



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

How Do We Pray_ - The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost - 7_24_2022

So how's your prayer life?

Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

About once a year I have someone make an appointment to come and see me. And they asked me one of the hardest questions I encounter in my professional life. How do I pray? And over the years I've come up with different kinds of responses. I had a handout and it had like all these different ways to pray. That was really when I was a new pastor. I gave up that handout. Nobody wants a handout. And then somebody would come and make an appointment with me and I'd tell them, well, we need an hour. And I would go verse by verse through the Lord's Prayer, explaining every single word in the petition. And that poor person would leave with their eyes glazed over. And then I would offer them books or apps, or when I got to this church, I would say, oh my gosh, you need to go to morning prayer every weekday morning, 8:30 on Zoom.

And all of these are really great answers to the question, how to pray. But every time that beautiful soul would leave my office, I felt like I really didn't answer their question. And over the years, at some point I realized, even though people were asking how to pray, they weren't really looking for methods or modes of prayer. Their question was far more fundamental. It was, how does prayer work? Do I talk to myself? How do I know that God is listening? Is God listening? Is there something I need to do to make God listen? How does God respond to me? Will God respond? How do I know it's God? How do I know if it's not God? These are all really deep questions and the answers are elusive and confusing. And often they elicit more questions. How does prayer work?

If we were to ask Abraham from the Old Testament, perhaps he would just say, well, just talk to God and God responds to you. It's a fascinating prayer in the book of Genesis. And at first glance, right, one could argue that in fact it's less of a conversation and more like a negotiation of a peace treaty of some sort. And so when you're talking to the Almighty, you better be ready. Right? So you better start with buttering up the deity, say, oh God, you're so great. You are full of justice. You know how to take care of the righteous and slay the wicked. And you're not going to slay the wicked cuz you're such a good god.

And then after you make God, remember who God is, then you kind of pull the human frailty card. Like you say, oh, you know what? I'm nothing, I'm just dust

and ashes. But let me ask you, can we, can we take care of this? And then you just be strategic, right? You start low and you get even more difficult. That's the way you get what you want from prayer.

Well, how well did Abraham's prayer work? So Abraham asked God to save Sodom and Gamora if there's 50 righteous people there. And he manages to whittle it down all the way to 10. In Sodom and Gamora, there were four. They were Abraham's nephew, Lot, his wife, and their two daughters. And before the angels of the Lord rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gamora, they told the four, get out of here. Flee for the hills and don't look back. And so as the four run, Lot's wife looks back. And what happens to her? She turns into a pillar of salt.

Now one could ask, well, if only Abraham had asked one more question, right? God, maybe if there's just one. So is that how this works? Is that how prayer works? You got to ask the right question in order to get the right response? No, no, no, no, no, no. No, my beloved, that is not how God works. And more on that later. But here's my takeaway from this vignette.

When we pray to God, when we talk to God, God is actually responding to us. God works with us. There's some sort of back and forth that happens every time we talk to God. One of the most beautiful witnesses I hear from people of God, from you all is when people share with me their own prayer lives and they say things like, "I talked to God the other day." "I talked to God and God said that he would take care of my spouse while she's in the hospital." "I told God how lonely I was and God was comforting me." "I asked God what to do and God said, be patient."

That's how prayer works. It's this amazing back and forth that may require you to acquire some different listening skills so that you can hear God's voice. And it will require you to have a leap of faith. And it also will require you to believe that God actually wants to hear what you have to say. But it's amazing grace. And I hope like Abraham, you will take advantage of this gift.

The other interesting thing about Abraham's prayer is it provides for us a wonderful model that it truly is a form of prayer to question God's ways. I mean, Abraham desperately wanted to save Sodom and Gamora. How many of us have had the same prayer? Right? God, save the Ukraine. God save Haiti. God saves the United States. It is a relief to know that we are in good company every single time that we shake our heads and think, what is God doing? One of the most fervent prayers you and I can pray is why? Why God, did you let this happen? Why? Why didn't you do something here? God, what is happening here? Why are you allowing this? These are faithful prayers to ask. So have courage when you ask them and God will respond.

Now, in our gospel reading, we have the disciples helpfully asking the question, Lord, teach us to pray. And Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer. It's been said a bazillion times by bazillion people over the centuries, and it's such a comforting prayer. It's a powerful one. It's never out of sync with what's going on in your lives and what's going on in the world.

And I just want to point out the obvious. When given the chance to teach us how to pray, Jesus doesn't say y'all need to pray for your souls, because they're going to Hell. You need to be careful and change your ways and repent. You are going to go to fire and brimstone unless you change and repent and fear the wrath of God. Instead what does Jesus say to us? Pray that God's reign will come on earth. Pray that you'll have everything you need to live every day. And pray for forgiveness. Always, always pray for forgiveness. Any time that you want to know the nature and character of our God, just reflect on the Lord's Prayer and you will know by heart who this God is. This is a God who's deeply concerned for the world and this is a God who's deeply concerned about you.

Now Jesus goes on to offer a little bit more instruction on prayer and He offers this parable. A late night visitor comes to your house and you have nothing in the fridge, but your neighbor has got a really stocked up space. So you go and bang on the door and you're like, dude, I need food. And your neighbor's like, dude, I'm in bed. And not only that, I got the kids in bed and it was awful to try to get them to bed and they're sleeping with me and I ain't getting up for any reason. And Jesus says your petition will be granted. Not because you guys are friends, but because you're annoying and you keep pounding on the door and you keep bugging that neighbor and they just want to get rid of you.

And so what does this mean? Jesus says, ask and you will receive. So is the point to be persistent in your prayers to God? Don't just ask once, ask a hundred times. I don't think so. I think there's a better point. I think the point is don't be afraid to ask. Ask God, talk to God, ask whatever is on your heart, whatever your desires are. Ask for anything. Ask for world peace. Ask for healing from your sickness. Ask for a companion to be with you with your loneliness. Asking is never prohibited. Ask as many times as you want. You cannot irritate God. You cannot bore God. But I have one caveat. If you do not ask, then do not think that God won't act.

In the year 2000, there was a slim volume about prayer that was written. It was called the Prayer of Jabez. It became a New York Times number one national bestseller in 2001, nine million copies. In 2001, it won the Evangelical Publisher's Gold Medallion Book of the Year. And the premise of the book was simple. It was an obscure verse in the old Testament, one verse, and it went like this. It was about a guy named Jabez. Jabez cried out to the God of Israel saying, oh, that you would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory. Let your hand be with me and keep me from the Evil One. And God granted his request.

So Bruce Wilkinson, the author said what Jesus said, ask, and you will receive. But here's what I found. Slightly dangerous and theologically problematic about what else Wilkinson said. He said that unasked prayers go unfulfilled and he offered this fable. A man named Mr. Jones dies and goes to Heaven and is met in Heaven by St. Peter. And St. Peter shows him all around Heaven. Shows them the golden streets and the beautiful mansions and the flower-laden fields.

But there way back in the corner is this really ugly unobtrusive building with no windows and one door. And Mr. Jones says to St. Peter, what's that? And Peter says, you don't want to know. And Jones says, oh yes, I do. So Peter takes him to the building and opens the door. Mr. Jones walks inside and it's this humongous warehouse filled with rows and rows and shelves and shelves. And on each shelf packed up high are white boxes with red ribbons on them. And Mr. Jones notices each box has a tag and each tag has a name on it.

So he looks at Peter and he says, is there one with my name on it? Peter says, yeah, but - and Jones is off . He goes to the Js, he finds his box, he pulls it down. He takes off the red ribbon. He opens it up and he begins to sigh deeply because he recognizes what's in the box. It was all the blessings that God wanted to give him, but he didn't ask for them. And Wilkinson goes on to say, even though there is no limit to God's goodness, if you didn't ask him for a blessing yesterday, you won't get all that you were supposed to have today.

Now I admit there's something compelling about this. Right? Ask! Ask and you will receive, but let me tell you unequivocally, there is no warehouse. It doesn't exist, because God does not work that way. God can't be manipulated in our prayers. God doesn't expect our prayers in order to give us things. That's not how prayer works. If something bad happens to you, it's not because you didn't pray for something. You cannot affect the outcome by not praying. Prayer is effective. It is efficacious. And not praying does not doom you. Resist thinking that way, that if only if you pray a certain way or a certain number of times or say the right thing, then your prayer will be effective. No, that's not how prayer works. Prayer is always effective.

I know two things about prayer. Prayer always works. And how prayer works is a mystery. And I know one more thing, remember to whom you're praying. It's what Jesus said at the end of our reading. We who really aren't great at loving perfectly. If a kid asked us to have some food, some meat, some eggs, some bread, we wouldn't give them a snake or a scorpion or a spider. We would give them food. And if we do that, how much more the One who made you, who took energy to create you, to give you breath, to give you life, to give you hope? How much more will that One take care of you?

So how's your prayer life? How do you pray? May you pray with boldness, may you pray trusting that God wants the best for you and is listening to your needs and your wants and your desires. And may you pray as often as you want,

however you want, but above all, may you pray and never be afraid to ask.
Always ask because God is listening and God will respond.

Amen.