

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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July 28, 2019
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 11:5-11

The Prayer of the Faithful

Do you know the call and response which begins with "God is good?" One person says, "God is good" and the rest respond with, "All the time!" Then the leader says, "All the time" and the people answer, "God is good!"

Many of you know that I recently returned with ten others of our church from our youth mission trip to San Diego, where we were once again part of Sierra Service Project and so were joined with five other church youth groups. The SSP leadership have found a good way to get the attention of a rowdy group of teenagers. Someone shouts, "God is good!" and enough people stop what they are doing to shout back "All the time!" Then, of course, the leader says, "All the time!" and the crowd says, "God is good!" and what do you know, everyone's attention is focused on one place, one voice, one speaker. It's very effective.

I've heard this call and response for a number of years. Our sister Presbyterian church in Ennis, Montana, knows it well since their pastor, Jean Johnson, begins worship with it every week. Every week they affirm that though each person in the congregation may not be experiencing life's goodness at this particular moment, and though famine and flood, fire and earthquake may devastate, and though evil is rampant in the world, through it all, God is still good. After all, evil and human failings and natural disasters are not of God's making, and God's love is the most powerful force in the universe.

I was curious about the origin of the call and response. If Google is correct on this, it originated in Nigeria and spread in Liberia during a time when Christians were experiencing persecution, torture, murder, and harassment. "God is good, all the time," became an affirmation of hope and faith, that yes, we will live as God's people, no matter what, for we know that God's goodness is eternal and will sustain us. God is good, (all the time). All the time, (God is good).

Here's my advice for today: If you have ever pondered the purpose of prayer and wondered about its effectiveness, keep this affirmation in mind. I believe it's a good summary of Jesus' teachings on prayer.

If we backtrack a few verses in Luke 11, we find that Jesus' disciples asked their master, "Lord, teach us to pray," and he gave them words which we continue to use today in what we know as the Lord's Prayer. And then he gave them a little scenario to think about. Imagine that it is late at night when a visitor arrives at your home. The dictates of hospitality require feeding your guest, but your cupboards are bare. However, you know that your neighbor has bread. In ancient Palestine, breadmaking took place in a shared courtyard, so everyone knew the status of each another's larder. (R. Allen Culpepper, 1995, Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol ix, Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 236) So you would naturally go to your neighbor and ask for bread when you needed it. But suppose your neighbor was cranky, and didn't want to get out of bed and disturb the children in the middle of the night. What would you do in that case?

Keep knocking, Jesus says. Eventually even a cranky neighbor will respond to the need, and share their bread.

He then gives a few more scenarios to which the answer is even more obvious. Suppose a girl asks her father for a fish. Will the father give her a snake? Of course not. What about a boy who wants an egg? Will his father hand him a scorpion? No way! Not going to happen.

Compare your expectations, Jesus is saying. What do you expect from neighbors and from parents, who we know are fallible humans? So what would you expect from God? God is so much more reliable than people are!

So, Jesus leads us to conclude, don't hold back on asking God for what you need. Don't ever give up seeking God's help. Don't stop knocking at God's door, especially when you are knocking on behalf of others. God is good, all the time. God is far better than the best of humans. It is God's will that everyone should have their daily bread, and that all God's children should receive what they really need, what will make them healthy and happy and strong. God will never give us snakes or scorpions when we are hungry. God will provide our daily bread.

When Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, he does not give them magic words to say. Instead, he teaches them about the nature of God. God is good, all the time. God is reliable. God's will is for human flourishing. Jesus offers encouragement to pray because through prayer, his disciples become part of God's life in the world.

For did you notice what reward prayer brings? God is not a vending machine who dispenses the snack we specify. The answer to prayer is not a blank check we can write, or whatever we think we need. Rather, the kicker of this teaching is this: God sends the Holy Spirit to those who ask, search, and knock. And with the Holy Spirit, we become part of God's answer to our prayers. With the Holy Spirit, we are God's agents of mercy, healing, and hope.

I believe that prayer is intrinsic to the human spirit. Something deep within us reaches out to something beyond us, and we call that reaching "prayer." But prayer with the Holy Spirit is a uniquely Christian concept. Church historian Justo Gonzalez tells us that in the early church, a distinction was made between those who were interested but not yet committed and those who were baptized believers. Prayer on behalf of others was considered a special assignment for the baptized believers. It was known as "the prayer of the faithful," prayer not just for their own needs, but for the needs of the world. This intercession was seen as the work of a priestly people asking a friend (that is, God), for the needs of another friend (that is, the world). (2010, Luke, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 145) The gift of the Holy Spirit opens the door and provides two-way communication. And then the many gifts of the Spirit empower our participation in God's answer to the needs of the world.

What that means, of course, is that we're not off the hook once we've prayed. When the door is opened, we can enter into God's presence, but God can also move across that threshold and motivate us to take action!

So, for instance, when we pray for those who are sick, we may well hear a call to sit with that person, take a meal to their family, provide a ride to the hospital, or give the hug that lets them know that we care. When we pray for those who suffer from addiction, we should not be surprised when God brings addicted persons into our midst and calls upon us to give support and encouragement. Or—here's one from our national scene--when we lift our "thoughts and prayers" on behalf of the victims of gun violence, we should also be prepared to use our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love as well as our democratic powers like the power of the ballot to reduce further incidents of gun violence. And when we pray for those who are hungry in our world, we had better be ready to change

our own lifestyle so that the world's resources can be more fairly shared. That's what the gift of the Holy Spirit will ask for. The prayer of the faithful moves God to move us to move the world closer to God's dream.

God is good (all the time). All the time (God is good). On our mission trip last week, we were privileged to spend a few hours at the border fence learning about some of the issues there. The culmination of the visit was meeting up with other members of our group who had crossed the border into Tijuana. We were all at the small park adjacent to the ocean called "Friendship Park," a place established by First Lady Pat Nixon in 1971 for Mexicans and U.S. citizens to freely mingle. Today it is divided by large steel bollards reinforced with a heavy mesh fence. Families on opposite sides of the border can meet there during certain weekend hours. The tight mesh of the fence limits human touch across the border to the tip of a pinky finger.

Following the instructions of a Mexican pastor who runs a shelter for migrants in Tijuana, we formed a large circle encompassing the border by touching pinkies around the circle and through the fence. And then he prayed the prayer he and his binational congregation have prayed every Sunday since 2011 at this same spot. His prayer was for understanding and peace, and that those in authority would be moved to find solutions to the problems of human suffering at the border. Every Sunday since 2011.

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 to you. God is good, all the time, and God will answer this persistent prayer of the faithful. Maybe the answer will come through visionary leadership motivated by concern for all God's children, leadership which is courageous enough to press on despite political opposition. Maybe the answer will come through the young people who were joined in the prayer, whose hearts were touched by the challenges of the border and whose minds will be devoted to finding a better solution than the current generation seems to be able to muster. Or maybe it will take a miracle. But week after week, the faithful pray, not just for themselves, but for the needs of the world. Week after week, they live their hope in the goodness and power of God, all the while tending to the needs of individuals and families caught in the unanswered struggle.

The prayer of the faithful rests on knowledge of God's goodness and mercy, God's power and love. The prayer of the faithful trusts that God's promise of peace with justice is here for those who choose to live in it. The prayer of the faithful does not give up when the answers don't come swiftly, for the prayer of the faithful opens up those who pray to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

God is good (all the time). All the time (God is good). May our prayers always be rooted in the ground of this truth. May we trust God with the deepest desires of our hearts, and the needs of the world. And may we be ready to be the answer to the prayers of the faithful, wherever they may be.