical problem in demanding patience immediately which reflects the large problem of what our dominant desires really are. Any lazy student can pray to get by on an examination. This is not a sincere commitment to be informed. Any idler can pray to be wealthy; this is not a sincere motivation to self-improvement. Any irresolute person can pray for a strong character; any weak person can pray to be freed of an addiction. But a sincere desire coupled with a firm resolve is something else again and it must be hammered out — not by hammering at the walls of heaven, but by hammering out and sorting out our own wills and desires, and hopes and commitments — in a persistent endeavor to see ourselves as we are and as we might be — and this means in the light of God and through the example of His Son.

But what of unanswered prayer? As Wordsworth puts it: ” Whence can comfort spring when prayer is of no avail?” It may be, but I think this may be overstating it, that we always do get what we really pray for. If the weak person’s desire is really to remain in the indulgence of his weakness in spite of his protestations to the contrary; if his prayer for strength to subdue his weakness is not sincere, he may very well get what he really prays for, if not what he truly needs and should achieve as a son of God. Then, too, sometimes the answers to prayers require a delay that seems a lack of response until our motives are purified. The story is told of Galileo who went to a shrine to pray for money, health, renown, success — until he finally earnestly prayed for illumination and a knowledge that would benefit mankind. Sometimes we pray for easy answers. and there aren’t any. Sometimes we pray for that which we should not or can not have. Hereclitus said it is not good for men to get what they wish. Sometimes with all our sincerity we pray for that for which God’s answer is a “No”. We pray that that problem will go away, and we are forced to face it and grow. We pray that we will be spared that illness — and have to learn the humility of mortal frailty and the wonder of God’s healing power. We pray that that spectre of death will go away from a loved one — and it does not — and we are left to remember the beauty of that life and learn that it somehow can never die. We must in the life of prayer share the agony of Jesus Himself Who prayed persistently, repeatedly in the Garden, so hard that the sweat dropped off like blood from His brow. Three times he prayed, “Father, all things are possible with Thee. If Thou be willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine, be done.” And yet as we know, God was at hand in the bitterness of His trials with the triumphant power of the Spirit. When the answer is “no”, when God does not seem to give us the things we petition, know that there is the gift of the Holy Spirit to sustain us.

It is not so much unanswered prayer that is the enemy of the life of prayer. Rather it is the reluctance to practice prayer at all, and prayer like everything else requires practice. Someone might say, “I do not pray because I do not find God real in my life.” It would be truer to say, “I do not find God real in my life because I do not pray.” Prayer is a way of seeing, a kind of sensitivity, a kind of awareness of the possibilities of existence. There are different kinds of prayer. Some are verbal. Some are felt. Some are modes of actions. For some their very kindness is a blessing and a prayer. Confucius once asked about prayer said, “My whole life has been a prayer.” For some their prayer is a dream of a better world to be that we can achieve — like Martin Luther King’s famous prayer-sermon — “I Have a Dream” — a dream that is closer to realization because it was his prayer.

Like everything else, prayer requires practice. But is in practicing the life of prayer, in stopping to give thanks for the goodness of God and His world, in being sensitive to the beauties that surround us, in being aware of the forces of good at work, in committing ourselves to that good, that somehow one feels more closely related to that which is the source of all these values, and can somehow look forward with a calm confidence.

Some of you have noticed that I have mentioned our fellow countrymen held hostage in every pastoral prayer since their being taken hostage. And one might ask, “What good does this do?” I cannot honestly answer. We may not affect the outcome. We do call attention to their plight. We invite a combined concern to be expressed. We identify with the compassionate love of God. We may very well contribute to the moral force of good over the spirit of violence and Terrorism. At the least it is a natural impulse of the committed Christian to cry out, “O God, help these poor beleaguered souls — O God, may our wills, small as they are, somehow stand firmly for redemptive love over violent passion.” At least we identify this much with what we understand to be God’s purpose and nature. And who knows what hidden tides of spirit may be touched to effect the future? As Tennyson wrote:

More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice  
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.  
For what are men better than sheep or goats  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?  
For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

And Jesus spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.