

# Prayer: Is Anybody Listening?

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## Luke 18: 1-8

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a gentle and wonderful servant of the church, once wrote this little reflection on prayer and those of us who pray: "If we think of prayer as an experience of communion with Ultimate Reality, we have a fair working definition of mystic experience...All of us can experience moments of overwhelming, limitless belonging, moments of universal communion. Those are our own mystic moments. The men and women we call mystics differ from the rest of us merely by giving these experiences the place they deserve in everyone's life. What counts is not the frequency or intensity of mystic experiences, but the influence we allow them to have on our life. By accepting our mystic moments with all they offer and demand, we become the mystics we are meant to be. After all, a mystic is not a special kind of human being, but every human being is a special kind of mystic."

What do you think of that? Does it ring true to your experience? Do you ever describe or think of yourself as a mystic? Or is your spiritual life closer to these words of the late and much missed Michael Yaconelli as he describes his own rocky journey on the spiritual path: "After forty-five years of trying to follow Jesus, I keep losing him in the crowded busyness of my life...For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person, and I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but most of the moments of my life seem hopelessly tangled in a web of obligations and distractions...I often dream that I am tagging along behind Jesus, longing for him to choose me as one of his disciples. Without warning, he turns around, looks straight into my eyes, and says, 'Follow me!' My heart races, but when I began to run toward him he interrupts with, 'Oh, not you; the guy behind you. Sorry.'"

He concludes, "I have been trying to follow Christ most of my life, and the best I can do is a stumbling, bumbling, clumsy kind of following...Is there a spirituality for those of us who are not secluded in a monastery, who don't have it all together and probably never will?" Does that sound more like you and your life of the spirit?

How is your prayer life, your spiritual life these days? Are you in touch with your "inner mystic", or are you just kind of stumbling, bumbling along? And does the question matter? Does it make a difference? This is what Gretchen Brisbin wanted to know when she responded to my request to the congregation for sermon topics...what about prayer, does it make a difference, does it really change anything? Every Sunday we lift up our prayer concerns? Why do we do that and what do we hope might happen?

I love the words of David Steindl-Rast, but I'm afraid I live the words of Mike Yaconelli. My spiritual life often seems as scattered as the fictional character who was described as hopping on his horse and riding off in all directions at once. Prayer can be a struggle for me in the midst of a busy and easily distracted life. And yet, it is hard to imagine my life without prayer. I suppose that is why I love Jesus' story of the woman stubbornly beating on the door of the judge until he finally opens it. She will not give up, she keeps knocking. There is even an element of humor in the story. Note that the judge doesn't open the door because he is concerned about her or wants to help her. He finally opens the door because her persistent knocking is so annoying. She is driving him crazy! He just wants to get rid of her. I can identify with her. I'm not always sure I am doing it the right way, I'm not always convinced I will get an answer, I wonder if when the one inside is even listening, but I keep on knocking. In all of my confusion and distractions and uncertainty, I try to keep on knocking. But, why?

I suppose you have all heard this definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over and wondering why nothing changes or why you don't get better results. Could the same be said about prayer? I know that for me, the biggest challenge of my prayer life is the feeling that maybe I'm beating and beating against a door that is never going to open. In the words of theologian, Rodney Clapp, "Sometimes, and I know I am not unusual in this, I just don't feel or sense God's presence. My spiritual life seems empty or numb. I pray, but feel as if my prayers go no further than the edges of my lips, as if I am just going through the motions. God's love simply does not feel real or alive. Such times can leave me anxious, tempt me to jadedness or leave me bored. At their worst, such times can threaten faith to its core."

Do you recall this story told by Barbara Brown Taylor? I have shared it before. "I have a seven-year-old granddaughter by marriage named Madeline. She is blond, skinny and tall for her age...My first indication that there might be gaps in her religious education came several years ago, when her mother, her grandfather and I joined hands around the dinner table and closed our eyes to pray. 'Why is Grandpa talking with his eyes closed?' she asked. 'Just be quiet and listen,' her mother said, which really was not a bad introduction to prayer.

"Last May when she came to celebrate her birthday it was just the four of us again. Madeline watched the candles on her cake burn down while we sang to her. Then she leaned over to blow them out without making a wish.

“Aren't you going to make a wish?' her mother asked.”

“You have to make a wish,' her grandfather said. Madeline looked as if someone had run over her cat.

“I don't know why I keep doing this?' she said.

“Doing what?' I asked.”

“This wishing thing,' she said, looking at the empty chair at the table. 'Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away, but she did. This year I wish my mommy and daddy would get back together.”

“That's not going to happen,' her mother said, 'Don't waste your wish on that.”

“I know it's not going to happen,' Madeline said, 'so why do I keep wishing?”

Says Taylor, “No one answered her. It would have been insulting, under the circumstances, since her question was better than any response we could have given her. Why do any of us keep wishing for things we know won't happen? Why do we keep tossing the coins of our hearts' desires into pools of still water that swallow them up without a sound?” I suppose we could ask the very same thing about prayer. Why do we keep knocking at that door?

Well, one answer would be because Jesus tells us to. He seems to encourage us to be annoying with God. Says Rev. Stephanie Frey, “Jesus invites, even commands, us to be as shameless and irritating in our prayers as that noisy woman at midnight. We should persist until prayer becomes the ongoing conversation between us and God. Then we will never come away empty-handed from prayer, because even if we wind up with none of the things we thought we needed, we will always wind up with God – God listening, attending and answering our prayer in ways we hadn't imagined.” Ah, the permanent value of our own small acts of faithful, patient persistence, of learning to pray even for fruit that may take years to blossom.

It would seem that there is so much more about prayer than simply the answer we want. There is the one who is praying – you and me – and how we are shaped, changed, transformed through this process. Thinking back to her granddaughter's question – “Why do I keep doing this?' Barbara Brown Taylor says, “What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationships itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty...What the persistent widow knows is that the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless. If you do not go and yell under the judge's window, what are you going to do? Take to your bed with box of Kleenex? No. Every day of your life you are going to get up, wash your face, and go ask for what you want. You are going to trust the process, regardless of what comes out of it, because the process itself gives you life.”

The process, the praying, the relationship gives you life. Does that give you comfort, does it give you confidence, does it give you hope? Curious that Taylor states that the most important time to pray is when your prayer seems meaningless, when God seems silent, when you don't seem to be getting anywhere, when you don't feel anything happening. Perhaps we are back to the idea of prayer shaping the one who prays. Says Maggi Dawn, “Repeated, habitual prayer, gradually tests and sifts what you believe is really important. If something doesn't matter that much, the momentum for prayer will diminish. But if it does matter, an unanswered prayer becomes like grit in an oyster – something that worries and annoys you until you are determined not to take no for an answer.” Or, in Taylor's words, “One day, when Madeline asks me outright whether prayer really works, I am going to say, 'Oh, sweetie, of course it does. It keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It's how we bother God and God bothers us back. There's nothing that works any better than that.”

I know I have prayed for many things in my life that did not happen – I think of certain football game last Sunday afternoon, for instance. But we all know the feeling...loved ones get sick, loved ones die, children take a wrong path, relationships end, peace and justice for all God's children seem as distant today as they ever did. And yet, even with my rather messy and at times unfocused spirituality, I keep at it, I trust the process...I trust the God to whom I pray. I pray because it is my way of saying that I really do believe that the way things are is not the way things have to be or will always be. In the words of one song, for me, to pray is to “kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.” The breakthrough will occur. The powers of darkness and death will not have the last word. So I choose to keep rattling cages until the answer comes. It reminds me of the shape of my own heart

And I pray in the hope of deepening the ongoing conversation between the Holy One and me. Prayer for me is not so much longing for certainty or for answers, as it is longing for a relationship, a presence, to give time, stay attentive and surrender myself as best I can...finally, to let God do it and try not always to control the situation or outcome myself. Again, not so much signs or tokens or even crystal clear answers, but rather staking my life on a transforming, ongoing, sustaining relationship. That's the power of prayer, of becoming the mystics we were always meant to be!”