

Seek... and Maybe You Will Find?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 11:9-13

Perhaps it is because of what I do for a living, but it happens quite often. I might be at the grocery store, getting some milk. I say “hi” to someone I know, may or may not be a church member. We talk for a moment, then, as I am about to leave, my conversation partner takes hold of my arm and says, “Say a prayer for my Dad, will you? He is just not himself anymore. The dementia is getting so much worse. And say a prayer for my Mom also. She is just beside herself with worry.” And of course I say I will do just that. “Yes, I will pray for your Dad and Mom, and I will pray for you too.”

I make a promise of prayer and I will keep it. But a part of me always wonders just what my friend is hoping for, what is she expecting, when she asks for prayer?

In July I had dinner with a long-time friend, also a UCC minister, who retired not long ago. It was wonderful to see him; it was sad to see him. Since his retirement he has had significant health issues, some of which seem to be resisting any and all medications. His immediate future, health wise, is very uncertain. As we parted, not sure when or if we would see each other again, I told him I would hold him in my prayers. But again, what did I mean by that? What exactly will I be praying for? What do I want my prayer for him to accomplish? In fact, is accomplish even the proper word to use?

Every week in our worship service we lift up joys and concerns during our prayer time. But when we ask for prayer for a friend suffering from cancer, for a family member stricken with grief, for ourselves as we face illness or surgery or a situation we fear might overwhelm us, what are we asking for... what do we hope will happen?

“Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.” Wonderful words, comforting words, but do we believe them? What do you suppose they mean?

Do you recall Huckleberry Finn’s experience with prayer? “Miss Watson, she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing come of it. She told me to pray everyday and whatever I asked for, I would get it. But it warn’t so. I tried it. Once I got a fish line but no hooks. It warn’t any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn’t make it work.” I think of all the times I have prayed to catch that one big fish!

Or there is this story about the power of prayer shared with me by church member, Jerry Warren: A bar called Drummonds in Mt. Vernon, Texas, began construction on an expansion of their building, hoping to grow their business. In response, the local Baptist church started a campaign to block the bar from expanding, using everything from petitions to constant prayer. About a week before the bar’s grand re-opening, a bolt of lightning struck the bar and burned it to the ground.

Afterward, the church folk were rather smug, bragging about the “power of prayer.” And so the angry bar owner proceeded to sue the church on grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the destruction of his building, “through direct actions or indirect means.” Needless to say, the church quickly abandoned the “power of prayer” argument and instead insisted it had absolutely no responsibility for or connection to the destruction of the bar.

The judge read carefully through the plaintiff’s complaint and the defendant’s reply. He then opened the hearing by saying, “I don’t know how I’m going to decide this, but it appears from the paperwork that what we have here is a bar owner who now believes in the power of prayer, and an entire congregation that does not.”

Ah yes, what to believe about prayer – the power of prayer? Again, just what are we saying when we say, “pray for me,” or when we say, “I will pray for you?” What are our expectations – and disappointments – when it comes to prayer? As one colleague, Steve Sterner, wrote a few years ago, “I think our problem with prayer is not that it works sometimes, but that sometimes it doesn’t. We truly struggle with the efficacy of prayer when it doesn’t seem to work. It is easier to believe totally that prayer does not work than it is to reconcile in our own hearts and minds why it doesn’t seem to work sometimes.” “Ask and it will be given to you...sometimes; seek and maybe you will find?” That doesn’t sound particularly comforting...does it? And so it is that I want to think with you about how we pray and what we pray for. And I have been guided in my reflections by an English Anglican priest, Samuel Wells, has been very helpful for me as I have struggled with and reflected on prayer and the prayers we say.

Wells identifies three different kinds of prayer. The first, he says, is resurrection prayer. This is essentially a prayer for a miracle. “God, we have seen your great power when you raised Jesus from the

dead. Now, by that same power, I call on you to heal my friend from cancer and restore her to health.” When I hear your prayer concerns each week or make a difficult hospital call, or visit with someone facing a serious cancer, I want to pray this prayer. God you have the power to fix it... so fix it, makes changes, take action, restore health! I want to pray it, but there are so many times when it is even hard to pray for healing, for the miracle, because healing just isn’t going to happen, at least not physical healing.

Which leads to a second prayer, what Wells calls, “the prayer of incarnation.” He describes this prayer with these words: “It’s a call for God to be with your friend or loved one. It’s a recognition that Jesus was broken, desolate, on the brink of death, and that this is all part of being human, part of the deal you sign onto the day you are born. Our bodies and minds are fragile, frail and sometimes feeble. There is no guarantee that life will be easy, comfortable, fun or happy. The prayer of incarnation says, ‘God, in Jesus you shared our pain, our foolishness and our sheer bad luck. You took on our flesh with all its needs and clumsiness and weakness. Visit my friend, my loved one, and give them patience to endure what lies ahead, hope for every trying day and companions to show them your love.’”

When that friend asks you to pray for her or her father, deep down she may know that the prospects for healing are pretty bleak. He is not going to overcome the Alzheimer’s. But when she puts her hand your arm, could she be asking for in help in trusting that she is not alone in all of this; could she be saying that she needs companions in the journey who can support her with their love and faith? Chances are you can help her with that, even in those moments when you feel powerless and inadequate in the face of all she is going through. This incarnation prayer, asking for God’s presence, comfort and care, is one I find myself using quite often.

But Wells also suggests a third kind of prayer in times of need and/or distress – a prayer of transfiguration, of transformation. This is a prayer that asks God to give us, our friend, our loved one a vision of a reality within, beneath and beyond what we understand. Wells says that this is a prayer that, in our times of bewilderment and confusion, asks that God might reveal to us a deeper truth to life than we have ever known, reasons for living beyond what we have ever imagined and an awareness of grace and love that we have never known before. Says Wells, ‘Maybe this is our real prayer for our friends, our loved ones, ourselves, a prayer for God to make this trial and tragedy, this problem and pain, a glimpse of God’s glory, a window into God’s world, even into God’s heart: ‘God, let me see your face, sense the mystery in all things, and walk with angels and saints. Bring me closer to you in this crisis than I ever been. Make this a moment of truth. Touch me, raise me, and make me alive like never before.’”

Preacher and teacher, Fred Craddock, shares an experience with prayer of transformation: “When my sister Frieda, my only sister, was dying of cancer, I had gone back to visit and knew that the time there would be the last time I would see her. She asked me to help her prepare her funeral service, which I found extremely, extremely difficult to do. When we finished preparing the service, she asked me to pray, and this is what I did. I located myself straight in front of the throne. Before I closed my eyes, I wanted to make sure I was in front of the throne, because what I wanted was God on the throne, God the power, God the almighty, God in whom all things are possible.”

He continues, “When I had positioned myself straight in front of the throne, I bowed my head and prayed for her relief and for her healing as intensely and sincerely as I could, and I closed with Amen. I lifted my head, opened my eyes, and there in front of me was Jesus, the bleeding lamb. Now who wants that? I wanted the God of power! But there he was... God in Christ - the one who identifies with us and suffers with us.” For Craddock, the prayer for a miracle became a prayer of transfiguration, a glimpse into a deeper truth, a new reality, indeed into the very face of God. His sister died, but for Craddock, there was healing and new hope.

When Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given you,” he does not exactly say what will be given. And when he says, “Seek and you will find,” he does not exactly say what we will find.” As Steve Sterner says, “Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of prayer is surrendering to the mystery of that to which we pray.” No, our prayers may not be answered in the way we wish, may not achieve the results we hoped for. And yes, there will be times when we simply are not okay with that. I’m quite sure that God is okay with those time when we are not okay with God. But, as Craddock discovered, as we are persistent in prayer, it is often we who are transformed, we who are changed, we who begin to see life and reality and God in a whole new light. And, disarmed of our demands and expectations, we just might find ourselves able to welcome the acceptance, love and other blessings that we didn’t even pray for.” No, I have no final answers for you concerning prayer and the power of prayer. But I do want to urge you to trust the process, regardless of what comes of it, because the process itself, the prayer itself, gives you life.