

“Is There Power in Prayer?”

You are by now well aware that, when I pose a question to which the answer seems obvious, the answer I seek is anything but the obvious. Such is the case with the title for today’s sermon: *“Is There Power in Prayer?”* Many people have been taught that the answer to that question is: *“There is great power in prayer!”* Books have been written with such titles as: Joyce Meyers, The Power of Simple Prayer; Stormie Omartian, The Prayer That Changes Everything®: The Hidden Power of Praising God; Dutch Sheets, Authority in Prayer: Praying with Power and Purpose to name just three. St. James wrote, ***“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”*** Sooo . . .??? Doesn’t that settle it? We’ll see.

The question, as I have posed it, brings about the problem. *“Is there power IN prayer?”* NO! Is power connected TO prayer? Oh, Yes! So, we had better understand where that power is, where it comes from, and how it works . . . otherwise prayer simply becomes flapping your gums in a meaningless exercise of futility.

The question, as I have posed it, speaks against the supposition that power resides in and belongs to the pray-er. I hear this expressed in many ways. One of my Ashland classmates and I were talking a few years back about something that I was hoping might happen, to which she responded, *“Well, we’ll just claim that in prayer and it’s yours!”* On another occasion, in a congregation other than this (so don’t worry; I’m not talking about you), I had a very stressful task to perform publicly, and when it was over, one of my members came to me to tell me that she had prayed me through it. I don’t care to count how many times at a wedding or other such event someone has come up to me to thank me for the nice weather I was able to arrange.

What these three events had in common was the notion that prayer was a matter of somehow generating spiritual forces that accomplished certain things. My classmate saw prayer as a tool to get what we want. My member saw prayer as her agency for assisting. The wedding guests

assume that my position somehow provides me with greater ability to manipulate cosmic (or at least meteorological) forces. [Aside: When I get that comment, my response is: “*No, that’s administration; I’m in sales and human resources.*”] The problem with all of this is that it leaves God out of the picture — such notions are therefore atheistic. Now, I am sure that every one of those whom I have just targeted would object to being called atheists — but if I, or we, can generate spiritual forces that transcend miles to overcome our problems or obtain what we desire, we have no need of God.

So back to my question: “*Is there power in prayer?*” No. Is there power in the God to whom we pray? Absolutely! Now, really Pastor, isn’t that just hairsplitting? I don’t think so. I think it is critically important in our prayer life that we understand our relationship to God in this. To quote the noted theologian, Paul Tillich: “*It is God Himself who prays through us, when we pray to Him. . . . We cannot bridge the gap between God and ourselves even through the most intensive and frequent prayers; the gap between God and ourselves can only be bridged by God.*” Forget about generating anything from within: When we pray, what matters is the God to whom we pray and the relationship we have with that God.

It is that relationship to which St. Paul appeals in today’s Second Lesson: “*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*” We are to live “in Him” — not just have Christ somewhere in the picture. “*Rooted . . . built up . . . established . . .*” — I fear too often we nibble around the periphery of Christ, rather than becoming fully immersed, growing ever deeper in love and in connection. The result of such rooting is inevitably thanksgiving — in fact, I would go so far as to say that wherever there are places of dissatisfaction, resentment, unmet desires or needs . . . those are the places where you (and we as a congregation) have yet to become rooted in Christ.

So the first aspect of prayer to which we should give attention are those

places that are untouched by, or insufficiently surrendered to, Christ. Seek them out; ask the Spirit to make them known. Ask the Spirit to help you reflect on what it costs you not to have that part of your relationship with Christ whole and vital. Seek direction from the Spirit for what to do to grow in that part of your spiritual life.

From today's First Lesson, in Abraham we get a picture of a man who was very much in touch with God. Many would argue that what we hear Abraham doing in this prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah is a classic case of the Yiddish term, schmoozing. A rabbi friend of mine corrected me on that word, if by schmoozing we mean haggling. If you are haggling over a price or some other part of a deal, in Yiddish, that is called schnorring. When you schmooze, you simply converse. Abraham is doing more than just having a conversation with God; but he is not, in the strictest sense haggling. I know, it sounds like that's exactly what he's doing: "50? Okay, so maybe 40? . . . maybe 30? . . . could you go for 25?" This looks for all the world like a classic market negotiation over price; like Abraham is schnorring with God.

What Abraham struggles with in this prayer is his understanding of God's justice: "***Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?***" So Abraham struggles with God in prayer seeking for the limits, the confines, the boundaries of divine justice. What He discovers is that God's justice is always tempered by God's mercy.

That is an important element for us to understand as we come to God in prayer. God does not need to be convinced to do the right thing. Yet often, in our prayers, we make it sound as if we believe that's exactly what we need to do. For example, our friend Esmeralda lies ill with cancer. What do we pray? We pray for healing! "*God, take this cancer from her!*" Why do we pray that? Because that's what we want. We want Esmeralda to be with her family, be with us, her friends, and to enjoy life well into old age. We hold to a value that this is what should be.

But listen to that prayer, because beneath the verbal what we wind up saying is something very much like this: *“God, we can’t trust You to do the right thing, so we are going to tell You the right thing to do.”* But Pastor, I’ve heard you pray for healing. Yes, you have. But if you pay attention, that is always (okay, maybe not “always,” but when I am being sufficiently attentive) connected or surrounded by some prayer that admits a) that I don’t know for what to pray; b) that I want to place this situation into God’s loving hands; c) that, while I am bold enough to ask for healing, what I really want is for God’s will to happen and for His Spirit to help me and others understand that will. That’s what Abraham does. It is an excellent model for prayer.

But, of course, if we want the best model for prayer, we turn to today’s Gospel and our Lord’s teaching about prayer. What we call The Lord’s Prayer (because it comes directly from “the Lord”), we could properly call The Disciple’s Prayer. After all, the disciples asked Jesus, *“**Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.**”* What we have now is the result of those disciples’ request.

I could go into exacting details examining what Jesus teaches in this prayer (in fact, we could be here for the next three to four hours going through it . . . relax!). Let me just point out three things that I think are essential for our coming to terms with why this is such an excellent model for prayer: 1) It is addressed in intimate terms to God as “Father”; 2) It focuses primarily on our spiritual life; and 3) It minimizes our attention on “stuff.”

It is the rest of today’s teaching from our Lord that requires some explication.

This parable about the friend at midnight coming to seek bread has several layers to it that we should explore. First, Jesus is not talking here about dire needs. Whether or not you have bread to set before an unexpected visitor in the middle of the night does not rank up there with terrorist attacks, tornadoes blowing through your community, or a spouse’s heart attack. Nonetheless, as we saw with Abraham, Jesus also

wants us to know that the lack of an immediate response in our favor does not mean that we stop praying.

Let me pick up that phrase: “*the lack of an immediate response in our favor...*” That, it seems to me, is a very large stumbling block for many people when it comes to prayer. George Carlin proclaimed that he had stopped praying to God and began praying to Joe Pesci on the assumption that Joe was “*the kind of guy that could get things done*” — and, Carlin declared, his prayer-success ratio was about the same with Pesci as with God. Well, if results in prayer is the focus (and it is for many people, maybe some sitting here?) that focus is out-of-focus. Prayer is not a matter of getting God to do what you want God to do. Pastor Brian Stoffregen has rightly noted: “. . . *prayer is not ‘putting coins in a vending machine.’ It is not putting our prayer in the right slot, pushing the right button, and waiting for the vending machine God to spit out exactly what we want. God is not a vending machine.*” Prayer is, first and foremost, a God-given means for us to stay connected to only source of life and hope we have. Let me emphasize that it is a God-given means.

Back to the midnight bread petitioner. What Jesus wants us to understand is this: God wants to provide for us. Even the worst kind of father knows enough not to try to feed his kids dangerous snakes or to substitute poisonous arachnids for beneficial (“incredible, edible”) eggs. So, when we approach God in prayer, it is never with the idea that we need to convince Him to love us, care for us, provide for us, or do right by us. What we need to understand is that God does indeed know how to love us, care for us, provide for us, and do right by us far better than we know. Jesus encourages us to remain persistent in prayer, in part because we lack such insight and need to struggle with our wills in opposition to God’s will as to what should be done.

There’s a bumper sticker that reads: “*God, all I ask is the opportunity to demonstrate that winning the lottery will not change me.*” That comes close to being a not-too-bad prayer. It recognizes that being changed by winning does happen. It doesn’t demand to win, but is seeking God’s

help if winning happens. Depending on how it is accented, it is limited in scope: “all I ask.” It comes close, but it does miss. Why? Because it is a self-centered prayer.

This may be the most harmful mistake people make when it comes to understanding prayer — they assume it is about asking for things. That doesn’t mean just material things . . . it could be focused on highly spiritual things . . . but the focus is on asking. Jesus does tell us to ask: “***Ask, and it will be given you . . .***” Does that mean we get what we want? No! It means we get what God wants! The key in prayer is to align our wills with God’s will, not to convince God to see things our way.

Which is why Jesus goes on to say, “. . . ***search, and you will find . . .***” Search for what? More things; you know, “stuff”? No! Search for what you need to know about God’s will, about the mind of Christ. Seek out what God wants for you, what God wants from you, what God is doing in you.

And then also “. . . ***knock, and the door will be opened for you.***” When you have been led into a deeper understanding of where God wants you to be, expect there to follow the courage and faith to step through whatever door He opens.

Have you ever prayed for something that did not happen? How did you know it did not happen? Isn’t it just as likely that God was doing what you needed, but you were too . . . inattentive, distracted, in crisis, or just plain pig-headed . . . to recognize that God had indeed brought about the answer to the need you were seeking.

Now, I said toward the beginning of this sermon that I would address St. James’ message: “***The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.***” On the face of it, it sounds like I disagree . . . I do not. I seek to comprehend. James zeros in on “***a righteous man***” (we, of course, will allow that he includes women as well). What, or who, is “***a righteous man***”? One declared right by God. But James has something a little different in mind in this context — he is addressing that individual who

is engaged in the ongoing wrestling match with God. The one who wants earnestly to know and do God's will, but recognizes that she is not yet there. The one who longs for more from God and more of God because he realizes that his life is not yet full with God. The one in whom God is at work in some powerful ways, but who seeks to be God's instrument even more.

So . . . Is there power in prayer? If by that we mean "*Do I have 'prayer power' to make things happen?*" My answer is emphatically, "No!" If by that we mean, "*Does God bring His power to work in the midst of our prayer relationship with Him?*" Then my answer is just as emphatically, "Yes!"

Author Thomas Long says it this way: "*Prayer is not a message scribbled on a note, jammed into a bottle and tossed into the sea in hopes that it will wash up someday on God's shore. Prayer is communion with God. We speak to God, but God touches, embraces, shapes and changes us. Whether we pray for rain or sunshine, our prayer is answered because in the act of praying we receive the gift we really seek — intimacy with God.*"

Amen.