

Let Us Pray

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

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Genesis 18:17-33; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-14; Luke 11:1-13

I enjoy listening to other preachers speak, because often they will begin their message with some anecdote or story about an experience they had that ties into the point they want to make in their sermon. For example, not long ago I listened to a pastor tell about his having had an episode of vertigo, where he kept losing his balance and falling over for no reason. He used this as an example of how life sometimes falls apart for us, and we lose our balance and need the reassurance of God's presence to stand up again and go forward in life.

I would like to be able to preach like that, but nothing much has ever happened to me so I don't have any personal stories to tell that would lead nicely into a sermon. So I just have to go to the Bible and start from there. In fact, I'm, not very good at "preaching," so really I just give lectures in biblical theology.

When there are several Scripture passages to consider, as we always have in Lutheran worship with Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel, I try to find some common thread that runs through these lessons. There must have been some reason why the people that put the lectionary together selected these particular readings for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost. So I think I discern a common theme in these readings from Genesis 18, Psalm 138, Colossians 2, and Luke 11. In a general way, these lessons seem to be about praying to God *and expecting to get an answer from him*.

Most obvious, of course, is our Gospel reading where Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray. We call that "the Lord's Prayer," but in reality it's *the disciples' prayer*. The Lord's prayer is in John, chapter 17, where Jesus prays to the Father that all his followers would be united in their communion with one another and with the Father and the Son. And he prays that we would be kept in the truth of the Word of God. That's the real "Lord's Prayer." Nevertheless, in Luke 11 Jesus is *teaching us how to pray*, and assuring us that we can depend on our Father to provide an answer to our prayers, just as any good human father would want to give the best things to his children.

The Psalmist, in Psalm 138, strikes the same note: "On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased," *tarhiveni nafshi 'oz* (Psalm 138:3) — a kind of Hebrew idiom for being endowed with an abundant and successful life. And then, in Genesis, we have Abraham asking the Lord to spare the wicked city of Sodom if righteous men can be found in it. Abraham starts with *fifty*, and eventually works the Lord down to *ten* righteous men — which, by the way, is called a *minyan*, the number of Jewish men required to begin a service in the synagogue. Unhappily, only one righteous man is found in Sodom and he, with his family, has to be dragged, kicking and screaming, from the doomed city. But Abraham, like the Psalmist and Jesus himself centuries later, understands that he can ask God for what he wants to happen.

And that's what prayer is, just talking to God and asking him for what we need — or think we need! But when we ask him we also need to begin by affirming that we understand God's ability and authority. Abraham calls the Lord "the Judge of all the earth." In the same way the Psalmist is careful to begin with praise and thanksgiving: "I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I . . . give thanks to your name for your *chesed*" — your faithful love because of the covenant you made with us. "For you have exalted above all things your name and your word" (Psalm 138:1-2). Thanksgiving, in the Bible, is not just saying "Much obliged," like Pa Kettle in the old movies. To "give thanks" in Scripture is actually an idiom for affirming our loyalty to God as our authority, our Great King. Prayer needs to begin with that affirmation. Paul, in the reading from Colossians, underscores that we need to live a life that is "abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:7), always acknowledging who's in charge.

That's why Jesus begins the disciples' prayer with "Our Father," as the prayer is also called, and adds, "hallowed be thy name," we treat your name with the utmost respect. Our culture has cheapened the idea of fatherhood, so we might think of a father as the guy that gives us a house to live in, who pays for our stuff or our education, or as the bumbling butt of jokes in the situation comedies — or at worst just as the sperm donor whose DNA we happen to have. In the culture of Bible times the father was a much more powerful figure, the head of the family who had almost life-and-death authority over other family

members. So when we come asking “our Father” for favors, we need to remind ourselves that he’s no pushover. He’s the one who makes the rules.

But wait — we’ve been naughty little boys and girls! We haven’t always kept the rules, we’ve messed up time and time again. What makes us think we can come to such an august, imperious personage as our heavenly Father and expect him to give us the time of day? The apostle Paul has an answer to this in our passage from the Letter to the Colossians. He says that although we were breaking the rules, and therefore “dead” in our sin, “God made [us] alive together with [Jesus], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14). I am astounded by the remarkable picture Paul is painting here. Usually we think of Jesus nailed to the cross, bearing the sin of the world as he hangs there in agony. Instead, Paul pictures our sins, and all the rules we’ve broken, nailed to the cross and Jesus is standing there with the hammer! And because of that, we can come to our Father and expect that he will hear us and respond to our request. As John says, “This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” (1 John 5:14-15).

But there’s a problem, isn’t there? Sometimes, in spite of all our praying, we don’t seem to get from the Lord exactly what we’re asking for, sometimes not even anything remotely close. Recently I’ve been praying for a friend that she would get the job she needed and also be able to move out of the rental apartment she couldn’t afford. I got a text that she now has the job and that her daughter has invited her to move in with her. Those were positive answers to prayer. But I’ve been praying for another friend that his wife will not have to have her foot amputated, and for another friend that his lungs will be healed, and so far there’s no favorable answer in either situation.

We think we know what God needs to do for us. We think we know what the right thing is to solve our problems. But we get frustrated when God doesn’t appear to see it our way. Our question is the question of Abraham: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25). We’re caught in the tension between our conviction that God is good and wants to bless us, and our experience that he doesn’t always seem to do the good thing we ask of him. Jesus tells us, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). But it doesn’t always work out that way, does it? We think we know what’s right for us, and “shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” But somehow it seems that God doesn’t always agree with us.

Faced with this question, people tend to give a pat answer. They say, “God always answers prayer. Sometimes his answer is Yes, and sometimes his answer is No, but whatever it is, it’s for our benefit. Maybe God wants to teach us something by not giving us what we think we need.” They will cite Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” whatever that was, when Paul asked for relief and the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9). But, skeptical academic that I am, I dislike pat answers. As to the Lord’s teaching us through any kind of sickness or affliction that doesn’t respond to prayer, I don’t believe he operates that way. *He gave us his Word to teach us*, and that should be enough! What kind of teacher, or what kind of Father, would allow us to endure affliction in order to teach us? That’s not the kind of father Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading. Truly, we can grow as we deal with difficulties, but we grow through the grace we’re given to confront the situation, not through the suffering it brings. And suffering, in the New Testament, is not sickness or deprivation, but persecution from a corrupt and godless culture. We will always have persecution if we take a stand for righteousness and truth; Jesus made that clear.

I think we can suggest a better answer to our why prayers don’t always get answered the way we would like. We live in a decaying universe. As the old hymn says, “Change and decay in all around I see.” Left to itself, this universe would fall apart. That’s what scientists call *entropy*, the tendency of everything to decay into disorganization. As Robert Frost noted in a famous poem, a stone wall will fall down over the seasons and has to be mended from time to time. Everything is like that, including of course our bodies which seem to “fall apart” as we age, and it takes effort to try to mitigate that decay in whatever way possible — how well we all know! That is just a “law of nature,” which of course is a strange concept because only something that thinks can obey laws, and inanimate natural objects don’t think so they don’t obey laws. They only behave in habitual ways according to how the Creator made them.

So everything is degenerating into disorganization; theologians call it “a fallen world.” That’s part of why bad things happen to us in spite of our prayers. Only one force is opposing that entropy, that decay and breakdown, and that is the Word of God. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and *he upholds the universe by the word of his power*” (Hebrews 1:2-3). To a degree we can fight that universal decay by aligning ourselves with the Word of God, living according to its precepts and, through prayer and thoughtful consideration, getting ourselves “in sync” with God’s purposes for us.

And as to why we don’t always get the answers we want in prayer, there’s another thing to consider. We often say that “God is in control,” but Scripture makes it clear that God does not directly control everything because *he has expressly given people control* in certain areas, subject to the guidance of his Word. That’s what it means for us to be made in the image of God. The Bible teaches that we’ve been placed here to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” over our environment (Genesis 1:28). As Psalm 115 puts it, “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man” (Psalm 115:16). So sometimes when we don’t get the righteous answer to prayer that we want it’s because *people* are standing in the way, people who are not committed to the benevolent purposes of our Creator — because we can successfully exercise our responsibility for the management of life only when we pay heed to the precepts of the Word of God.

Nevertheless we are to pray. Let us then pray, and expect an answer. We’re to do this because we’re followers of Jesus, and *that’s what he tells us to do*. But prayer is not like magic, or like chemistry, where we control the result by manipulating a formula. Prayer depends on a relationship with a Person, our heavenly Father. Sometimes we get the answer we want, and sometimes we don’t because the entropy of the universe, or human perversity, blocks the good thing the Lord wants to do for his children. We could say that those things that hinder the good purposes of God are the work of the devil. But the Lord, through his Word, is working against these forces. As John says, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8 KJV). *God is for us, and not against us*. And the main thing we get through prayer, regardless of the answer we receive, is communion with the Father who loves us and gave his own Son to bring us back into his family.