“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV)

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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!”

Romans 8:22-27 (NRSV)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a color TV?
Dialing For Dollars is trying to find me.
I wait for delivery each day until three,
Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a color TV?

Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a night on the town?
I’m counting on you, Lord, please don’t let me down.
Prove that you love me and buy the next round,
Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a night on the town?

Wouldn’t it be nice if Janis Joplin were right?
Wouldn’t it be nice if prayer worked that way?
Wouldn’t it be nice if it were as simple as that?
Wouldn’t it be nice if, on one of those mornings when you’re late leaving the house, and your coffee cup spills on your lap as you got into the car, and the traffic is backed up because they’re doing road work, and your gas tank is almost empty—wouldn’t it be nice if you could just say a little prayer and all the lights would turn green, and a parking spot would open up right by the door, and you’d walk into work looking fresh and clean and put together?

Wouldn’t it be nice if you could get down on your knees and fold your hands and close your eyes and say Amen, and find that the dishes were done and the lawn had mowed itself?

Wouldn’t it be nice if replacing your old jalopy were as simple as asking God for a new Mercedes, or whatever your preferred make and model might be?

In today’s reading from Luke, the disciples watch Jesus praying, and when he has finished, they say to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” They have seen him at prayer in a number of settings. In fact, the author of Luke seems particularly interested in Jesus’ prayer practices. Luke describes Jesus praying at a riverside where people are being baptized,¹ and in deserted places far from the crowds who followed him,² and out on a mountain where he stayed overnight,³ and alone with his disciples,⁴ and on the Mount of Olives the night before he died,⁵ and even from the cross.⁶ He prayed before he chose the disciples; he prayed before he fed the 5,000; he prayed everywhere and anywhere and all the time.

¹ Luke 3:21
² Luke 5:16
³ Luke 6:12
⁴ Luke 9:18
⁶ Luke 23:34, 46
The disciples watched Jesus pray, and they could see how important it was, how powerful it was, so they asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” And Jesus did. He gave them a version of what we now call the Lord’s Prayer, or the Our Father—the prayer we pray every week, along with Christians in every time and place, speaking every language imaginable, praying in churches and hospitals and prisons and schools and homes, all over the world.

Jesus gave them a prayer to pray, and then he proceeded to say more about the nature of prayer. He talked of pounding on a neighbor’s door to ask for help providing for a visiting friend. He talked of a loving parent who would not give a snake instead of a fish, or a scorpion instead of an egg, but instead gives good gifts to her child. He said, as we sang just a few minutes ago, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

“You can’t always get what you want,
You can’t always get what you want,
You can’t always get what you want,
But if you try sometimes, you just might find,
You get what you need.

Most parenting advice does not include giving your children what they want all the time, right? So perhaps God follows that strategy. Perhaps God is like a wise parent who looks out for the best interests of the child, even when that means denying something that the child wants in the moment for the sake of future health and well-being. Surely there are times when what we think we want would not actually be the best thing for us, and God’s perspective is broader than our own.

But this answer is not entirely satisfactory. What about the times when our prayers seem like they should be no-brainers for God? What about the prayers that seem entirely aligned with what we know of God’s will? When we pray for wellness for a child with cancer, for instance, it’s hard to see how that could be something that’s “not good for us.” After all, the Bible promises a time to come when death will be no more, when mourning and crying and pain will be no more, when God will wipe the tears from every eye.7

When we pray for an end to hunger and poverty, it’s hard to see how that could be different from God’s own prayer for the world. After all, the Bible promises a time when everyone who thirsts can come to the waters, and everyone who is hungry can come and eat, without money and without price.8

When we pray for peace in Kenya, or Syria, or Egypt, or Afghanistan, or Iraq, or any number of other places, it’s hard to see how that could be something God wouldn’t support. After all, the Bible promises a time when swords will be beaten into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they study war any more.9 And Jesus himself is known to us as the Prince of Peace.

So what about those prayers?

If this were an easy question, someone would have figured it out a long, long time ago, for it is a question that has been asked for as long as people have been praying. This is one of those spots where we can very easily get ourselves into trouble by trying to say more than we can really say. This is one of those times when the most powerful thing we can do is acknowledge that we do not fully understand. The truth is, we don’t know—I don’t know—how to explain why some prayers seem to go unanswered.

Here’s what I do know. It is NOT because we didn’t pray well enough, or often enough, or fervently enough. That is dangerous theology indeed, because it turns prayer into something we have to achieve, something we have to be good at, something we think we can control.

Here’s what I do know. It is NOT because these things—cancer, warfare, hunger, suffering—it is NOT because these things are God’s will. God can and does show up even in the

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7 Revelation 21:4
8 Isaiah 55:1
9 Isaiah 2:4
midst of them, and God can and does work for good, even there—but God does not cause us to suffer.

Here’s what I do know. When we pray about these things, even though our prayers may not be answered in a way that we can see, God is nevertheless at work. And one of the ways God works is that through the prayers we pray, our hearts are changed and we become a part of the answer. We become peacemakers, starting within our own lives and growing upward and outward from there. We find ways to alleviate hunger and poverty, starting in our own communities and growing from there. We dedicate ourselves to creating programs to support kids with cancer, or doing research that will eventually find a cure, or funding those programs or that research. When we pray about these things, even if we see no discernable sign that anything has changed, God is at work changing us.

Because here’s the thing about prayer. Ultimately, it is not a means by which to achieve the ends we desire, but rather, it is an end in itself. The value of prayer lies not only in its results, but in the relationship we develop with God. Just as a relationship between spouses, or between siblings, or between friends requires time and effort, so, too, does our relationship with God. A friend and mentor of mine describes prayer as “hanging out with God,” spending time together as you might do with a longtime friend, without any particular agenda other than enjoying one another’s company.

It’s not all about results; it’s not all about what you say or what response you get. It’s about intentionally opening ourselves to God’s Spirit. It’s about sharing the deepest yearnings of our hearts with God. It’s about returning over and over again to the One who is the source of our being, the One who sustains us in every moment, the One who loves us beyond all loving, the One whose word is trustworthy and true—not because we will necessarily get what we want right away, but because in the process, we will assuredly get what we need: the breath-taking, world-changing, life-saving love of God that is for each of us and all of us, now and forever.

Lord, teach us to pray.

Amen.