

"Confidence in Prayer"

Luke 11: 11-13

July 24,2016

10th Sunday After Pentecost

Prayer is something that we, as Christians, do (or should do) often. But, when we do pray, do we have any confidence that God actually hears and (more importantly) that He is predisposed to answer our prayers with what we need or want? What a stupid question you might think. Of course we have confidence as we pray. At least that's how we would answer that question when asked in church on a Sunday morning. However, some of the ways that Christians practice prayer make me wonder if this is really true. We act as if we are not confident in just praying and that we have to do more

For example, in a crisis situation, people will say, "I'll take as many prayers as I can get," or "The more prayers, the better." While it is a good and Biblically commanded-practice to pray for others, such statements give the impression that, if we get more prayers or say more prayers, then we will wear down God with our many prayers and have a better chance of getting what we want from God due to the sheer number of prayers that we or our family have said.

Another example are prayers that go on and on and on and on. While there is nothing inherently wrong with lengthy prayers per se, there seems to be the idea that we can impress God with the literacy and length of our prayers and thereby get what we want because of that.

A final example disturbs me the most. When some Christians ask other Christians to pray for them and with them, they will refer to them as "prayer warriors." I've seen this terminology used on Facebook and other social media. It may sound good but do you know what a "warrior" is? It is a soldier who goes out to fight against his enemy to force the enemy to submit to him. Is this terminology we really want to use in connection with prayer? In prayer, are we fighting against God? I was at a meeting of pastors of various denominations yesterday and one pastor introduced his prayer by saying, "Let's bombard heaven." Is God our enemy whom we have to fight and bombard with our prayers so that we can force Him to submit to our will by the intensity of our praying.

In all of these examples, we find confidence in the number of our prayers, the length of our prayers and even in the intensity of our prayers but where is our confidence in God? We act as if God is in need of change. He is someone who is, at best, apathetic towards us and, therefore, indifferent to our needs or, at worst, is angry with us and, therefore, opposed to our needs. He needs to be roused from his slumber of indifference by our many prayers or our lengthy prayers to be made aware of our needs. Or, he needs to have his anger appeased by our intense prayers and convinced to give us good gifts, instead of ignoring us or punishing us.

This is a pagan notion of God which is shown by how practitioners of non-Christian religions approach their god. They come with burnt sacrifices (sometimes even human sacrifices), hoping to appease their god and then with loud petitions, hoping to make him notice them and grant them what they need. Remember the story of Elijah and the prophets of the god named Baal. They had a contest to see which God was the true God: the LORD or Baal. They set up two altars and put bulls on each altar. The god who sent fire to burn the sacrifices was the true God. The prophets of Baal prayed. They shouted. They danced around the altar. They even slashed themselves with swords and spears so that their blood flowed. They were convinced that if they just prayed hard enough, long enough, loud enough, and showed their intensity and sincerity by cutting themselves, their prayers would have the power to persuade Baal to answer their request.

This way of thinking has worked its way into Christianity. Some Christians believe that God, either because of apathy or anger, needs to be persuaded, even forced, to give out good things or that He enjoys playing games with us by withholding what we need to see if we will ask Him enough times for it. If we just pray often enough, long enough, or intensely enough, then God will change from His present state of inactivity and be convinced to take action on our part. Or, He will be pleased that we jumped through all of His hoops by praying and will then give us what we ask for

However, we cannot *make* God do anything. He is Creator. We are creatures. He is Almighty and we, by comparison, are utterly weak. We have no leverage with God with our prayers, our innate worthiness, our good actions, or anything else to cause Him to do anything. In fact, the only thing that our behavior causes God to do is to be angry over our sinfulness, judge us as guilty, and condemn us to an eternity in hell. No amount of earnest or sincere prayer can change that.

However, the Good News is that God does not need to be changed to care about you or love you. He already *does* love you. He always has. That which came between us - our sin - and which brought forth God's anger, judgment, rejection, and damnation has been changed, not by our earnest prayers, stellar behavior, or anything else on our part. God took the initiative. He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to bridge the gap between Himself and us created by our sin. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross placated His anger over our sin, satisfied His judgment against our sin, and reconciled us to God again.

In baptism, the judgment against your sin took place. You were personally reconciled to God and given the new life won by Jesus in His resurrection from the dead. You were made sons and daughters of God in your baptism. The whole dynamic between you and God changed from an angry or apathetic god of your own invention or perception to a God who is your loving Heavenly Father. His disposition towards you is not one of anger that you have to change by the intensity of your prayer so that He will change His mind about you. Nor is His disposition towards you one of callous indifference that you have to change by the length and frequency of your prayers so that you can squeeze "unclaimed

blessings" out of God. His disposition towards you is one of absolute, total, unwavering love which *wants* to provide for your needs and bless you richly. Jesus' point in teaching His disciples about prayer here is not so much about our persistence in prayer but in God's persistence in giving. It is an encouragement to pray and to let nothing to deter you from praying.

Why? First of all because God desires to answer prayer. That is the point of the first illustration. Middle eastern rules of hospitality in the first century required the entire community to be involved in entertaining a midnight guest. Jesus' rhetorical question in beginning the illustration was a ridiculous one and the audience would have recognized it. No one would refuse to help a neighbor who needed food in a pinch like that. But suppose, Jesus says, you ask someone who is only a friend and you ask him at the most inconvenient time for something to help out someone your friend doesn't even know. And, suppose, that friend is selfish beyond the limits of community decency and so focused on his own situation of being in bed, asleep, and the door already locked. Yet, Jesus says, despite the unimportant nature of the request (three tiny cakes of bread), the inconvenience of the hour, and the selfishness of the friend, the man will honor the request out of a sense of duty to the man's bold request.

The implication here is that, if a sinful selfish friend will agree to answer such requests, how much better it will be for you with God. He is not a grumpy neighbor or merely a friend. He is your Heavenly Father who created you and bore you as His child through His life-giving Word in baptism. Your requests are not from a stranger whom He doesn't know, but from you whom He knows intimately. There are no troublesome times, inconvenient situations, or unimportant requests for Him. Every time - midnight or midday - is a good time for Him. Every situation is good for Him since, as the Scripture says, "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." (Ps. 121:4) He is not one who is bound out of duty to do anything for anyone, but His perfect love moves Him to desire and to do what is best for His beloved - namely, you.

Secondly, God, not only desires to answer prayer, but He will only give you good things. Jesus said, "What father among you of you fathers, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" Various commentators mentioned that fish and eggs are the food of the common man. A snake may resemble a fish but is unfit to eat. A curled up dead scorpion apparently resembled an egg of that time but could not be eaten. Fathers on this earth, even though you are evil, Jesus says, would never give things that only appear to be good but are actually harmful or useless to your children. You know how to give good gifts and you do that.

How much better it will be with your Heavenly Father! He will give good gifts, not those things which only appear to be good by the world's standards, but are actually harmful or useless. You may not get all the wealth, material luxuries, fame, success, and all the other things which the world says is good and which the devil uses to appeal to your sinful nature. However, Jesus says, God gives you the Holy Spirit in your baptism which is the highest and greatest spiritual gift which includes every other spiritual gift and certainly will include the necessary gifts to support this body and life.

So, Jesus says, "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, it will be opened." Pray! Let nothing stop you! Let nothing frighten you off from praying! God delights in hearing your prayers and answering them. He will hear your prayers and answer them. God delights in giving you good gifts. He will give you you good gifts according to a father's loving heart.

As you who are adults and have already grown up know and you who who are children will find out, that means we will not got all those things which we want or think we absolutely need. Our parents, out of love for us and for our good, did not always give us everything, eve though a lot of the time they could have. Later, we found out that, we really didn't need those things and some could actually have been harmful to us.

Also, this means that we will receive some things from our Heavenly Father which don't make any sense to us now and which don't seem to be for our good. Yet we have the promise from Scripture: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

Therefore, as dearly loved children of our Father in heaven, we keep coming to Him in prayer with all of our requests, needs, and desires. We are fully confident that He hears us and we joyfully expect Him to answer. We trust Him, as a Father who always loves us, always cares for us, and always wants our good to do what is best for us. Therefore, we receive everything that comes our way as a gift from our Heavenly Father, even if can't understand it or think there is something better that He could have done.

So, we *do* have confidence while praying. But it is not confidence in the number of our prayers, the length of our prayers, or even in the intensity or sincerity of our prayers. If that's where our confidence is, then I'm sunk and you probably are, too. Our prayers are often weak, sporadic, and lackadaisical. Rather, we have confidence in the One who hears prayer. He is One who perfectly knows your needs as your Creator and perfectly loves you as your Heavenly Father. He is the One who, out of His love, will hear your prayers and answer them with good things according to His plan for your life. Instead of focusing on prayer and your confidence in praying it, focus on the One who hears prayer and His promise to answer it. Believe it in your heart. And, when you pray, live as if you do believe it. You will never be disappointed. Amen.