

**7 Pentecost
July 28, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This morning's first lesson about Abraham negotiating with God is almost unbelievable. The people of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah have caused a great offense against God, and God wants to wipe the cities off the face of the earth. Abraham pleads with God that if he, Abraham, can find fifty innocent and good people, will God be willing to take a softer line. God agrees, but then Abraham begins to push the envelope ... what if I can find only forty-five people? God says, "Okay, I'll relent for forty-five good and innocent people." Abraham continues this negotiation until it gets down to ten people. Imagine the chutzpah it took to talk God down from fifty good people to only ten. Hold that thought for a while.

Secondly, this gospel reading from Luke is about the Lord's Prayer ... or, at least that is where I imagine most preachers using this reading are going to go with it this morning. However, I think there is something much more fundamental in what this story is about.

Let's take a look at the "ask," "search," and "knock," part of this reading. "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." "Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

This portion of the reading has a history of interpretation within the Church that I believe sends the wrong message about our relationship with God. Read the wrong way, this piece of scripture renders prayer transactional, inviting us to believe that God is a cosmic vending machine into which we can insert our prayers like so many coins.

In the churches I went to as a child I was taught about this kind of vending machine God. For years, I heard in Sunday School and in sermons that fervent, persistent prayer can heal diseases, prevent car accidents, feed hungry children in faraway countries, fend off nightmares, prevent premature death, and save broken relationships.

As I matured ... in age and in my faith development ... I came face-to-face with the reality of life. Diseases didn't always get better. Car accidents happened ... my son was disabled in one. I still had nightmares. Almost every day I see pictures of children starving in Yemen, or Syria, or the Sudan. Young people ... my high school classmates ... tragically died. Relationships and marriages disintegrated ... including my own. And, at times, others ... friends, family and parishioners ... with all good intentions ... would try to explain all this to me. They usually gave me one of two reasons ... I needed to pray harder, longer, and with more faith. Or, God did answer my prayers ... God just said, "No." What I heard from these folks was that I didn't have

the right currency for the vending machine God, or there wasn't enough of it. Either that, or I had found the machine empty of the candy bar I wanted.

To ask what role prayer plays in the face of ongoing tragedy, injustice, and oppression in our world is to raise the hardest theological questions I can think of about God. Does God intervene directly in human affairs? Does such intervention ... or lack of it ... depend in any way on the way we pray? Can prayer "change" God? Do our prayers have tangible effects for other people, even when those people have no idea that we're praying for them?

It is not my intent to criticize or offend anyone for the way they pray. There are lots of faithful people for whom these questions are off base ... and for some these questions may seem heretical. The fact is that I know people who pray with earnestly for everything from parking spots and lost house keys to cancer remission and acceptances for their children at the college of their choice. They pray expecting answers ... and apparently, they sometimes receive them. At least that is what they tell me.

However, let's go back to the beginning of this reading. It starts with a disciple approaching Jesus and asking for instruction. "Lord, teach us to pray." It is a simple, straightforward request. Yet it seems odd ... the disciples were not unfamiliar with prayer. They were not inexperienced when it came to prayer. They were devout Jews who had most likely grown up attending Shabbat services, lifting their hands upward in worship, or lying prone on the ground to make their lamentations. They knew how to pray. What they sought was not better technique ... or the "right" words. There was something else the disciples was asking in the question.

So what was it? What did those around Jesus observe when he prayed? The stories aren't specific, but they come close. Obviously, God was alive in Jesus. So when Jesus prayed he must have experienced a deep connection between his humanity and the divinity that was alive in him. It showed in his authenticity. It showed in his vulnerability. It showed in his intimacy with others and the divine presence Jesus called "Abba." It showed in his deep sense of belonging. In the trust of others and of God. In his sense of peace even in the midst of chaos.

What Jesus showed in his life ... because of his prayers ... was an intimacy with the divine presence of God that was transformative and nourishing. Jesus exhibited a sense of self ... authentic self. He also presented a fresh vision, a renewed perspective, a greater strength, and a deeper empathy because of his prayer.

So, when the disciple says, "Lord, teach us to pray," I think he was saying, "Teach us to attain what you have attained." Teach us to be with God as you are with God. Teach us to commune as you commune. To communicate as you communicate. Teach us to unlearn those false beliefs and false promises that keep us from praying as you do. Yes, we confess that we are impatient, self-absorbed, and transactional creatures, greedy for quick answers and even quicker gains. Teach us to unmake all of that. Help us to start afresh. Teach us to pray ... not just the words ... but the way that you pray.

In the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer ... which, by the way, is full of very beautiful and well articulately written prayers ... in the Book of Common Prayers the Catechism defines prayer as "Responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words." If ... as I say as an invocation at the beginning of all my sermons ... if "God is alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus" ... then prayer is like breathing. We are hardwired for prayer. Prayer is what we do as God's children made in God's image. Prayer will hold us because it is for us. We know ... and are known ... in prayer. It is our humanity communicating with the divinity that is alive in each of us ... just as it was alive in Jesus.

Instead of "ask," "search," and "knock," perhaps we should use words like "yearn" ... and "hunger" ... and "want." I "yearn" fiercely, persistently, relentlessly, and passionately for my brokenness to be healed. I have an insatiable "hunger" for the world to be a safer place for young people.

What if Jesus's lesson here is to encourage us to acknowledge the deep desires which drive and haunt us? To state without reservation or embarrassment that at times for us all is not all okay in this world. To confess that we are not yet full ... that God's kingdom has not yet come ... and that even though it's midnight and we know our door-pounding at our friend's front step is mightily inconvenient to the surrounding universe, we don't care and we're going to keep pounding because we still need bread right now?

When you pray, say, "Your kingdom come." When you pray, say, "Give us each day our daily bread." When you pray, say, "Forgive us our sins." When you pray, say, "Do not bring us to the time of trial." Ask. Search. Knock. Keep knocking. Keep knocking. Keep knocking.

There is nothing dainty or delicate about this teaching from Jesus. His invitation is brawny, assertive, and pushy. It is our "longing" named ... then named again ... and named again. It is holy yearning insisting on itself to a God who can more than handle our ferocity.

Jesus concludes his teaching on prayer with a remarkable image: "If 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!" What we want, and what we ask for, is that the cancer to be healed ... God gives us the Holy Spirit. What we search for, and what we seek, is a way to have our broken relationship be made whole ... God gives us the Holy Spirit. We desperately yearn for a time when our young friends will not be shot and killed ... God give us the Holy Spirit.

What Jesus promises us in answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit. When we pray ... when we persist in prayer ... when we name our longings in prayer without fear or compromise ... God will never fail to give us God's own, abundant, indwelling and overflowing self as the Answer we actually need. The God alive in us ... just like the God that was alive in Jesus ... that God that is alive in each of us is there for us always. When we contend in prayer, God will not withhold God's loving, consoling, healing, transforming, and empowering Spirit from us. When it comes to no-holds-barred, absolutely self-giving generosity, God's answer to all of our prayers will always be Yes.

Maybe this Yes is what the disciples sensed in Jesus when they watched him pray. Maybe the presence of the Spirit radiating through Jesus is what compelled them to go deeper in their own prayer lives. Whatever the Yes was, it permeated Jesus's whole being. However the Spirit manifested herself in Jesus's life, that Spirit was so beautiful and so compelling, the disciples wanted to experience her, too.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the first Secretary General of the United Nations, had a saying that I often use as a blessing ... "For all that has been ... Thanks! For all that will be ... Yes!" It is this Yes that is the answer to our prayers ... whatever that Yes is.

Yet, I will have to be honest. Sometimes I struggle with Thanks and Yes. It's not easy to let go of my transactional, vending machine God. I mean, if Abraham can negotiate with God, why can't I? It's hard to accept the Holy Spirit as God's Answer to my prayer, when I'd rather receive healing for my son's head injury, or an end to the toxicity that now governs American politics, or lasting freedom from anxiety, or commonsense gun control, or some reliable hope in the face of global climate change. Yes, I love and trust God, but sometimes my love for God is sometimes thinner than I think it is ... all too often I want stuff from God much more than I want God's presence to come alive in me. All too often I want God to sweep in and fix everything much more than I want God's Spirit to fill and accompany me so that I can do my part to heal the world. Resting in God's Yes requires vulnerability, patience, courage, discipline and trust ... interestingly, these are all traits I can only cultivate in prayer.

So we pray. We pray because Jesus wants us to. We pray because it's what God's children do. We pray because we yearn and our yearning is precious to God. And we pray because what we need most ... whether we recognize it or not ... is God's own Spirit pouring God's self into us. "Responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words." With words, without words, through laughter, through tears, in hope, and in despair, our prayers usher in God's Spirit, and remind us that we are not alone in this broken, aching world. God's Spirit is our Yes.

Amen.