

“When God Says No”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
July 24, 2022

Friends in Christ...

At times prayer seems very powerful as miracles happen. At other times prayer seems like an empty exercise. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus gives his disciples (and us), models of prayer to use. The one found in Matthew is the most common one used such as it is here at St. Paul’s as the Lord’s Prayer. In this Gospel, Jesus instills confidence in his disciples that they will receive from God that for which they pray. He teaches them (and us) to pray for daily needs: the food we need to live, the forgiveness we need to grow in our relationships, and the protection we need to remain faithful. Because of what we have already received (our daily needs), we are certain that God will give even more to those who ask: that is the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful gift! Why would we not ask for it? We will hear the Luke text on prayer shortly.

But first we will take a brief look at the Epistle lesson assigned for today from Colossians, Chapter 2. The city of Colosse was about 100 miles east of Ephesus in what is now Turkey. Paul did not start this church, so one can assume that other missionaries did. The letter, believed to have been written by a follower of Paul, addresses problems in the young church. From Colossians 2:6-15 (CEB)

Error Threatening the Church

⁶So live in Christ Jesus the Lord in the same way as you received him. ⁷Be rooted and built up in him, be established in faith, and overflow with thanksgiving just as you were taught. ⁸See to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception, which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ. ⁹All the fullness of deity lives in Christ’s body. ¹⁰And you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not administered by human hands. The circumcision of Christ is realized in the stripping away of the whole self-dominated by sin. ¹²You were buried with him through baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³When you were dead because of the things you had done wrong and because your body was not circumcised, God made you alive with Christ and forgave all the things you had done wrong. ¹⁴He destroyed the record of the debt we owed, with its requirements that worked against us. He canceled it by nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵When he disarmed the rulers and authorities, he exposed them to public disgrace by leading them in a triumphal parade.

False teachings had taken place and needed correction. One of the issues was did a believer in the Way need to observe all the Jewish festivals and laws. A second issue was that some paganism had infiltrated the believers. The Colossian Christians were encouraged to continue living to please God. The heart of the letter is that Jesus Christ is able to give full salvation and that these other beliefs and practices actually lead people away from Him. As believers, we are rooted in Christ.

The Colossians text ends with language that recalls a sight all too common in the ancient world – the humiliating march of prisoners captured in battle. In verse 8 the believers are warned not to be “taken captive” by enslaving visions of reality. In verse 15, these false claims on believers’ loyalty are themselves led in triumph by Christ, stripped of their seeming power.

Forgiveness is central the resurrection faith. The author does not tell us exactly how it works, but on the cross was nailed all that stands against us, all that holds us guilty, all that would strip us of the fullness of embodied life. Trespasses, transgressions, and sins are forgiven, and no one gets to rule us out of the kingdom again.

There can be no doubting that Paul believed baptism is the single most powerful moment in a Christian's life. Colossians 2 is a remarkable passage for many reasons, not the least of which is the theological freight that Paul loads onto baptism. And it all ties in with Paul's favorite two-word phrase: "In Christ."

In Colossians 2, it is nothing short of startling to see how often Paul talks about our being either "in Christ" or "with Christ." It all stems from baptism, Paul says. Baptism somehow catches us up in the power of Christ's death and resurrection. Once you are baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit, it's almost as though you need to send out the spiritual equivalent of those "Change of Address" cards that people mail out to everyone they know after moving into a new house. Because Paul teaches us that after baptism, we are spiritually relocated. It's a change-of-address for our hearts.

It is a whole new world now because of Jesus' victory over death and the devil, over sin and guilt. The situation is new. And in baptism we get drawn into that new world. There is power available for changed living. There is wisdom available to discern truth. There is grace available to continually cleanse our lives. There is a gospel to proclaim as we invite others into this new world.

Baptism brings all this to us. We live out our baptism in Christ while still remaining in this world, too. In this world there are still any number of competing theories and philosophies that attempt to explain what's what. There is virtually no end to ideas as to where the world came from or where it's going. Amazon.com is filled with books that purport to tell you the "real" nature of God.

Rather than giving thanks for what we have, instead we look for something else. Some of the early believers wanted more to show that faith. So they created hurdles and impediments. They should have looked at the example of Jesus, who we are often told in the Gospels that he went off to pray. The disciples saw this and asked Jesus for advice as how to do so. From Luke's account:

Gospel: Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV)

¹He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ²He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." ⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child

asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word? Amen.

The text consists of two parts: the delivery of the Lord’s Prayer followed by two sayings on petitionary prayer. The Lukan text of the Lord’s Prayer is shorter than the Matthew version consisting of only five petitions, compared to Matthew’s seven. The additional petitions in Mathew are “Thy will be done” and “But deliver us from evil” and probably liturgical expansions. Prayer in the Bible is primarily working with God in carrying out his purposes of salvation history. The supreme petition of Christian prayer is for the Holy Spirit.

You may wonder why there are two versions of the Lord’s prayer. The shorter version is in Luke 11:1-4, and the longer version is in Matthew 6:9-13. Niveen Sarras explains that the two versions share the same contexts but are addressed to different ethnicities. The evangelist Luke wrote his gospel to the Gentile Christians who did not learn to pray like their Jewish counterparts. He set the Lord’s prayer in a catechetical context. Luke’s introduction explains the reason behind Jesus introducing the Lord’s prayer. Jesus was praying, and one of his disciples asked him to teach them to pray like John the Baptist taught his disciples (verse 3). Like Luke, Matthew set the prayer in a catechetical context. His purpose is not to teach his audience, the Jewish Christians, how to pray but to reform their prayer and places it within the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and his own constancy in prayer is a testament to its importance in our lives. Prayer does not need to be eloquent to fulfill its purpose in seeking relationship with God. We pray knowing that God hears our words, whether through tears, our singing, or our sighs. We are invited to pray because that is how our relationship with God is nourished and strengthened. We speak our concerns and listen for God’s word. Listening in silence is challenging amid the noise of our environment, and silence is a rare and fleeting experience. However, it is great to discover in our relationships that being together in silence provides for powerful connection and deeper understanding. In teaching us to pray, Jesus has given us a gift that invites us to bring our cares and desires to a loving God, with the assurance that God knows us and hears our prayers.

Jesus’ parable about the friend who begs for bread from his neighbor at midnight, is it really about persistence or shamelessness? Or is it about something else? To think fresh thoughts about this story, it helps to know five bits of background information. First, in the Ancient Near East, it was taken for granted that one offered a meal to a visiting traveler as hospitality was of paramount importance, even at a midnight hour. Second, bread (think pita) was essential to any meal in that culture; grain in the form of bread was a major part of the diet and it also served as a utensil (you broke off pieces to dip into common serving bowls). Third, since baking occurred out of doors in an oven shared by several families, everyone knew who baked bread on a given day. Fourth, the reputation, of a village for hospitality was a matter of community honor. And fifth, there is a fascinating question regarding the proper translation of the word commonly rendered as “persistence.” Some scholars translate this text as an avoidance of shame, or shamelessness, rather than persistence.

Jesus continues: “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (11:9-10).

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the passage for us because our experience seems to contradict Jesus' words. How often have we have asked and not received; we have searched and not found. In spite of our most fervent prayers for their health and safety, we have lost loved ones to cancer and senseless accidents. In spite of the fervent prayers of people around the world, daily we hear of tragedies of violence, hunger, disease, and natural disasters.

If God is like a loving parent who desires to give what is good and life giving (11:11-13), why do so many prayers seemingly go unanswered? There is no simple answer to this question, though simple answers are often given. One answer given is that it only *seems* that God has not answered our prayers; God always answers, but sometimes He says no. But we are not to give up.

What then can we say about unanswered prayer? We can affirm what Scripture tells us: that God is all-powerful, yet God is not the only power in the world. There are other powers at work, the powers of Satan and his demons, the powers of evil and death, often manifested in human sin. Although God has won the ultimate victory over these powers through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the battle still rages on. Consequently, God's will can be — and often is — thwarted.

We are to dare to be shameless in our prayers, to keep bringing our needs and hopes to our heavenly Father, because Jesus tells us to do so, trusting in God's loving purpose for us. Not everything that happens is God's will. There is evil in the world.

A few years ago, the Akins, a Southern Gospel group, had the song "What if God Says No." Its refrain went:

What if God says no
It don't mean
He loves us less
It just means He knows what's best
What if God says no
It's enough we have His grace
So don't let go of your faith
What if God says no

I think that gives us a perspective on what we believe to be unanswered prayer. Also, God has a much bigger picture and sometimes the answer is not now. We have to remember that there can be prayers from both sides of a situation where the answer cannot satisfy both parties. For example: a party is having a big function (like a wedding) outside, and they are praying for beautiful weather, where a farmer is praying for rain for his thirsty crops.

The text from Luke brought to mind the old gospel tune: "Just a Little Talk With Jesus." Its refrain is:

Now let us have a little talk with Jesus
Let us tell Him all about our troubles
He will hear our faintest cry
He will answer by and by
Now when you feel a little prayer wheel turning
And you know a little fire is burning
You will find a little talk with Jesus makes it right

We are to have those little talks and to give thanks at all times. Thanks be to God. Amen.