



**“Does Prayer Make a Difference?”**  
**Scripture – Matthew 6:5-8 and Romans 8:26-27**  
**Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, February 25, 2018**

Peter Marty is the editor of *The Christian Century* magazine and I am drawn to a proposal he made a few months back. He recommends we “alter the way we talk about prayer by eliminating the use of the word *answer*.” I like it. It shifts our notion of prayer away from the idea that it is similar to our Amazon wish list. Far too many have a childlike understanding of prayer as asking God for what we want. Then, if we receive what we prayed for – which can run the gamut from a parking place to being cured of cancer – we assume God answered our prayer. If we do not receive what we desired, we conclude that we did not pray hard enough or there were not enough people praying or we need to be patient or the answer was “No” or God was in Aruba and not taking calls.

Another reason to drop the word *answer* from talk about prayer is the sheer arrogance of it. Do we really think that God does not know what we want or need until we ask?

Another difficulty with connecting the word *answer* with prayer is that our self-interest skews our perspective. A Presbyterian minister named Henry Kuizinga told a story from his days in seminary. “He said that a group of especially devout students practiced what they called ‘morning watch.’ This was a daily period of prayerful silence in which they listened for God’s Spirit to direct their priorities. [It is a good idea and I wish I maintained such a discipline]. He says that at the end of one semester, three of these students approached one of their professors and announced that at their morning watch, God had instructed them not to take his final examination. The professor spelled out in no uncertain terms that it was not God they heard that morning, but a voice from a much lower source.”<sup>1</sup>

Today we heard two passages focused on prayer. The first was advice from Jesus on how *not* to pray. He said, “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.”

Do you know people who post far too much about themselves on their Facebook page? Same sort of thing. Prayer should never be a spectacle designed to impress. It should be an honest and authentic conversation with God.

The second passage is from the Apostle Paul who speaks for many of us when he says, “We do not know how to pray... as we ought, but God’s spirit intervenes with sighs too deep for words.” Do you know that prayer?

Whenever prayer is a struggle – which is much of the time – or whenever someone infers that prayer is simple, I fall back on this wisdom of Paul. “We do not know how to pray.”

Paul was a devout Jew who prayed regularly, but he was wise enough to approach conversations with God with humility. He knew that anyone who thought prayer was a smooth, uncomplicated matter failed to grasp its depths.

Numerous theologians have written lengthy books on prayer – What is it? Why do we do it? How do we do it? What difference does it make? Questions have been swirling around the topic of prayer for eons. We are thankful Jesus taught his followers one prayer – the Lord’s Prayer –which will be our focus next Sunday.

As I wrestled with the subject of prayer over the past couple of weeks, some ideas stepped forward while others retreated. My hope is that beyond the service you will continue to ponder at least one of them.

Prayer is a time to be fully present with God. When this happens, you can build a more intimate relationship. Presence and relationship.

God is not peering down at us from a distant galaxy. God is present throughout the cosmos and as near to us as our breath. Although it often feels as if God is absent, it is we who are absent. We live scattered lives. One writer says, “We speak of being scatterbrained. The truth of the matter is that the scatteredness is much more systemic. We are scattered at every level: body, mind, and soul...We throw ourselves to the past, often clinging to a past pain or trauma. Or, we hurl ourselves towards the future, attaching ourselves to a hope or a fear. We are in the past, or in the future, everywhere but here. To have presence in the heart is a remedy. It is an un-scattering. Presence is simply to have our heart where our feet are.”<sup>2</sup>

Not that this is easy. Our minds love to stray. A thousand different thoughts vie for our attention and we must keep eliminating them. Delete! Delete! Delete!

Keep in mind, praying is not all cerebral. Some find that they maintain a better focus when they solely concentrate on their breathing or walk a peaceful labyrinth or handle small prayer beads or sing the melodious words or focus on the bright flame of a candle or a compelling piece of art.

When we are present with God, we can engage in a conversation. We generate thoughts in our minds, and – the hard part – we listen for the whispers in our souls. Prayer is not about telling God what to do, but about focusing our awareness on God’s presence.

Hopefully that will naturally lead us to be grateful. Ninety percent of our prayers ought to begin with a thankful heart. Ten percent can be lament and protest, but the overwhelming majority of prayers ought to begin by recounting many of the blessings of our lives. Daily prayers of thanksgiving remind us of the numerous graces we enjoy. Such prayers expand and intensify our gratitude, which alters the way we perceive reality and paves the way to a purposeful life. Even in the throes of dark times, we can name something for which we are thankful.

Another thought: Prayer can help us tap into the reservoir of strength. Peter Marty states this beautifully when he says, “The more persistently we hang in there with prayer, the more we encounter a God who does not provide an answer to our every want, but who offers strength for our every need.”<sup>3</sup>

How this happens, I cannot say, but I have experienced it myself and witnessed it in others. I have been at the edge of being overwhelmed and drawn strength from God to endure. Likewise, I have known people who suffered a horrific loss that could have destroyed them, but they tapped into a source of strength that allowed them to survive.

However, this comes with a warning. Such strength is not garnered quickly. It is built up over time. If you have failed to nurture a spiritual life, you cannot suddenly dip your cup into this reservoir of strength and expect to draw much. However, if you have an active spiritual life, you will find strength when you need it.

Prayer can also give us a new set of eyes. It can help us see the world from God's perspective. This insight has helped me more than any other as I have grappled with the many dimensions of prayer. God does not see people according to races, nationalities, or any of the other labels we fearful, finite creatures slap on them. God sees beloved children and when we attempt to view others as God does, we do not see strangers or adversaries. We see brothers and sisters; people who can enrich our lives and people whose lives we can enrich. When we squint to view the world from God's perspective, we not only see the world as it is, but how it can be. It urges us to be kind, forgiving, passionate about justice, and generous. It inspires us to work for the world God dreams it can be.

Finally, prayer can help us discern an echo in our soul that everything is going to be all right.

When we lived in Richmond, Camilla worked at Virginia Commonwealth University and one of the women in her office was diagnosed with breast cancer. Donna was a thirtysomething single mother with a beautiful and cheery eight year-old daughter. Donna underwent surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, but nothing could stop the odious disease stealing her life.

In her final week, Camilla and I visited Donna in the hospital. There were 20 people crammed into her room as she drifted in and out of consciousness. It was apparent that we were no longer talking weeks or even days, but only hours. The medical team was doing its best to keep her comfortable.

There were two other pastors in the room, and at one point, one of them asked for everyone except the three pastors to clear out. As he saw it, the time had come for the professional prayers to step in. I cringed at the thought, but felt trapped. Once everyone else was out in the hall, the three of us formed a small circle around her; two of us held her hands.

One pastor began to pray and he called on God to perform a miraculous healing. When he finished, the other picked up where the first left off, except with a louder and more insistent tone, which I found disturbing.

If our notion of God is that God could have healed her but was waiting for us to ask before responding, what kind of God is that?

I cannot imagine that God is waiting for us to bark commands before acting or refusing to respond until a sufficient number of requests had been registered. I understand that when times are bleak and people are desperate, some imagine they have the power to get God to do as they wish, but how absurd to think that anyone can exert such control over God.

So, after the first two finished praying, it was my turn. Feeling wholly inadequate, but aware that sometimes people who are unconscious can still hear, I gave thanks for the beautiful way she had touched so many other people throughout her life. I expressed gratitude for the wonderful job she had done raising her daughter. I prayed that she would feel the enormous outpouring of love of her family and her many friends. I prayed that she would be reassured deep in her soul that her daughter would be well cared for and would never forget her. Finally, I prayed that Donna would feel God's presence and know in every fiber of her being that nothing – not even this dreadful disease – could separate her from God's love in this life or the next.

Prayer can reassure us that we are eternally in God's care. A colleague (Peter Marty) remembers Anna, "a parishioner in his church who was terminally ill. Sometimes when he visited her in the hospital, *she* prayed; other times he took the lead. Even though Anna's voice and body weakened as the weeks passed, her eyes retained their glow and her mind its spark. Then, one day she said, "Pastor, I don't see myself getting better. How about we skip the prayer for healing today? I just want you to pray for the Lord not to leave me. That's all I need now – the close company of God."<sup>4</sup>

Isn't that what all of us need in good times, in times of struggle, and at the end of our journey – the reassurance of the close company of God. We nurture that awareness through a life of prayer.

## NOTES

1. Michael Lindvall, "So How Do You Really Know?" May 31, 2009.
2. Omid Dafi, "The Prayer of the Heart," *OnBring.org*, February 20, 2017.
3. Peter W. Marty, "Prayer without Answers," *The Christian Century*, April 12, 2017.
4. Ibid.

## Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God —

You teach us to pray, and to offer our petitions to you in Christ's name. So, with boldness, we approach the throne of grace. We come with gratitude, for you rejoice with us in times of delight and weep with us in seasons of sorrow. We come with hope, for you receive us with compassion and turn toward us in love. We come with confidence, for you promise to hear our prayers ... the ones we are able to voice, as well as those that silence draws from our hearts.

Compassionate God —

You know our inmost hearts. So, in these quiet moments, we lay bare the pain that plagues us, the worry that consumes us, the grief that overwhelms us. We seek healing for ourselves and for others: for bodies aching from disease, or weary from the toll of daily demands; for minds riddled with invisible illness, or suffering the indignity of dementia; for spirits broken by stress, or heavy with despair. Surround all of us with your comfort, we pray, and breathe your sustaining spirit upon those we name before you in silence:

Gracious God —

Your creation cries out for healing. As we pray for this world in need, break our hearts for what breaks yours. We watch helplessly as violence decimates nearby neighborhoods and wars rage in faraway countries. We grieve that children around the corner and across the globe go to sleep with empty stomachs and wake to days empty of opportunity. We lament the poverty of imagination that infects our common life, but confess we often feel helpless to effect change. Fill each of us with renewed conviction, we pray, and send your healing spirit upon the places and situations we name before you in silence:

Ever-Present God —

You are no stranger to suffering. But — as the empty tomb gives witness — you do *not* let suffering have the final word. Dwell with us, we pray. Mend our brokenness; refresh our spirits.

As we pray for healing, align our wills with *your* will, so that the story we tell with our lives may be a story of grace. By your Spirit — strengthen us, guide us, renew us, until our prayers give way to action, and our actions plant seeds of peace. Draw us into your work, O God, and shape our petitions into prophetic words— words that invite transformation and offer reconciliation.

Hear us now as we join our voices to offer the prayer Christ taught us: **Our Father...**