



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Three Parts of Prayer: God”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Romans 8: 18-28; Luke 11: 5-13

August 23, 2020

As many of you may recall, today we complete a three-week sermon series, on prayer, that we began a month ago. We started, in late July, with the consideration of our part in prayer, and we focused on two things. After being reminded of the Nike Prayer that we’ve explored in the past (the fact that we just need to do it), we turned to the expectant nature of prayer and set our hearts on that fine line between testing God and coming to God with that faith-filled expectation that God will answer even our most ambitious of prayers.

Then, in the beginning of August, we turned our attention to the role of the Spirit and we were quickly reminded that it is not our job to heap up the many, the meaningful, or the well-constructed words that will somehow enable our prayers to be heard by God. Because, that is the role of the Spirit – to speak the deep and sometimes nonsensical murmurings of our hearts to the very heart of God.

Now, after a few weeks away, we return to the third question – that of the role of God. So, before we go on, I want to turn our attention back to the Scripture that has been framing this series from the beginning. This is Romans 8: 18-28.

Romans 8: 18-28

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 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. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 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. 27 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.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Now, we're going to get to our reading from Luke in a bit, but it was that last verse that in many ways had leapt out to me from the outset of considering this series. In some other translations, the phrase reads a little more directly in saying that, "In all things God works together for good, for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." That phrase etched itself into my heart coming out the outset of these reflections on prayer and, in many ways, I jumped somewhat blind into this series with a certain amount of trust and expectation that, when I came to this third sermon focusing on the part of God in prayer, I'd know what to say. I have to admit that, even with the two weeks we had in-between, that wasn't as much the case as I thought it would be. I really sat somewhat speechless, earlier this week, when I was trying to figure out what to say this morning.

Prayer is a challenging topic. I knew that going into this, but it certainly has been the case. I think there are plenty of ways to talk about our role in prayer – and even the role of the Spirit was one that welled up within me with a certain natural flow. When we start talking about God's part in prayer, however, it quickly becomes another thing. The simple truth is that when it comes to most of the questions we might ask – we don't have the answers!

- How does prayer work?
- Does prayer influence God? Does it have the power to change God's mind?
- Why does it seem as though God answer some prayers and not others?
- When I pray with expectation to God and the Spirit carries that prayer to God what impact does that have on the manner in which God is engaging in my life?

I can speak with eloquence and experience about how prayer influences us. I can talk about how it impacts the person praying and, in the case of intercessory prayers, the person for whom we are praying. I can talk about the work of the Spirit and the connection to God's wisdom, strength and guidance when we open our hearts and minds in prayer. When it comes to those types of questions about how it influenced God, however – when it comes to those longstanding mysteries of how God is impacted by prayer – the simple answer is that I don't know. The admittedly disappointing answer is that I've yet to hear anyone provide responses to those queries that I find either compelling or convincing. Scripture tells me to pray, but the honest truth is that when I pray to God, I simply don't know the exact nature of the influence that prayer is going to have.

But, there are three things I do know...

First, I know that God's response is not that of a short-order cook. We talked about this in week one of this series – God's not a divine genie granting our wishes three and God is not Santa Claus, fulfilling the desires of everyone who managed to stay off the naughty list. Scripture tells us that God answers our prayers – again and again Scripture makes it abundantly clear that our faith-driven prayers are answered by God – but God's not going to turn our lottery ticket into a

winner just because we ask. I think in both faith and experience, we all know it doesn't work that way.

Second, and I could do a whole series of sermons on this one alone these days - I know that God's response will most likely require my participation. I'll be honest and say that this has been a point of tension for me in recent months. One story after another has emerged, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, with churches flouting the guidance of doctors and healthcare officials under the guise that somehow God is simply going to protect them from the virus because they're at church and praying. One story after another, we've seen mass gatherings of churches, the laying on of hands – all treating God has some holy vaccine that makes them impervious to the risks – and some even drawing into question the faithfulness of those who don't do the same. And, sure enough, one story after another, more than a few of these have resulted in outbreaks and illness. Why, because no matter how much we may wish it did, it doesn't work that way.

There is a clear Biblical narrative that shows us that God's activity in this world is most often activity that unfolds in partnership with God's people.

- Noah had to build the ark before God could flood the lands.
- God didn't part the waters until Moses raised his staff at the edge of the sea.
- Niniveh wasn't saved until Job followed God's command to preach their condemnation.

I could go on and on with these but, with the exception of the direct miracles of Jesus (and even many of those had others involved), the story of God's engagement in this world is primarily that of God engaging through the faithfulness and actions of God's people. God doesn't just do it for us – God amplifies the efforts of our limited humanity to a point at which God's ends can be accomplished through the marriage of our faithfulness and God's Spirit at work within us. We know that God watches over us, but we still wear seatbelts in cars and helmets on bicycles. We know that God looks out for the lost and forsaken - we make lunches and sort shoes for those in need. We do our part and God works in and through our limited humanity to answer our prayers and the prayers of others. The second thing I know about God's answer to prayer is that God doesn't do it for us or without us – God's answer to prayer comes in partnership with us.

Finally, I know that God answers prayer in relationship with us – which brings me to our second reading this morning. This is Luke 11: 5-13.

Luke 11: 5-13

5 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; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 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.

9 "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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you

who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 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!"

“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!” Some of you have probably noticed, over the years, that I tend to try to steer clear of the parental language for God. Between the question of imbuing gender on a genderless God, and the complications that some have in their own relationships with their fathers, I know that ‘father’ is not the best term for everyone. Using the opposite, ‘Mother God,’ can be great when you’re trying to make a point, but unless you’re trying to make a point it is just jarring and distracting for many people. And ‘Parent God,’ just kind of falls flat. So, I tend to just try to stay away from it altogether and it’s not an issue. That is, until I run into a moment like this!

Because, here’s the thing – I simply think there is no better way to understand God’s role and response in prayer than by means of understanding the response of a loving parent to a beloved child. Beyond all else – beyond all of the questions of expectation and grandiose verbosity that we explored in the first weeks – beyond the question of our role in God’s answer to prayer that we just considered – prayer is an act of relationship. Our prayer to God, and God’s engagement in that prayer, is one of sharing conversation, dialog, heart and struggle between a beloved child of our loving, parent, God.

Every person in this room knows what that means. Whether you’ve been on one or both sides of that equation, we all know that moment of shared heart and struggle between a parent and a child. We’ve all been there. We know that there are times that parents can say yes as we sweep away the pains and strife our children are facing. And, we know that there are times that parents have to step back in painful agony as they allow their children to find their own ways to overcome the burdens they bear. We know the joys of shared celebration, and we know the tears of inconsolable sorrow. We know that there are times that children understand the parents in the moment, we know that there are many in which that understanding won’t come until much later, and we know there are some that will remain forever unclear. But, the engagement is in the relationship...the shared conversation...the enjoined tackling of that which this world has a tendency to thrust upon us. And, above all else, I suggest - that’s God’s part in prayer.

There’s simply no better way to understand God’s part in prayer than to understand that God is the loving parent devotedly engaged and eager to answer every prayer – every act of relational connection – that is extended by God’s beloved children. Like our children, the answers we receive won’t always be what we want or expect. They won’t always come in the time we anticipate. And, there will be plenty of times in which we will feel like that precocious teenager storming out of the room because things didn’t go our way. But, just like those parents, God’s going to be there again when we return – open arms, incomparable grace, unconditional love – longing and ready to be a part the relationship of prayer that we bring.

There are a lot of questions people ask about prayer to which I don't have the answer – and to which I've never heard an answer that is either compelling or convincing. What I do know, however, is those three things...

- God is not a holy vending machine where we can simply hit F5 to get those extra salty chips that we like.
- Whatever God's answer is to our prayer – more often than not, we're going to be part of the unfolding of it.
- No matter when or how God's answer comes, the foremost part God played in prayer was being part of the relationship that grows through the very prayers that we bring.

We may not always see, agree with, or understand the answer that God brings to prayer. But today, tomorrow, always...our loving parent God will forever be there to join us, his beloved children, in the strife, in the sorrow, in the joy and in the response to all that this world can thrust upon us. Now, I'm the first to admit that that answer doesn't even remotely clear up all of those aged mysteries of God's part in our prayers, but even in the midst of that unknown, I find rest in that assurance. No matter how much I may wish I understood more – now matter how much I may wish I knew more – the knowledge that God answers my prayer in love is really all I need to know.