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### Teach Us To Pray

Genesis 18:20-32

Luke 11:1-13

Prayer can be a tricky thing. Prayer is clearly a fundamental part of Christian spiritual practice. And yet, prayer sometimes makes us uneasy.

How are we supposed to pray? We ask just as the disciples did.

Does God hear us?

Does God respond?

Why does it sometimes seem as though God doesn't hear?

Or hears but doesn't act?

We often talk about being in a relationship with God... that an ideal life is lived in concert with God. This may also be the most useful model for imagining what prayer is and how it works.

To pray to God is to be in relationship with God. We can see this relationship in our reading from Genesis.

First, we have to note that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not about homosexuality, but about hospitality – loving our neighbor. And this part of the story that we've heard tonight is about how God and Abraham relate to each other – how they work together.

Their exchange is not a one-sided conversation. Abraham is concerned about whether God is going to act justly. So he confronts God.

He calls God out, asking, “you wouldn't kill 50 innocents, would you God? That doesn't seem like you, killing the innocent along with the guilty.”

The Hebrew phrase translated “far be it from you” even carries a connotation of the profane, implying it would profane God's character to slay the innocent with the guilty, to be inattentive to innocence in the administration of justice. And God relents to Abraham's plea, not just once, but six times.

Also notice that God's action in the first place is based on the outcry against these two cities which treat strangers so badly. And God isn't being arbitrary about it. God makes decisions based on what is happening.

God sends emissaries to investigate and consults with Abraham on the way. This story is a story about God working with humanity to investigate and counter injustice.

Importantly, the story tells us of the power of prayer. Our prayers do make a difference. God is fully interactive and open to being influenced.

It might feel safer to envision a God that can and does swoop down and solve all of our problems for us, answers all of our prayers if only we would pray the right way.

But that is not the God I've experienced and that is not the God pictured in this story of Abraham. But neither is God powerless.

God, instead, is a relational God that needs us to pray, a God that shares power and freedom with Creation, with us. Such a world may seem a lot riskier, a lot scarier... to think that God wants and needs us and our prayers. That God doesn't act alone.

But it also provides hope – hope that we can and will make a difference, that there is more to life than an arbitrary power dictating what will and won't happen.

We are not only affected by God, but God is affected by us, our fears and our hopes.

The theologian Marjorie Suchocki puts it this way: “All of existence is an inter-relational, interdependent dance of mutual effect, action, and reaction, making a difference.

... If God is affected by us, then prayer takes on the awesome character of being one way that we can shape the energy God receives from us.

... Prayer in [a relational existence] is an openness to God's own creative energy, and to the good that God intends for us.”

So prayer is not only talking to God, but prayer is in being in relationship with God. Not a one-sided relationship, but a mutual relationship.

It is sending our energy,  
our fears,  
our hopes,  
our very beings to God  
and receiving God's energy,  
God's being,  
and God's calling in return.

And, like all healthy relationships, open and honest communication is needed. Although thankfulness and praise is important in prayer, this also means, for example, that if you're angry at God, it's ok to express that anger.

God can handle it – and God will call us to use that anger for our own growth and for the betterment of creation.

And if God is affected by us, we might give some consideration to the energy and intention we bring to prayer. Certainly, we need to be open and honest, but our intention is also important.

What kind of energy are we putting into our relationship with God? Positive or negative? Think of your relationships with people... Is it easier to work with people who are positive or negative?

Of course, offer to God what you can, if what you have is negativity at a certain moment, then tell God about it. But, we might also try to focus on the positive when we can.

For example,  
I would propose that a short positive prayer for healing, is just as effective, if not more so,  
than a long, detailed, depressing laundry list of ailments that God needs to deal with.

And, let's consider what Jesus said to his disciples about prayer... Our scripture tonight included Luke's version of what we commonly call the Lord's prayer or the Disciple's prayer.

We see immediately that Jesus' prayer is also relational, between two members of a mutual relationship. Jesus starts the prayer with “Father God.” And whether we say father or mother or both, the stress here is immediately on the fact that this is an intimate relationship, this is family.

We also see relationship throughout this prayer.  
Praying for God's reign to come is a desire for relationship between God, neighbor and self.  
It is a desire for God's transformational power to be at work in our lives.  
It is offering ourselves for transformation by the love of God that we might be part of the realm of God here on Earth.

The Disciple's prayer also asks for bread – nourishment. Whether we understand this as physical nourishment or spiritual nourishment or both, it acknowledges that we are not self-sustaining, but are dependent on God and on each other for our survival and growth.

In a few moments, as we take communion together, we might reflect on this inter-dependence as we eat the bread. That our physical and spiritual nourishment comes from both God and each other – that we are bound together as one in God's love.

We also see relationship in the request for God's forgiveness. We need God's forgiveness and we need to forgive each other. And we also need to forgive God.

A healthy relationship cannot sustain grudges – God will not hold a grudge for what we do, and we cannot afford, in a relational, interdependent world, to hold grudges against God or each other.

And in releasing any ill will towards God and each other, we open ourselves both to the giving and acceptance of good will and love in the future.

In this model of prayer as relationship, what about the questions that I named earlier?

How do we pray? We have seen the example that Jesus gave us and how it can be understood as reflecting a relational God.

Does God hear us? Does God respond? Yes, God does hear us as we are called to hear God in return. And God does respond.

God responds by doing what God can and calling us to do what we can. God works with us. Prayer is about offering ourselves to God and being open to God using us in response.

And perhaps the most difficult question:

why does it sometimes seem as though God doesn't hear?  
Or hears but doesn't act?

I don't know that I have the definitive answer to that question, but I've often felt that some of the standard answers ring just a little hollow. As a child I remember people saying that God does answer, but sometimes God says no.

And sometimes that works... if I'm praying for a new car, perhaps it isn't in my best interests. Certainly, we often want things that might not be good for us in the long run.

But, this possible no answer seems quite unsatisfactory if we are praying for one's health, for example. To think that God would refuse to heal someone seems, to put it nicely, unjust.

We sometimes also hear that God didn't answer our prayer because we didn't pray hard enough, or correctly, or with enough faith. All of which I believe are hogwash and nothing more than trying to shift any blame and responsibility from God, and often onto a victim who doesn't deserve it.

So, what is a possible approach to this vexing question on apparently unanswered prayer? Here is how I tend to see it, which you may or may not agree with... and that's ok.

First, I believe God doesn't and can't change reality. Prayer, even God, cannot change human mortality and frailness. God cannot change the laws of physics, but I also note that we do not fully understand these laws even today so that the humanly perceived border between the impossible and the possible remains fuzzy.

So, I think there are situations where God simply cannot answer our prayers – it just isn't possible. However, God can use our

prayers to help us through those difficult situations. To love us and sustain us.

And it is well worth remembering that we don't know which situations can be affected and which cannot. Only God knows that.

So it is well worth praying for healing, for example, no matter what the situation, no matter what anyone else might say. To pray for healing is to pray for the healing that is possible.

God works with us, with all things in Creation, to bring forth the best possibilities, whether that might be small, incremental, almost invisible change or large, dramatic, seemingly miraculous change.

For only God ultimately knows what can be accomplished. And by praying, we are offering ourselves and our energy to be used in answering that prayer.

And so it is important to pray, to listen to God's call, to offer ourselves for God's intentions.

I like how Marjorie Suchocki puts it when she says "Prayer is a partnership with God, not a manipulation of God."

We also need to briefly consider the parable that Jesus tells in our reading from Luke because I think this parable is part of the problem when people think they just didn't pray hard enough for something.

On a quick reading, the story seems to tell us to be persistent and we'll get whatever we want. That the way to manipulate our parent God is to badger God relentlessly much like a little child may ask for candy until the parent finally gets tired of saying no and gives in. But, I do not think Jesus is really saying

this. As we just said, prayer is not manipulation of God, but partnership with God.

One commentator notes that the Greek word translated as "persistence" in tonight's scripture is perhaps better translated as "shamelessness." That more than repetition, it implies a "boldness that comes from familiarity."

So, instead of a story telling us it is good to badger God, perhaps this is a story that is telling us to shamelessly call on God to keep God's promises, much as Abraham does in the case of Sodom.

And what is this promise? Note that Jesus in this parable does not tell us that we'll get whatever we want. The parable is about asking for bread to share, which makes me think of the bread of life – the symbolic bread of eternal life in God's realm here on Earth.

And this connection is supported in the next paragraph where, after illustrating that a parent knows how to give proper things to their children, Jesus promises us that God likewise will give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks.

This seeking that Jesus promises will result in finding, I believe, is not about seeking material things or even good health. In this parable it is about seeking the Holy Spirit and living in the love and kin-dom of God.

The Holy Spirit is the gift of our Holy Parent, given in loving relationship,

that we will always find if we seek,  
that we will always receive if we ask.

It is the kin-dom of God to which we will be admitted if we but knock on the door.

So do not be afraid of prayer. Pray to God, be in relationship with God. Ask, seek, knock and, through the gift of the Holy

Spirit, you can live in God's transforming love, in the realm of God.

We are in relationship with God.  
Prayer changes God and also changes us.  
Prayer changes reality.

In prayer, we open ourselves to God,  
we talk to God,  
we listen to God,  
and we offer our very beings in partnership with God.  
May you pray often and deeply, growing together as partners  
with God.

Amen.