

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
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The Gift of Unanswered Prayers

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

If you're a fan of country music, you may be familiar with a song by Garth Brooks with the line, "Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." When things don't go as planned, it's easy to assume God has not heard or answered us. But I have come to believe over time, that God listens and answers always according to God's will, not mine. In hindsight, I understand that the thing I fervently ask God to do, may not be in my best interest. If you believe God has a plan for each of us, you see how God ever so gently or not so gently, steers us back to the path of God's will. This may be God's greatest gift: an invitation to wait, or even a closed door that causes us to shift course. Four words in the Lord's Prayer, thy will be done, are essential to understanding how God guides and communicates with us. As we seek to walk God's path, prayer connects us to God's heart.

My own prayer journey started with two simple prayers that became routine. I learned to say my bedtime prayers, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." How could anyone sleep after that prayer? It was superstitious and said without knowing who I was praying to, or for what purpose. Then there was grace, hastily recited before mealtime. Though not particularly formative, these prayers were the beginning of a life-long relationship.

As a young Mom, I mentioned to a member of my Bible study that I was preparing to take an important licensure exam. She said to me, "I'll pray for you" and my response was a quick thank you and wave as I was leaving. But she stopped me in my tracks when she said, "No I meant I'll pray with you." And I looked at her rather incredulously and said now? You mean together? Out loud?" That just wasn't a part of my Episcopalian experience! To sit with someone who would intercede for me, seemed almost too intimate.

Perhaps it was a nudge from the Holy Spirit or my own curiosity, we sat in a quiet place and prayed together. I remember feeling vulnerable and utterly cared for at the same time. A couple of days later, I received a note from this friend who invited me to join her in a prayer partnership. That was the beginning of a fifteen year relationship where we prayed for one another and our families. Our connection deepened, sharing joyful and difficult moments. As we put before God in faith, our needs and thanksgivings, it was also formative spiritually. A tangible opportunity to see God at work, prayer opens the door to the power of relationship.

According to a Gallop poll, 90% of Americans say that they pray. Most can recite at least parts of The Lord's prayer and the 23rd Psalm. But unless we have intentional practices of prayer, the time we are most likely to hit our knees, is in the midst of crisis. One writer suggests that this is like learning to drive a car on the beltway. All we want out of it is to survive. But there is so much more to prayer, than mere survival of our trials. Prayer keeps us connected relationally to God and one another. Our relationships develop as a history of communications and deepen as we share more of ourselves. Imagine if we only took an hour on Sunday to talk with someone important to us, we would miss out on the rich depth of intimacy. So it is, with our relationship to God.

I think the disciples had an inkling of this as they watched their Lord and teacher retreat to a quiet place to commune with God in prayer. They saw a connection, a conversation, a love relationship that seemed to undergird Jesus' life and being. So they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Jesus taught them words that connected them to the personhood of God. It would establish a trusting relationship and was a pattern that reflected both intimacy and community. He said, when you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, and do not bring us to the time of trial.

If we examine this pattern of prayer, the very first thing is that Jesus calls God, Father. In the Aramaic translation "Abba" means Daddy, which implies intimacy, that God considers us family. We can come to God in prayer as a child, seeking guidance and protection, trusting that God cares for us with the love and passion of a parent. "Hallowed" or holy is your name is the establishment in our hearts that God is sovereign. When we say, "thy kingdom come" and add "thy will be done," we give our hearts to God's purposes in our lives. And when we ask for daily bread, Jesus teaches us to only ask for what we need today to sustain us. Trusting that God will provide, we acknowledge our dependence on a loving Lord.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those indebted to us." We are invited to examine just how God's love is reflected in our relationships to one another. Our journey is to be lived out in our communal life together as the Holy Spirit's love flows from vertical to horizontal relationships. Finally, "save us from the time of trial" is the part that is probably said with the most fervency. We ask God to shield us from the adversities of life, and to keep us on the path of God's kingdom. For some, this becomes the proving ground for God's existence. When trials do occur, and hope feels distant, our prayers for one another make God's presence tangible.

After he taught his disciples how to pray, Jesus told them a parable to help them grasp the nature of God's relationship to us. A neighbor knocks on the door late at night asking to borrow bread to serve an unexpected guest. But the man is sleeping and refuses to answer the need. Jesus says the neighbor is to persist, to ask, to search and knock and the door will open, perhaps in unexpected ways. Because we are so loved by God, we will be given much more than we could ask or imagine. Jesus ends his teaching with a promise, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask." Jesus didn't say God will give us what we asked, but God will give the Holy Spirit who works in us for our good purpose.

Today's gospel invites us to reflect on our prayer journey. Do you come to prayer with trust, expectation and persistence or have you given up assuming your prayers have gone unanswered? Are your conversations connecting you to the heart of God? God's compassionate nature draws us into relationship. Lean on the words Jesus taught or if you can tolerate it, simply sit in silence, and trust that God will show up. Find your sacred space, light a candle, meditate on an image. God's answers will come in the depth and breadth of God's love for us. May God bless us in our prayer journey. May Jesus continue to teach us, and the Holy Spirit flow among us. Amen.