

"PRAYER"
John 14:12-14
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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One day when Jesus was teaching he said,
"See that mountain?"
"If you have enough faith you can move it.
Prayer moves mountains."

This isn't a direct quote but I caught its meaning Jesus seem to be making the point if you pray hard enough for something and have enough faith, God will make it happen. At least that's the popular perception. But is that what he really meant?

Some people would say, "Yes!" They've prayed for a good outcome and it comes out just as they hoped it would, maybe even better.

I know a lady whose doctor told her that her heart was so diseased she had less than six months to live, so she took an early retirement and went home. But she didn't lose hope. She made her condition known to her family, friends and church and they all started praying for her. Once a month she attended a healing/prayer service and was always one of the ones who came forward for the laying on of hands and prayer. Six months later her doctor gave her a clean bill of health.

But, it doesn't always work out that way. Case in point:

Somewhere in the back of my mind there sticks the catch phrase, "Prayer Changes Things." I first heard it in a sermon long ago and it always bothered me, probably because when I was in college for a long time I was in the grips of depression. Wanting to believe prayer changes things, everyday I kept praying, "**Lord, make me feel better. Take away this heavy, dark cloud.**" To make sure my prayer would be answered I even added the prescribed formula, "**in Jesus' name. Amen.**"

Despite my prayers, the depression lingered until after a long time it ran its natural course. "**Ah!**" you might say, "**your prayer was finally answered in God's good time, because you finally got out of your funk.**" Maybe so, but how do you explain this?

A teenager is in a car accident. She's in the hospital, her life hanging by a thread. Her parents, friends and church offer up multiple sincere prayers. "**Lord, let her live, we pray it in Jesus' name.**" Nevertheless, the girl dies of her injuries. Why didn't their prayers work?

And then this: A young man in the crisis of his life kneels down and prays, "**Father, I'm afraid. I'm scared to death. Save me from this terrible situation,**" yet the next day he's put to

death on a cross.

To be sure sometimes we pray for healing, a new job, getting out of a bad situation with least pain and damage possible and we get what we ask for. Then why didn't this young man's prayer seem to work?

I really don't want to know the number of people who lost their faith because they've been taught in Sunday School, "**Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, ask in my name and the door will be opened to you.**" Even when they did what they've been told, they found prayer doesn't always change things. So, they become skeptics. "Prayer," they say, "is a sham and people who pray are only kidding themselves. Perhaps it's not totally mindless because those who do pray are mentally thinking their way through a problem, but let's get real, their thoughts are going no higher than the ceiling, and even if there is a God, why would God be concerned about anyone's petty little problems? So get off your knees and up on your feet, if you want to get through this life, get going and make it happen."

Many people actually believe this. I know them, you know them and in a way you have to respect them because they stick to their convictions. Maybe there're a few honest skeptics with us this morning. Hopefully this sermon will speak to you. But I hope it also speaks to you if prayer is a regular part of your daily routine. And I say that because at some point all of us have been disappointed because our prayers aren't always answered in the way we hoped.

Most of us know the difference between prayers and wishes. We know God isn't a genie and all we need to do is rub our two hands together to make our dreams come true. We also know selfish prayers like, "Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife. Us four. No more. Amen," are products of an unhealthy spirituality.

And yet, even the most courageous, spirit-filled saints, from time to time, get confused when they pray because they forget how to pray for the right things.

At one point in his life the great Martin Luther, who triggered the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, was distraught and confused by all the controversies surrounding his efforts to get Christianity back on track. Opposition was rising and events were spinning out of control, driving him into a deep funk. So his wife Katy dressed in black mourning clothes, darkened the house and sat in a corner. Luther asked her, "Who died?" She replied, "God must have died. You are so worried and distressed that God must be dead!"

Is this the same Martin Luther who risked life and limb when he defied the Pope by refusing to recant his beliefs and said, "Here I stand, I can do no other?" He was brave enough to say this because he prayed, "O God stand by me against the world. Thou must do it. Thou alone. It is not my cause but thine."

If Martin Luther was strong and sure when he faced down the powerful leaders of the Roman Church, it was because he was having a good prayer day. He was focused and in touch. But later when he got confused and afraid he must've been having a bad prayer day. His prayers weren't working, maybe because he was asking for the wrong things. Even if his prayers were sincere, it's

possible he was off the beam and out of sync with God's will.

I was kind of cheating when I alluded to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane earlier. I rightly caught the essence of his prayer, "Father I'm afraid, I'm scared to death. Save me from this terrible situation," but I purposely left off that last, all important petition that made all the difference, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."

You see, none of our prayers will ever bring us total satisfaction until we're willing to add that last critical request and then be willing to accept the consequences, trusting that no matter what happens, God is still making all things work together for our highest good.

So maybe our prayers aren't working because we're going about it backwards. If you believe prayer is supposed to move "the arm of God," you're in for a lot of disappointments. That's actually the pagan's approach to God. Plead enough, bribe God with offerings, sacrifice your best cow and finally God will break down and do your bidding.

But you really experience the power of prayer when you accept that it's the "arm of God" that should be moving us. God doesn't have to change. We need to change. Into what? Human beings who are God's children, in sync with God's will.

Jesus' promise, "If you ask anything in my name, I'll do it," doesn't mean God will automatically do what we want; instead Jesus promised God will give us what we need, the things of the Kingdom, those intangible yet eternal things that last forever, things we can never give ourselves, such as hope to overcome despair and the inner peace needed to see us through our sorrows and unconditional love when we're lonely and ashamed.

Then why doesn't God always answer our prayers and change things to suit us? I don't know. It's a mystery. And yet, like Jesus in the garden through prayer we can experience, even during times of crucifixion, God's eternal presence, actively at work changing us and drawing us, closer to where we're supposed to be, under God's protection and grace.

There's a shrine in France where people go to pray for healing. A man who lost his leg in an accident hobbled his way down the road towards the shrine. Someone said loud enough for him to hear. "Look at that silly man, does he think if he prays hard enough God will give him his leg back?" The man heard the remark, turned and said, "Of course I don't expect God to give me back my leg. I'm going to pray to God to help me live without it."

Having said that let me offer a few suggestions to consider next time you pray.

First, get into the habit of intentionally entering and savoring God's presence every day. Go off by yourself, silence yourself and offer up yourself to his enveloping presence. Then, trust God actively listens to you. Also realize prayer is an act of faith and God honors your prayers.

Second, be honest with God. Speak in plain language, and say what's on your mind. Don't hold back. God already knows what you're thinking anyway. If you're filled with doubt, admit it. If you're angry with someone or yourself, let it out. Even if you're angry with God, let him have it.

God can take it.

Third, don't ask God to come to you! He's already there! Instead, ask God to help you come to him. If God seems far away, maybe it's you who has to come closer.

Next, never be afraid to pray for yourself. I've talked to too many people who'll readily pray for others, but never themselves mistakenly thinking, "Oh God's too busy to listen to my silly problems," or even worse, "God doesn't want anything to do with me. He knows I only pray when I'm in trouble." Don't fall for that one. God has plenty of time for everybody, even you, especially when you're afraid you've worn out your welcome.

And finally, this is important, talking to God is like having a conversation between two friends. You speak, you listen. And yes, God will talk back, not in a voice you can catch on tape, but in that still small voice speaking truth deep within you, or even in untenable situations as they unfold, and often through other people. Prayer isn't meant to be a monologue, instead it's a dialogue between you and God.

Prayer is one of the essentials connecting you to the source of life. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches, cut off from me you are nothing."

A boy was watching a holy man praying on the banks of the Ganges River in India. "Sir, will you teach me to pray like you?"

The holy man studied the boy carefully. Then he gripped the boy's head in his hands and plunged it forcefully into the water. The boy struggled frantically until finally the holy man let him up for air. "What did you do that for?" the boy demanded. The old man replied, "I just gave you your first lesson." "What do you mean?" "When you realize you need to pray as much as you need to breathe, then you're ready to learn to pray."

I'll repeat what he said, "When you need to pray as much as you need to breathe, then you'll be ready to learn to pray."

We can read all the books we can lay our hands on about prayer, we can attend seminars and listen to sermons like this one, but until we realize we need to pray as much as we need to breathe we'll never know the complete satisfaction that comes from prayer. The Apostle Paul encouraged us to "pray without ceasing." I don't think he meant us to be on our knees twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, but I do think he wants us to cultivate the desire for ongoing, intimate, vital conversation with God.

This is the essence of prayer, longing for God's friendship and guiding hand, yearning to be loved so we are able to love and positioning ourselves under God's will. Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive and your joy will be complete."

Let's pray.

Father, we ask to be able to pray like Jesus so we can be like Jesus, for your glory and sake. Amen.