

“Christianity, 21”

5. Does prayer make any difference?

Text: Psalm 40:1-3; Luke 11: 1-13

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*Dear God,
So far today, I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper,
haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over-indulgent.
I'm really glad about that.
But in a few minutes I'm going to get out of bed,
and from then on I'm probably going to need a whole lot more help!
So be with me, please, and thank you for listening.
Amen.*

I absolutely love that prayer! It provides, in playful delight, an invitation to our focus this morning which is all about prayer: Its effectiveness, its mystery and our very human wondering about its power.

But first let me reorient us to a much larger picture. You may recall that back in September we began an ongoing series of sermons with the intention of opening some contemporary thinking about being Christian in the 21st century. It's a series grounded in my conviction that being Christian is not only a wonderful thing, but also that the Christian perspective is vital and viable and urgent in our time.

So far we have made four stops along the way, each one brought to focus with a question. You can trace these in the bulletin as I continue to list all of the titles with each subsequent stop. "What do I really believe?" "Who was before everything?" "What does Christmas tell us?" "What do we know about Jesus?"

Today we add a fifth stop and this question: "Does prayer make any difference?" And lest I wander too far afield I turn us right upfront to the wisdom of Jesus. Prayer made such a significant difference in his life. His "Yes" to the question before us comes with a few essential and deepening qualifiers.

First: Prayer makes its steadiest difference when it's daily. Or at the very least, let's say when it's regular. After all, human-merely-being as we are, and distracted and assuaged as we can be, there are very few things (if any) that we can promise as faithfully as Jesus. And besides, the whole idea of prayer is not meant to create an expectation followed by a corresponding measure of guilt! So let's stick with the intention of daily and call it regular!

I am quickly mindful of the passage in Mark telling us that "a long time before dawn Jesus went away to a lonely place and there he prayed." His reliance on prayer begins this simply. Of course, we don't know if that was his practice *every* morning or though we can make a pretty safe guess. And we can say with certainty that prayer was within the observable rhythm of his days and the tempo of his life.

I suggest this as his first clue to us: regular, steady, daily stepping aside and taking pause. The quiet moments before I fall off to sleep are a favorite time for me, or in the contemplative glide of my rocker. Some folks have told me when they are running (not frantically but for exercise!) they find their deepest focus in the unity of mind, body and soul. Sometimes it's in the simple "Wow" of a fabulous sky, and others in the angst and irritation of a traffic snarl.

But where-so-ever it is, in and through and around and beneath, Jesus modeled well that pause in regular and daily ways. And his example stands alone as true.

Then second: Prayer makes a remarkable difference when it's direct and personal.

Remember: Jesus didn't pray to the sky or the clouds, the hills or the valleys so beautiful as they are. He didn't pray in the abstraction of imagination or the flight of ideas. No, he prayed to God wanting to connect in a living, loving, personal relationship. In fact, he went so far as to use a familial term of intimate address, Abba, which is the way that a first century Hebrew child would refer to her father so and translates pretty close to "Daddy!"

Thirty-some years ago, I spent a summer serving as a Chaplain at Cushing Hospital in the suburbs of Boston so a program of training called Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE. I can remember an incident there when my understanding of prayer took a giant leap. It came when Sister Mary Donohue, my supervisor, observed me through the laboratory of a one-way mirror. She noticed that my posture changed when the patient I was seeing asked for a prayer. She saw my shoulders literally stiffen. She also heard my voice shift lower. In a group session later that day she asked me about that; and then with gentleness, told me that prayer for her was not ever a call to get formal. It was, rather, a simple personal desire to have a word with God.

That freed me in a profound way. And I now know this as truth. If I can't relax in the personal posture of connecting with God, no matter what I say, my prayers fall flat.

Third: Prayer is most efficacious when it is rock-solid-honest. As in any relationship, honesty really matters so even when honesty is hard, or maybe especially then. And as the risk of vulnerability rises by truly saying what's on our minds and hearts, the mystery of disclosure drives prayer all the deeper. Prayer, of all places, is not intended for small talk or social banter!

Last year the best selling book Eat, Pray, Love was made into a movie starring Julia Roberts. The story focused on a newly divorced woman, Elizabeth Gilbert, who set out on a journey of self-discovery. The movie was filled with the twists and turns of relationship and loss, exploring and yearning, food and prayer and love. In one particular scene Liz is completely lost and bereft. Everything she had hoped for was not materializing. And so she prayed: "Dear God, I'm not very good at this. I am a big fan of your work. You've done some great things. I'm sorry I haven't talked to you in a long time. Actually, a really long time." (And then through tears.) "I am in trouble. I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. I don't know who I am. I need your help. I just need a minute of your time."

Now that's Hollywood (!), but still, in context, that's rock-solid-honest prayer, too. There is no pretense. Some awkwardness, yes. But it cuts to the quick and the core.

One more for today: Prayer is most powerful when God is in the center. This is a tricky part of the equation! Because although honesty, informality and ease all lend their way toward telling God what is so for us, the deepest power in prayer comes when we take ourselves out of the middle and stop talking and start listening. More direct: It's most effective when we open ourselves to God's influence rather than the other way around!

For many people, this is the biggest puzzle in trusting the efficacy of prayer. Our attempts to influence God toward our solutions or to guide the heart of the Divine toward our ends make us quickly suspicious, and rightly so! And let's face it: we are largely ego-centric in our approach to almost everything. That comes with the basic equipment of being human! So if we do not learn to transcend this reality in our approach to prayer, we offer our "Amen" on pretty swampy ground!

Longfellow put it quite well: "What discord should we bring into the universe if our prayers were all answered! Then we should govern the world and not God! And where would we be then?"

Emerson follows with this: "Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from a higher point of view." That's the posture of opening ourselves to God's influence at the highest point of view. Now there's a radical and powerful possibility, and that is prayer at its deepest best!

This is plenty and enough for today! May these thoughts encourage new depth in our own practices of prayer at each and every one. May they enlighten a vital spirit of Christianity in our time. And may they pique your interest to the inexplicable mystery at just to think of it, that we would have the privilege of conversation with the very Author of the Universe!

Thank you for your patient listening . . . in the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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