

Those here last Sunday heard Jesus' parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, which Luke introduces as being about the need to pray always and not lose heart. Yet, in the parable itself, neither widow nor judge actually pray.

This morning, Jesus tells another parable in which two people do pray, though Luke indicates Jesus is focusing his words on those who have declared themselves righteous and look down on others. My hope is to incorporate Jesus' lesson on the difference between the attitudes of the praying Pharisee and praying tax collector while continuing to consider the place of prayer in our lives. Let us hear God's word in Luke 18:9-14:

<sup>9</sup> *Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:* <sup>10</sup>*“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

As I begin, I want to go back to reread several verses in Psalm 65, which express gratitude for the providence of God over creation, and for sending rain. Yet, I also recognize, that even after a time of drought, we may be tiring of several days of consistent rain, particularly since most of our gardens are finished for the season. The psalmist declares to God:

*You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.  
You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers,  
and blessing its growth.*

Within these words, there is a cyclical understanding of planting and harvest, God sending rain in due season, watering earth and seed to produce a bounty of grain. Prayer is offered for God to do the providing, which sounds great, but then I wonder, what if you pray and it doesn't rain? Does praying for rain work? And if so, how? Is it the quantity of prayers, or the humility of those praying, or perhaps the right formulation of words or proper dance that somehow prompt God to open heaven's faucets? And if God does not respond as requested, is drought a sign of judgment?

This is where prayer becomes a bit of a heady struggle for me. When the theme of prayer arises, I find myself pondering my own understanding of prayer – what prayer is and what it is not, how to pray and when to pray. I have never had iron-clad answers. Would that I could, with the uncompromised confidence of the psalmist, declare to God, “O you who answer prayer!”

I have shared before my thoughts on the phrase I took to heart when I first heard it many years ago: “God always answers prayer; but, sometimes the answer is ‘no.’” My concern with the phrase arises when someone says it with a too confident certainty she or he can know the mind and ways of God. So, if at a time of tragic personal loss, someone said to me, “... sometimes God’s answer is ‘no,’” I think my reply might be, “Please tell me why God said ‘no’?” One response could be, “I don’t know why.”

I believe that “I don’t know,” response is instructive, and might give us pause before we even suggest God sometimes says “yes” and sometimes says, “no.” Yet, when I reply, “Please tell me why God said ‘no,’” I could be told, “because of your sin, or because you did not pray in the right way, or hard enough, or with enough faith.”

Lack of faith, or not praying hard enough, or not waiting long enough, are catchphrases of promoters of the health and wealth gospel, those who promise God has an earthly blessing of success, and even financial wealth for each person. This kind of theology is easily linked to those who declare natural disasters to be God’s message of judgment because of a people’s sin or nation’s immorality. I find that hard to do in Haiti.

I admit I have a personal wariness of those who pretend to know the mind or ways of God, often in prideful and judgmental ways. I think that is Jesus’ point in telling of the prayer of the Pharisee, who offers thanks to God, but then proceeds to explain his standing in relation to the sinners of the earth, including the tax collector who has also come to pray. It could be likened to those who are invited to a charity dinner at which they are expected to make fun of themselves, but decide to ridicule an opponent. As one writer suggests, the Pharisee acknowledges God in his prayer, and then the Pharisee “reminds God how lucky God is to have such a wonderful worshiper.” [Johnson, E. Elizabeth, in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010), p. 215.]

Linked to my wariness about those so certain they know the mind and ways of God is my belief God does not orchestrate every movement and action in either the created world or human activity. God created a universe in which tornadoes can spawn, hurricanes can roar, and the earth can quake, as a matter of nature not judgment. In my mind, God does not plan for someone to be behind the wheel of a car after having had too much to drink. For me, genocide and war are neither God’s judgment nor desire, nor are hunger and poverty signs of a person’s sin or nation’s unfaithfulness.

That said, I am also not comfortable assigning everything to free will, or the idea of the world simply being created and then set in motion by God. If everything is either random occurrence or human contrivance, prayer would be irrelevant. So how does prayer fit in? I have kept with me a simple two word belief about prayer I heard more than a decade ago from Jim Wallis, of Sojourners magazine. Two words: “Prayer works.” I believe he said he learned it from his mother. “Prayer works.” That’s it, and I have grown to grasp that that is enough.

Where I stray is when I follow my natural inclination to ask, “How?” “How does prayer work?,” or “What evidence do you have to prove prayer works other than your personal request was granted?” I would like an instruction manual like the one that came with my digital camera, which shows not only how to shoot a picture, but ways to improve the resolution, and create interesting effects. “How does prayer work?” “How can I have more effective, even creative prayers?”

The fact is I can read the instruction manual all I want, but if I don't use the camera regularly, I will forget what the manual suggests. If I don't experiment with some of the creative options, I will likely never be surprised by a new image. Just so, my belief that prayer works is dependent on my praying, even trying new forms of praying: prayer in song, prayer as dance, or walking prayer, such as on a Labyrinth.

I actually find the question, "How does prayer work?" to be futile, as if with enough wisdom we can create a schematic for activating the pressure points of God. Yet, I do think we can ask "how?" in terms of practicing the discipline of prayer. To say there is no right way to pray is correct, but it offers no guidance for one who is asking how to pray.

When asked by his disciples to teach them to pray, Jesus offered what we call the Lord's Prayer. It becomes a model prayer because of its components, of acknowledging God as the hallowed recipient of prayer, as well as its linking of the realms of earth and heaven. Requests for daily bread and forgiveness are coupled with a commitment to forgive others.

What we discover as we consider prayer is its source is in the heart of human experience with the world. A farmer will pray for rain to begin or cease with hope – if the rain does not come to quell the drought, or cease to stop the deluge, it is a disappointment, but it is neither a judgment on faith or a statement of God's lack of care. With the farmer, we pray because it is what people of faith do with a God who we believe listens and cares.

Now, as I noted last month, when I am asked to pray for good weather for a church or family event, supposedly because as a minister I have an "in" with God, I often use the response a colleague once shared: "You need to know I am in administration, not manufacturing."

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we tend to focus on the Pharisee's pride in his goodness and obedience, and the tax collector's confession and humility. Yet it is not so much the Pharisee's pride at issue, and certainly not his good works. What Jesus is more concerned about is the Pharisee's inability to both see and name his dependence on God. [Procter-Smith, Marjorie, in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010), p. 217.] Pride in self masks dependence, even on God; and again, the Pharisee comes across as God should be happy to have him on the prayer team – a most valuable pray-er, if you will.

I thought of when people most often come to church, and if I asked what are the three most highly attended services during the year, you would probably say, Christmas, Easter and \_\_\_\_\_. I would suggest the third are the 9/11's of our experience; the times of Katrinas and the Sandis and the Matthews, the Marathon bombing, and Newtown, Charleston, and Orlando shootings – those national or regional moments of assassination, war, and inexplicable tragedy. At such times I sense people are seeking answers, but even more, I think there is a desire to be in the presence of praying people, even knowing, deep inside, there is no explaining such tragedies. That is to say we gather with a united dependence on God not self, even if there are no answers forthcoming.

From time to time we sing the hymn, "How Can I Keep From Singing?" There is a sense in which people of faith can say, "How can I keep from praying?" When one turns a corner and is surprised by a sunrise, that marvel becomes a prayer. When one receives news of a beloved friend's death, that sorrow becomes a prayer. When a child is born, that miracle and mystery becomes a prayer. When children are caught in war's crossfire, that heartache becomes a prayer.

As noted on the bulletin cover, our Presbyterian Directory for Worship describes people of prayer as those who "listen and wait upon God, call God by name, remember God's gracious acts, and offer themselves to God."

In our life's experiences, from delight to sadness, our prayers are offered as responses of joy or anger, expressions of gratitude or guilt, attitudes of hope or despair. Prayer is not a vending machine, where we insert our prayer, push God's buttons, and receive the requested treat. Prayer works not for the answers received, but because it is a means of connection with a gracious God, a God who cares for each of us. We pray because that is what we do, it is a part of our DNA, it is imbedded in our breathing. As people of faith, we cannot keep from praying.