

A Confessional Sermon about Prayer

Hosea 1:2-10; Luke 11:1-13

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I must begin with a confession today. In fact, you could call this a confessional sermon. I don't speak often on the topic of prayer. The Luke 11 text is the lectionary text for today. I didn't choose it; it chose me. I avoid speaking about prayer because my experience with prayer is different from much of the popular understanding of prayer. You've heard it just like I have. Some people are glib, even disingenuous, when talking about prayer. They fail to acknowledge the inconsistencies, why some prayers seemingly are answered and some seemingly are not. Some refuse to distinguish between coincidence and answered prayer. My personal circumstances have forced me into raw honesty about prayer. I affirm that truth doesn't need to be propped up by us. Truth is truth and stands on its own merits. We don't need to put a spin on it. So I do not glaze over inconsistencies or pretend something is when it really isn't.

My most profound experiences with prayer are related to my middle daughter, Hannah. At age three months, she began presenting symptoms of a rare neurological disorder that have left her with profound cognitive impairment. Hannah turned 30 last month. She is non-verbal. She is not toilet trained. She cannot feed herself. Her cognitive level is estimated to be about 18 months. *And I want you to know that I have prayed.* As earnestly as I could, I've prayed for Hannah. Hundreds, probably thousands of people, have joined us in praying for her, some with tears in their eyes.

My experience with Hannah is a powerful filter through which I see life, assess theology, and approach prayer. I recoil now, even take offense, when I hear glib, superficial comments about prayer. Why would God provide someone with a parking space on a busy day of shopping, but not heal my daughter? Why would God direct a tornado away from your house, only to have it hit your neighbor's house? I don't

confront people and make an issue of it. I just choose not to talk about it, until the lectionary text chooses me.

You and I both know what this text says about prayer. It says it in the Sermon on the Mount too: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.” There is either a disconnect between what Jesus says and what I’ve experienced, or this text means something other than the obvious. So how are we to understand this teaching of Jesus about prayer?

Let me first address what prayer is. Just what do we mean when we talk about prayer? Some have defined prayer as “talking to God,” which suggests a one-way conversation, us “informing” God of something. We need help with this or that or the other, so we inform God of our need. But does God really need to be informed? If God is omniscient, meaning all-knowing, then God doesn’t need us to inform God of anything. Some go a step further and describe prayer as “communicating with God,” which suggests a two-way exchange. We express our needs and then listen for the leading of God. That’s certainly better but, in my opinion, still falls short.

I want you to hear this statement by a man named Basil Pennington. He was a Cistercian monk and was a friend of Thomas Merton. They both wrote extensively on prayer and spirituality. He wrote this,

*(Prayer) is not talking to God, which most people think of as prayer. It’s lectio divina, listening to the divine speak to us—not just through Scripture, but through the experience of the divine spirit. You have to see that your thoughts are nowhere big enough, and go beyond ideas about God to the direct experience (of God). Quoted in *The New York Times Magazine*, March 21, 1993*

I like that. Go beyond ideas about God to the direct experience of God. It’s the difference between talking about love and being in love, experiencing it for yourself. He’s right; our finite language and images cannot hold the infinite nature of God. We cannot stuff the infinite into the finite. Therefore, if our prayers use only language and images, then

our prayers are inherently stunted. Pennington suggests that we must go beyond language and ideas to direct experience with God.

I also like this definition from my friend John Killinger. He and I reconnected about a month ago. Prayer, he says, is “the act of being with God.” (John Killinger, *Prayer: The Act of Being with God*) It may include words, but does not require them. It is not dependent upon time or place or posture. It is dependent solely upon the focus of one’s heart and mind upon God, being with God.

I talked with Pat Hallum about this recently. I took Communion to her home, and she told me about a class she took once with Sister Kathleen Flood. I think some of you were in the same class. Sister Flood belongs to the Dominican Order, sometimes referred to as the Order of Preachers. She told Pat and the class that she no longer prayed for *the answers*, as if she knew what was best in every situation. Instead, she said she held her loved ones *in the circle of God’s light and love*.

Hold them in the circle of God’s light and love.

I confess it is arrogant for me to think I know what is best for Hannah. I may think I do, but do I really? She and I are both better served when I hold her in the circle of God’s light and love.

Lectio divina. The act of being with God, who is ever present and awaiting our attention, like the father of the prodigal son waiting for his son to look up from the pig pen and come home. Prayer is awareness of being in the presence of One who loves us more than we can imagine, who accepts us as a son or daughter, who validates our existence on this earth. Prayer then is not just for the purpose of getting things from God. We pray in order to experience God, the Ground of our Being, and to give ourselves to the One who is our Source of Life. We pray in order to be with God, and as we do that regularly our life begins to grow richer, more centered, deeper and more joyful.

Now, while that is all true, what about Luke 11? Ask, and it will be given you. Is it that simple? Clearly, clearly it is not. Those three verbs ask, search, and knock in the Greek language are present tense imperatives, meaning that we are to keep on asking, keep on searching,

and keep on knocking. So I do that, for Hannah and for you, but I do it with a changed perspective now. I have come to accept that prayer is not the Dominoes Pizza delivery line, where you place your order and it turns up piping hot on your doorstep exactly as ordered. No, my perspective has changed. And that change has helped me be more grateful for what I do have. Rather than clamoring for what I do not have and will not have, I can be grateful for what I do have, and that is healing.

Ask, search, and knock: is it possible that this is one of those texts where the obvious meaning is not the intended meaning? Some theologians believe Jesus was really talking here about the Kingdom of God, the reign of God in our lives. Ask for God to be alive in your life. Never grow tired of that. Keep on asking, and it will be given to you. Search for God, every moment. Do not stop searching for God, and you will find that God is present every moment. Knock and knock and knock again, and the door to faith and hope and truth and love will be opened to you. Not only is it possible; I think that is exactly what Jesus meant.

Roberta Bondi, the theologian and church history professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University and our lecturer a few years ago, has written about her journey in learning to pray. She says that she first had to unlearn a lot of things she had been taught about prayer. After many years, she began to learn a kind of prayer that is non-verbal. No language. No mental images. Prayer came to be an occasion simply to be with God. She now says that prayer “is a sharing of the whole self and an entire life with God.”

Bondi finds Mary and Martha’s relationship with Jesus, recorded at the end of Luke 10, to be a good model for prayer. Mary and Martha, you may remember, were friends of Jesus. They genuinely loved him, and he loved them. They were not submissive or subservient. They were not afraid of Jesus. They were not secretly angry with him. They told him when they were angry and why. It was a relationship of trust. (*Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life*, pp. 33-34, 43-44).

Do you remember who was there at the end? Not Peter. Not James or John. It was Mary.

That is my honest, confessional sermon about prayer. I still pray, “Lord, teach us to pray.” So we’re not disappointed, Lord, so we don’t have to make excuses, so we don’t have to pretend. Lord, teach us how to be with you, so that our lives grow richer, more centered, deeper, and more joyful.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we bring raw honesty before you today. We do not claim to be wise or clever. We simply are hungry to know You and the truth. Amen.