

How Many? How Long? How Much More?
July 24, 2016
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“You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.” Sorry. I love starting sermons with lyrics from Mick Jagger. And somehow they do seem to have something to do with prayer.

In the movie *Forrest Gump* there is a scene where the boy Forrest goes to visit his best friend Jenny. She lives in a tumble-down shack with a father who is clearly an abusive alcoholic. Jenny runs from him into the corn field with Forrest, and, kneeling down, says, “Pray with me.” The content of her prayer is “Please, God, make me into a bird so I can fly far, far away. Please God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far away.” Over and over. It sounds like a prayer she’s prayed many times before. She is not made into a bird. She does get removed from the home by the county authorities, but she suffers from the effects of that parental abuse for the rest of her life.

I believe that any of you could tell a similar story, not one from a film, but from real life. Some story of need and pain and prayer...and apparently, silence. Every Sunday we pray together. We pray for healing, we pray for peace. We pray in words we use time and time again. Our loved ones still suffer from illness, war still rages, people are still shot in senseless violence. There may be some healing, there may be some peacemaking, but we suffer from the effects of disease and violence for our whole lives. How long will this go on, we wonder? How much more can we take? Will we really get what we need, as the song says? How can we affirm the Gospel, the Good News in the face of this reality? How does Jesus teach his disciples to pray?

Jesus is continuing his long journey to Jerusalem. We have been following him, week by week, in the lectionary, using Luke’s account. There have been healings, there have been meals, there have been parables on how to live into God’s commandments. Luke says that the disciples, after watching Jesus in prayer, asked for a lesson about it. John the Baptist had taught his disciples prayers, and they wanted one too. So Jesus gives them the simple words we have, which we treasure and recite and teach to our children. Luke’s version is shorter than Matthew’s which leads some scholars to think that it is the older, more original form. But the gist of it is the same in either Gospel.

There have been a million sermons about the Lord’s Prayer, and many of them do a phrase-by-phrase breakdown, analyzing the meaning of each petition, and sometimes offering new insights that are essential when we have learned a prayer by heart. But I want to begin by looking at the teachings that follow the prayer: the examples Jesus gives to get at the purpose and meaning of it. Jesus uses two illustrations: the neighbor-to-neighbor relationship and the parent-child relationship.

What if: someone had unexpected company in the middle of the night and did not have any food to offer his guest: a huge hospitality gaffe. He goes to a friend at midnight, explains the problem, and asks if he can borrow some bread. The friend says, "Don't bother me. We have all gone to bed, the house is locked up. I can't help you out right now." Then Jesus goes on to say that

even though the friend won't get out of bed to help out of friendship, he will get up to help if the man is shameless enough to keep asking and knocking on the door. That's right: shameless demands work eventually, according to Jesus.

What does this example or parable of the annoying neighbor mean? We know we are unable to fully comprehend the mind or the actions of God. God is of course not a sleepy friend who does not want to be disturbed in the middle of the night. Any human language or attempt to reveal God's thoughts will fall short of any kind of accuracy. On the other hand, the human attitude in the story is instructive. In case we were wondering how to pray, here's a hint. Persistent and shameless prayer will have an effect, apparently.

What if: a child asks a parent for food, like a fish or an egg. What are the chances a parent would give them poisonous things instead? God may be something like a parent, but the gifts we receive from God are beyond anything a parent could give. God gives the Holy Spirit as a gift, when asked. In case we were wondering what we should be praying for, here's a hint. Not for wealth or comfort or success. God instead will give the ultimate good: the Holy Spirit.

What if: God could interact with people face to face. Genesis gives us another 'what if' story. The exchange between God and Abraham is not called prayer, but is more like a conversation. There are few passages in the Bible where God is so accessible and so pliable. God decides to take Abraham into his confidence about the problem of Sodom. It seems that having chosen Abraham as a source of blessing for all the nations, it is appropriate to consult him about righteousness and justice and sin. The open question is a wholesale destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for unspecified sins. (At this point, before you make the common assumption that the sin was same-sex relationships, we might look for a place in the Bible that tells us what the problem in Sodom *really* was. The prophet Ezekiel later tells us "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." This gives us a rather different take on "sodomy": it should mean "those selfish and arrogant enough to let others go hungry. But I digress.) In any event, when consulted by God, Abraham is very polite, very respectful, but he says, "Really? Kill everyone if just some are wicked? Really? Far be it from you to be unjust, judge of all the earth that you are." Abraham seems to be giving justice lessons, advocating for the people of the city. In the following bargaining session he talks God down: "if I can find 50 righteous people, if I can find 45, if I can find 40, if I can find 30, if I can find 20, if I can find 10" – talk about shameless persistence! And it works: God agrees to be more merciful. In case we were wondering whether we can question God in prayer, here's a hint. Argument is a possibility.

When people try to figure out the how and what of prayer, we could talk about mechanics. Or we could talk about relationships. What is the relationship between the two participants? It is something like that of a neighbor in need to a neighbor with bread. It is something like a hungry child and a parent. It is something like that of two people weighing the obligations of justice and mercy. It is something like a relationship that requires work, intention, and perseverance. If we persist, and ask and seek and knock, a door opens. You might call it the Holy Spirit door. Luke likes to talk about the Holy Spirit. It is an energizing, enlivening, transforming power, one that makes all kinds of new relationships possible. It breaks down barriers of language and class to form new communities. It is the glue that binds people into a common purpose. Through it, we are lifted beyond ourselves in joy while still being rooted in the soil of human need. It is a kind of doorway into the kingdom of heaven, present and yet somehow still to be realized.

What if: we are partners with God in transformation. The Holy Spirit is the best gift, the superlative gift that God can give as part of that process. In praying together, we are asking how we may be more engaged in the world's suffering. We are seeking for avenues of hope for others. We are knocking up against any structures that create conflict or oppression. In case we were wondering how we approach that door of transformation, the Lord's Prayer gives us a hint. We start with the words "Our Father": we go together, not as individual supplicants, but as a community praying.

We know from learning about many liberation movements, including the anti--apartheid movement in South Africa and the civil rights movement in the US. So often, it was prayer as song, the heartfelt yearnings of people in crisis, that pulled the community together. As Boston University professor Cheryl Boots writes of the civil rights movement:

"When they were at mass meetings, they would sing for two hours. People would sing in jail; often, they were separated, so they couldn't see each other, but they could hear each other, and so they would sing...."

So music was important for creating a community, an egalitarian resonance, or the sense of commonality we feel when we sing together. It may or may not last, but it is a very powerful feeling, and it comes from singing and listening to music in a very deep and meaningful way. It takes everybody to make that music, old and young, male and female, white, black, brown, yellow, pink. Singing together crosses generations; it crosses time. It's kind of a model: Okay, we can make music together, why can't we live together in peace, valuing each voice?"

I might wonder whether, in our context, if we learn to pray together, maybe we can live together in peace, valuing each voice

Henri Nouwen said that "prayer leads us from false certainties to true uncertainties." It's not always completely comfortable, but neither was the journey to Jerusalem. When we say, "Teach us to pray" with the disciples, we join them on the road.

What if: this church used prayer, not as a private moment of meditation, but as a form of activism. What if we actually prayed for the Holy Spirit to enter us and change us and help us see the world as the arena of God's justice and mercy? How does a community imbued with the Spirit take note of the events of the last month: violence and anger erupting, seemingly everywhere? Do we recall the argument of Abraham with God about sweeping away the righteous with the wicked, and have conversations about justice? Do we affirm our relationship with innocent victims? How does a community, ardently praying for the gift of the Spirit, hear the persistent and shameless requests of neighbors for bread? Do we recall stories of reluctant generosity, and our own requests for daily bread? Do we affirm our relationship with those who hunger? How does a Spirit-filled community hear about the needs of children for the good things, the nourishing things of life? Do we recall that story about fallible parents giving good gifts, and wrestle together about how to raise our children? Do we affirm our relationship, made at the time of baptism with each child here: a promise to love, support and care for them in their faith life? This kind of prayer is for those who have chosen an intentional journey with Jesus: a hard road, but full of learning and joy.

What if: this church takes hold of prayer, not as a shopping list, not as "these are the things I'd like to have," but as an opportunity for change. Maybe we can't always get what we want, even when those things seem so simple and so necessary. But we can receive the gift we need, the gift of the Spirit, that open door. There are no magical formulas and no guarantees that all things will have

the outcomes we would like. There is only (only!) the promise that we are like precious children and that God partners with us for a better future. Even when it feels like bargaining, even when it feels repetitive, even when we are confused about what's best for us, we continue to open ourselves in prayer. It is not blind faith, but faith formed by the continuing story of God's relationship with human yearning that brings us to the place of transformation. Join me in persistence, in argument, in caring.

What if: the door opens, and the kingdom comes?