

What Are You Praying For?

Luke 11:1-13, Acts 1:12-14

Ben Dorr

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

In 1955, John Gaunt, Jr. won the Pulitzer Prize in photography for a picture that first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. It's a picture of a young man and a young woman—they are husband and wife. Husband looks out at the ocean. Wife looks at her husband. But it's not a romantic look in their eyes. The photo is titled "Tragedy by the Sea." Moments earlier, their one-year-old boy had been playing by the waters, waded in, and was swept away. They're standing in the sand as the waves roll in and out, with the unbearable knowledge that they are too late.¹ The photo does not suggest that the couple said a prayer at that moment, but what if they had? If they had prayed to God for a miracle, *would God have given them what they asked for?*

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." That's what Jesus says about prayer in Luke's Gospel. Beautiful, hopeful words. And yet my hunch is that every person who has ever prayed to God has had the experience of asking God for something that was not granted, searching for an answer that was not found..., and frankly, the parable that Jesus tells his disciples on the heels of those words does not do a whole lot to clear things up.

A friend badgers another friend into helping him in the middle of the night, as if God is asleep, and God doesn't really want to get up and help us, but if we can just annoy God enough with our prayers, God will finally relent so God can go back to sleep. What in the world is Jesus telling us?!

Let's not make one-to-one analogies with this story. What's true in this story is that the friend who knocks on the door leaves with something he did not have when he first knocked on the door. He leaves with bread to eat. He leaves with food to share. The friend's life is different because he knocked on the door. The friend has received a gift from the act of knocking on the door. I wonder if this is what Jesus is telling us about prayer.

I'm reminded of that scene in *Shadowlands*, the movie about C.S. Lewis. Lewis has just learned that the cancer in his newfound love, a woman named Joy Gresham, is getting much worse. Not knowing how much time she has left, Lewis and Joy respond to this news by getting married. So when a friend (who knows that Joy has been sick) asks Lewis how things are going, Lewis responds, "Good news, I think. Yes, good news."

Lewis is talking about being newly married to Joy. The friend mistakes Lewis's response for good news about Joy's health. "I know how hard you've been praying," says his friend. "And now God is answering your prayer." "That's not why I pray," snaps Lewis. "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me."

Maybe that's the second thing we can say about prayer. If the first point is that prayer is mysterious and inexplicable and we don't always get what we pray for, maybe the second point is this: Prayer changes things. Prayer changes us. According

to Jesus, our lives will be different because we knock on God's door, in prayer. If we turn to God in thanksgiving or bow before God in confession, God will change us. If we cry out in despair to God, God will be at work to change us.

And someone says, Well, I don't see it. But does it really matter whether we can see it? Because God's ability to give us a gift is not dependent on our ability to see that gift or even to remember that gift.

Think about the first gifts any of us were given. None of us remembers the first time we were fed. None of us remembers the first time we were crying as a baby and rocked to sleep at night. But someone gave us those gifts, someone showed us that love when we were too young to even say the word *love*." And our inability to remember those gifts does not make those gifts any less real. We don't always recognize or remember the gifts we receive in order to make it through this life. But that does not mean that God is not at work, always there to give us good gifts, always there to be generous with God's love.

In our text from Acts, the disciples have not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, a gift that will send them throughout the world to show the world how much God loves the world. But Luke tells us that the 11 disciples, along with Jesus' mother and brothers and a group of women, "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer...."

What do you think they were praying for at that moment? For Jesus to come back soon? For God to restore the kingdom to Israel? For safety from the Romans? For certainty in the midst of an uncertain future?

A church member, Mary Ann, once shared a marvelous story about prayer with me, something that happened years ago when she was just a girl. She says that when she was eight-years-old and in the third grade, she was in Miss Annie's class at school. "In Miss Annie's third grade, we played bingo on Friday afternoons. Months passed without my winning a single time. One Friday, I decided to pray: 'Please, Lord, let me win just one game.' Then I won! That afternoon, I won again and again, many, many times. Through the years, I pondered that experience of answered prayer but told no one. Statistically, it was a virtual impossibility for this to have been a random occurrence. The God who set the galaxies in motion had stepped into a child's bingo game! The Creator knew and cared about the thoughts and wishes of his children." She says it was an event that was very formative and helped shape her faith in God.

Fast forward two and a half decades. "Twenty-five years later, my mother attended a celebration in the town where we used to live. Miss Annie was there also, and she related one memory to my mother. She said that when I was in third grade, my father went to school one afternoon and told her how much I wanted to win a bingo game. The following Friday, she watched my card and continued to call my numbers, letting me win over and over again." Mary Ann says that her mother told her that story, "never knowing how that event had shaped my view of God's omnipotence and love." Then she asks an intriguing question: "Was it only a coincidence that Miss Annie manipulated the game after I prayed to win, or was the answer to my childish prayer orchestrated by the power of God even before I prayed it?"

I don't know how prayer works. What I do know is this: Prayer changes things. Prayer changes us. And perhaps...prayer even changes God. Not by convincing God to do something that God would otherwise not do, but simply by saying to God, time and again, "Lord, we are in your hands. We belong to you and are helpless before you,

and love you and have faith in you, even when our faith makes no sense at all....”

I believe God is moved by such prayers. And I believe that God responds to those prayers. Even when God’s response is not clear right away, I believe that our prayers reveal *our* hearts right away. Prayer exposes us. It uncovers our needs, our hopes—our greatest joys and our deepest fears. All of which...is good news. Because that’s how God wants us. Not the cleaned up, pretend version, but the real version. The messy us. The authentic us.

One of my preaching professors in seminary was a Baptist minister, Dr. Cleo LaRue. Before Dr. LaRue became a professor at Princeton, he had many years of experience pastoring churches in Texas. He writes, “As a young twenty-year-old pastor in my first church in Texas, I remember a family caught in a season of sustained adversity. A distraught mother, trying to hold her family together, lay desperately ill in the hospital after a bad car accident. Her husband was unemployed, her son was in jail, her daughter was pregnant out of wedlock, and her creditors were calling the hospital demanding that she pay something on her overdue accounts.”

Dr. LaRue says that he went to visit her in her hospital room early one morning, “and after a brief greeting, she closed her eyes and stretched her hands toward me for a word of prayer.” At that point, Dr. LaRue says, “I thought I should do something more than merely pray for her. I thought it my place to give her some sound spiritual advice about life. So I said to her, ‘Mozelle, I’m not going to ask God to move your mountain. I’m just going to ask God to give you the strength to climb.’”

Then, he says, “This very sick woman immediately put her hands down and opened her eyes. ‘Wait a minute, little preacher,’ she said. ‘Don’t you tie God’s hands this morning. If God wants to move my mountain, you let him. I’m not trying to climb over a mountain; I’m trying to get out from under one.’”²

This is, I suspect, the way most of us have felt during the course of the past year as we’ve muddled our way through a worldwide pandemic. Sometimes that mountain we’re trying to get out from under has come in the form of an unexpected job loss and unpaid bills. Sometimes that mountain has come in the form of a congregation divided over whether and when to return to worship. Sometimes that mountain has come in the form of mostly white congregations listening with shame to their own silence in the face of racial injustice and then struggling to find their voice for racial equity and justice. Sometimes that mountain has come in the form of real and raw grief, when an awful disease has brought someone’s life to an end much too soon.

But far be it from us to assume what God will and will not do in the midst of this mess. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” In other words, don’t stop—that’s what Jesus is telling us. Don’t stop praying, don’t stop asking, don’t stop revealing what’s on your heart and mind to God. Because even though we do not know how God will respond, we do know the God to whom we’re praying—a God of boundless generosity, a God of limitless love, a God who has triumphed over Death itself.

The Rev. John Mulder is a former president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. “One might say I was predestined to be a Presbyterian,” he writes. “I was born, baptized, and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. I was ordained to be a Presbyterian minister. I taught for seven years at Princeton Theological Seminary, and then I became president of Louisville....” Then, he writes, on September 11, 2002, “I crashed.”

What caused the crash? An undiagnosed bipolar illness, “a pattern of drinking that

had progressed into full-blown alcoholism,” and a horrible disregard for boundaries that violated the vows of both his marriage and his ordination. “I had to resign as president of Louisville,” Mulder says, “and in the following year, I struggled to deal with the physical, spiritual, and moral wreckage of my life.”

Eventually, Mulder went to a rehab program. All throughout the program, he kept praying one prayer: “Please Lord, forgive me.” For months, he prayed that prayer. And nothing happened. He felt no closer to God. Finally, Mulder says he gave up that prayer, and without knowing why, he prayed a different prayer: “God open me up. Please open me up.”

One morning, as Mulder was making breakfast for himself, by himself, he describes being surrounded by white light. “It was not blinding or frightening, but warm and embracing. At first, there were no voices or sounds, but as the light subsided, I eventually heard, ‘You are not alone.’ And then the light faded.” This experience, says Mulder, made all the difference. Later on, the staff at the treatment center told him that this event marked the beginning of his recovery. Mulder’s behavior before his crash was, by his own admission, terribly wrong and deceptive, completely inexcusable. And yet, despite all the anger and hurt and pain that he had caused for so many people, Mulder says that he was able to take steps toward making amends and reconciling with many of the people he had so grievously wounded. As Mulder puts it, “It all began with a simple prayer: ‘God, open me up.’”³

I cannot tell you that you will receive exactly what you’re praying for. I can tell you that according to Jesus, the most important part about prayer *is our persistence*. “Keep knocking,” says Jesus. “Don’t stop,” says Jesus. Because the one who stands on the other side of our prayers is not a disgruntled neighbor who wants to go back to sleep. It’s the God made known in the love of Jesus Christ. The God who spun the planets is the God who loves you and delights in you and is ready, eager—no matter how put-together or messy your life feels right now—to hear from you. What do you hope will happen the next time you talk to God? What will you say?

Maybe a good place to start, in the midst of a year that has been so disruptive and deadly, a year in which it’s been tempting to lose hope in whatever God has in store for God’s Church... maybe a good place to begin is with four little words: “God, open me up.”

Notes

1 I became aware of this photograph through the book *Capture the Moment: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, Cyma Rubin and Eric Newton, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 34.

2 As told by Dr. Cleo LaRue in his sermon “The University of Adversity,” October 26, 2008, found at www.day1.org.

3 John Mulder, “Finding God,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 18, 2013. Mulder also tells this story in the book *Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories*, John M. Mulder with Hugh T. Kerr, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 394-396. Additional information is found in Peter Smith, “Fallen Presbyterian leader finds path to renewal,” *The (Louisville, Ky) Courier-Journal*, November 26, 2012, [Fallen Presbyterian leader finds path to renewal \(usatoday.com\)](http://usatoday.com).