

Teach Me to Pray  
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle  
July 24, 2016

Lord, teach us to pray, (Luke 11:1b)

That was some selection from the lectionary! Whores and children of whores, snakes and scorpions, circumcision of every kind. In the spirit of last week's tabloid headlines we might summarize by saying: Homeless man says God is his speechwriter. Says, multiply with a street walker and feed your offspring neither scorpions nor snakes. Beware of empty deceit. Rejoice! The record that stands against us with its false trials has been erased. Knock and the door will be opened!

I hope I don't disappoint you because despite those scintillating headlines, I want to spend our time together reflecting on prayer and especially unanswered prayer. This is a challenging subject and we are unlikely to fully explore its depths on a single Sunday but we'll do what we can.

A number of you have confided frustration or doubt in your own prayer lives. Is God listening or is he angry with you for some unknown reason? On our better days we might feel a bit like that cartoon I've seen in a periodical that made its way to my mailbox. Imagine an angel sitting at a desk overflowing with papers and files barely held in place by puffy white clouds. She is wearing the headset of someone who works the phones during the telethon and she's saying: "I'm sorry, all of our angels are busy at the moment but your prayer is important to us. Please hold and your prayer will be answered in the order it was received." Remember, there are more than 7 billion people on the planet and if we were all to do as Paul advised the Thessalonians, to pray without ceasing, it could be a mighty long wait!

Why did the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray? Surely after several years on the road with Jesus they would have gotten the hang of it. One possible reason is they were finally beginning to understand that Jesus was the Son of Man; they had

an opportunity to learn from the Master. There is no doubt this was *not* the first time in human history the question had been asked. Fundamentally, prayer in one form or another, is a part of the very fabric of who we are as human beings. The anthropological record shows that long before there was the written word there was prayer. Prayer is an integral part of who we are as sentient beings. All religions embrace some form of prayer but it is not unusual for persons not otherwise religious to lift their voices in times of need. We often ask one another – even casual friends – “please pray for me”. And still we feel uncomfortable or inadequate when we pray. Lord, teach us to pray.

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One of my most treasured possessions is a tiny book that was published in 1915 – that makes it more than 100 years old. It is called *The Meaning of Prayer* and was written and compiled by Harry Emerson Fosdick. My copy is water stained and falling apart. It appears that the first owner was Harriet W. Davidson who received it as a Christmas present in 1915 from someone with the initials M. A. D. – her husband Matthew perhaps? At some point it was priced at \$1 perhaps for a church fundraiser. I would guess I am the third or fourth owner and it has now been in my possession for more than 30 years. It is held together with pieces of clear packing tape. Its contents are a treasury of wisdom, soaring prayers, peerless prose and deep Christian insight.

According to Wikipedia, Harry Emerson Fosdick was born in Buffalo, New York, completed seminary at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and was called to the First Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey just after the turn of the century. He

struggled with the fundamentalist understanding of Scripture and shortly after serving in Europe as an Army chaplain during the first Great War he was called to the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. This is the same historic church from which J. Barrie Shepherd retired in the year 2000. Fosdick developed an increasingly progressive understanding of Scripture and in 1923 he delivered a historic sermon entitled *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?* At the next General Assembly of the northern branch of our still divided denomination, a court of censure was ordered to scrutinize his religious beliefs! He resigned from First Pres, met John D. Rockefeller and became the first pastor of the Riverside Memorial Church when its doors opened in 1930. Reading the other headlines from last week it seems these very same culture wars are far from over.

But let's not let politics intrude into our exploration of the most important conversation we can have at any given moment; prayer. Paul counseled the Thessalonians to: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:16-22). Do you hear echoes of our Gospel reading as I do?

As we have discussed before there are many types of prayer: adoration, consecration, confession, communion, thanksgiving and petition, for example. The prayer that Jesus teaches the disciples in Luke contains elements of adoration, petition, and confession and from Matthew's account we might add supplication. Oddly, to my way of thinking, there is little in the way of thanksgiving, consecration or communion.

The most inclusive definition of prayer is the means by which we communicate with God. As in any relationship, open communication is an essential ingredient. Communication suggests dialogue not monologue. Open communication means honest, straight-forward, soul baring communication. Prayer is both laughter and tears; joy and even anger. Don't worry, God can handle your anger. Alfred Lord

Tennyson likened prayer to "opening a sluice between the great ocean and our little channels, when the sea gathers itself together and flows in at full tide." Through prayer, we can learn what it means to rejoice in the presence of God" but also to share our deepest longings and hurts. Ultimately prayer is about becoming more Christ-like. As John Mogabgab, editor of Weavings magazine summarizes: "Just as long-married spouses often come to resemble one another, so dwelling with God in the intimacy of prayer causes us to grow into the likeness of the One with whom we share love." That alone is a pretty compelling reason to heed Paul's entreaty to pray constantly!

But often we get stuck in our prayer lives and feel as though our tongues have been made dumb. Be aware that "Our struggles in prayer often trace the contours of our relationship with God, and illumine the places where God is wooing us to deeper fidelity and joy." Too often in our busy-ness we revert to simply asking God for "stuff". Mogabgab contrasts the Psalmist's soaring songs of thanksgiving with the common caricature of today that "in our talkative, impatient world – prayer is relegated to a spiritual shopping list launched heavenward on the wings of pious words". A threadbare substitute it would seem; hardly opening the oceanic sluice that Tennyson writes of. And yet life is filled with needs God can provide and Jesus encourages the disciples to ask and ask persistently without limitation.

Let's spend our remaining time considering why our prayers seem to get put on "heavenly hold". For those who are frustrated, angry or worse feeling that God isn't hearing or responding to your prayer, know that you are not alone. In those moments of frustration it might help to remember that Moses never got beyond the top of Mt. Nebo. Although he could see the land of milk and honey he never set foot in the Promised Land. Or Job who cries out "My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me. Surely there are markers around me, and my eyeballs dwell on their provocation." (Job 17 1-2). Or the Psalmist whose words Jesus repeated in anguish from the Cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping

me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest (Psalm 22:1-2). Or the prophet Habakkuk who opens O, Lord, how long shall I cry out for help and you will not listen? (Hab 1:2) For every David victorious in battle there is a Job who suffers despair. And yet our God is a steadfast and loving God.

I believe many more of our prayers are answered than we realize; we simply fail to see God's hand in response to our prayers. Fosdick writes: "Many prayers ask for a *thing*, and God's answer is wisdom sufficient to get the thing." (Meaning of Prayer, p. 118) "Dean Bosworth puts it clearly "Almost all the petitions a disciple ever has occasion to make to God can be answered without recourse to the so-called laws of nature, *if God has power to put a thought into the mind of humanity.*" Let me re-state that: most prayers don't need a miracle to be answered. If we believe God has the power to put a thought in another person's mind the answer is usually delivered in a way too subtle for us to recognize. Don't look so much for miracles as answer to our prayer; look for a deeper sense of peace.

Consider that in our limited knowledge, it is not uncommon for us to pray for that which is not good for us; common sense reasons why our prayers are not always answered. For example, we often don't fully understand the implications of what we ask for. The truth is "no" is as real an answer as "yes". How many times as a parent or grandparent have you had to tell a child "no"? No, you may not have a second candy bar; no, you may not cross the street without holding my hand; no, I will not co-sign a loan so you can take a vacation in Hawaii.

Sometimes the "what" of what we ask for is denied but the substance of our petition is granted. Fosdick recounts the story of St. Augustine's mother, Monica. Monica was a devout Christian and *Gus* was a bit of a bon vivant who was having too much fun to seriously consider becoming a Christian. When he made plans to sail from his home in North Africa to Rome to pursue a career in rhetoric, Monica was distraught. She was absolutely certain that if her son

escaped her watchful eye and made his way to the sin capital of the Western world – think of our very own New York City! – all hope would be lost. Little did she know that as she knelt in prayer that night, Augustine had already set sail and would soon be in Rome. But the punchline is that within months of his arrival he met Ambrose who saw the deep yearnings within Augustine's heart. It was not long after that he was solidly on the path toward becoming the Bishop of Hippo and one of the most influential thinkers of the early church. Monica's prayer that Augustine not leave Carthage had been denied but her wish that he become a Christian was fulfilled in a most glorious fashion!

How many times have your petitions been for a miraculous rescue from your own lack of planning, elbow grease, or prayer? How many times have we not done that which we know we ought and then drop on bended knee praying "just this one-time Lord"? Thinking again as a parent or grandparent do we sometimes see the wisdom in denying a request in order to teach an important life lesson. I wonder if God doesn't sometimes think likewise! It reminds me of an aphorism that is sometimes attributed to Augustine that goes something like: in matters of importance pray as though everything depended on God and work as though everything depended on you.

Fosdick summarizes saying there are three broad reasons our prayers of petition are denied: we don't really understand what we are asking for; the prayer is inappropriate, and we are not spiritually ready to receive the good we seek – we simply need patience. We are out of time so let me end on a somewhat lighter note by reading this morning's quote from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who asks us to consider "What discord should we bring into the universe if our prayers were *all* answered!" We don't have to think too deeply to understand the truth of that!

Lord, open that sluice of prayer between us that we might rejoice in your grace, know your will for us, and grow daily to be more like you.

Amen