

Sermon on Prayer,

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Why pray? Does Prayer Change God's mind?

Do you pray?

How do you pray?

Where do you pray?

alone or with others?

family meal times, bed times?

with a prayer partner? as individuals, and Obviously on Sundays for

congregational worship and prayer , as the body of Christ.

But the most important question is : why do we pray? Does prayer change God's mind?

St. Augustine said once: "that a person prays that he / she may be constructed, not that God may be instructed".

Is it true?

As you know I am originally from Syria, and in my home town churches and mosques are next to each other. In fact in the old down town of my city 'Homs' churches and mosques are too close , in a 100 square meter you have two churches and two mosques. We hear the call to prayer from the mosques as we gather on Sunday for worship. I used to see from my window the Moslem men going to worship five times a day. Prayer in the Islam and Judaism have certain rituals , like cleaning your body before praying and there are also certain positions for prayer like kneeling and facing east, etc. In Christianity we don't have rules or rituals about prayer.

As you know I come from Syria and I also used to serve at St. Andrew's in Ottawa for 8 years. When War started in Syria, we started fundraising to send some money to the church there. We wanted to connect with them, so on Feb. 2012 Sunday morning after worship, some of us gathered around a small

speaker phone to make a long distance call to speak with congregants from the Presbyterian Church in Syria (my home church congregation). I remember that day clearly. I was translating the messages exchanged between the two groups on both sides. On the other end were the people who were under siege in the old city center. That group included few elderly people, Sister Valentine, an 85+ years old nun, who is the director of the Presbyterian elderly center and the minister. They were all staying in the elderly center which was in the area which was under siege for a year and a half. They told us that the church building was bombed on Easter Sunday that year, many people's homes were turned to dust and many people have left the city. Over the phone we worshiped with them and even sang a hymn "what a friend we have in Jesus" each in their own language. We finished by asking what can we -your brothers and sisters- here in Canada do for you? Their answer was: pray for us.

In the beginning I felt like I wanted to say: yes of course, but honestly we do want to help what else can we do? For you? So I asked again. They replied: "please tell the church to pray for us".

Christians who are under oppression and have no access to earthly power truly believe that prayer gives them access to a greater power and that it truly changes things.

What about us here in Canada? We live in a land of peace and freedoms. Do we need to pray?

Many people give up on prayer. They have reasons or excuses such as:

1. If God is perfectly good, then God is already doing everything possible without waiting to be asked. This renders our prayers useless.
2. If God has set the laws of nature, then why would God want to change them? Asking God to act against the natural process is like asking God to go against God's own will.
3. Some argue : If God is able to act in the world why doesn't God do so sooner. Either God is unwilling or God is unable.

Does prayer change God's mind??

As we approach this mystery of prayer, it is good to think about what is prayer? What is the definition of prayer? Is it :

A set of words that we recite such as the Lord's prayer?

Or prayer is a conversation /talking with God?

Or A relationship?

Just as Christianity is not a religion with rules and do and don't but a life of faith, prayer in the Christian meaning is relationship- that brings me and God together where my will is aligned with God's will.

I think our definition of prayer also depends on what God do we believe in.
who is God?

God is ...not to be defined but to be worshipped...but we know that

1. God is a living not a dead God. The God who no longer plays an active role in the world is a dead God.
2. That God is a relational God. God seeks a loving relationship with us - acts and interacts with the world. God didn't create the world and rested forever. God did not set the world into motion and went to sleep. God is still creating and recreating the world, shaping and transforming us. God is still acting and interacting in the world.

3. That God is the God of the impossible, and to approach God in prayer means to always believe in Hope. To pray in hope means to believe in what we don't see, what is impossible for us but possible for God...to believe in what God is able to do, and yet we can't see in the present moment. "for who hopes for what he sees"? Said Paul(Rom.8: 24).

If we believe in a living, relational, God of the impossible, then do we believe that God changes?

Soren Kierkegaard said: "Prayer doesn't change God, but it changes him/ her who prays".

If we believe in a metaphysical God- who does not interact with the world, then yes. But we don't.

1. Creation: we believe in the one who, by creating us in the first place, at the beginning of time, chose to limit God's self and chose to change in order to make room for us in the world.
2. In carnation: God then chose to come to us in Jesus Christ, taking our human body. God acts and interacts with us, and calls us beloved, and considers us co-workers and co-creators in this world.

Many times in the Old Testament God changed (/ repented) and forgave the people of Israel and established a new covenant with them.

Our NT reading today was the parable of the unjust judge which Luke recorded in his gospel. It is about the judge who has neither decency nor conscience, a corrupt official interested only in his own advantage. And a nagging widow who appears in his courtroom. She is poor and powerless, somebody not noticed by the movers and shakers of her town. She has no money to bribe this dishonest judge; she cannot afford a lawyer to speak up for her. So you know what she does? She speaks up for herself. She is like a dog with a bone...Grant me justice she shouts Grant me justice she persists.

When this does not bring her immediate results, she does not give up but

rather insists more and more. Jesus gave us this parable to teach us to persist in our prayers.

The widow keeps returning to that courtroom, and refuses to be silent. Grant me justice- grant me justice! she became the squeaky wheel and it is no surprise that the judge soon grows weary of this. To spare himself further annoyance, the judge decided not simply to hear her case but to grant her justice.

When our prayers go unanswered, we may sometimes feel like the widow: alone, powerless, unheard, a victim of unfairness, disregarded, the least and last person in line. But is God the judge in this parable?

But if we think of it for a moment, we can see that the God we believe in has nothing in common with the unjust judge and that we are not like the widow but rather more like the unjust judge. God is not like the unjust judge but more like the widow.

What we know of God through scripture and through Jesus Christ is really the opposite of the Judge's description here. The God we know is both our judge and our advocate to whom we have a direct line in prayer. The one who not only listens to our prayers but scriptures tells us that God the Holy Spirit prays

for us when we can't pray. This loving and living God has nothing in common with the insensitive Judge in the story.

Sometimes when our prayers go unanswered, we tend to think of God as an authoritative judge, a bureaucrat, an abusive parent who answers prayers randomly, only when God wants to, and in order to get rid of further annoyance.

God is not like that. Instead the Lord is the author of all justice and compassion, the One who gives good gifts.

God fits more into the description of the widow in this story who keeps knocking on our door waiting for us to open, the widow who keeps nagging on us wanting us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.

God is more like the widow who never gives up. God never gives up on us, but rather ever attempts to break into our closed universe, ever calling us into a relationship with him, breaking down the walls, reaching out to us, pleading with us to be just and merciful. God is the one who is ever faithful and unconditionally loving even when we are not!

It is true that we are to imitate in our prayer the persistence shown by the widow but that is not because God is hard-hearted or deaf but because prayer is a relationship.

When Jesus told this story to teach us to persevere in prayer, he did not teach

us to believe in a deaf God , and he didn't ask us to repeat empty words but he asked us to be genuine, and to be sincere,

In other words to be Holy as our Father in heaven is Holy, to open up our hearts and minds in prayer and to allow our lives to be changed through this relationship with the Holy one.

Persistence indicates that genuine desire for change. Persistent prayer builds us up after the image of our God... Prayer changes us and changes God.

If God granted everything we ask for, then God is a magician...or if God never give us anything that we ask for then God is deaf in both cases there is an abusive relationship.

Sometimes the answer to prayers is yes and sometimes no. bit in all cases when we pray we are given the gift of the Holy spirit: as Jesus said 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 seek him?"

God grant us the "Holy spirit" which is the ultimate gift... god abiding with us. When At Lazarus's death, Jesus not only granted Mary and Martha their prayer that their brother is raised from the dead but when he cried shared with them the gift of the presence of God among them in their dark moment, the gift of the God who shares our sorrows and grief and feels our pain.

That was the experience of Job too in the book of Job in the OT which we read

this morning. When Job finally encountered the divine, after all what he had been through, he knew that nothing is impossible for God. Prayer allows us to enter holy grounds and to encounter the divine.

Prayer is a relationship. It helps us tune ourselves to understand God's will. To enter into the Holy

And to give God the steering wheel to lead us, like a potter with artistic touches forms, shapes, and reshapes the pottery, so does God with us in prayer.

We need to persevere in prayer not because God does not listen, or far away, or does not feel our pain but because prayer is standing on Holy ground. It is opening our hearts to the presence of the Holy in our midst, and opening our minds to understanding the will of God is indeed a process or recreation

In his famous book, Prayer: Philip Yancy wrote: “through persistent prayer, I find that God is the wise, and senior partner in the relationship. I find, in fact, that God has been asking , seeking, knocking too, in the subtle ways I so easily ignore”...” the value of the persistent prayer is not so much that we get what we want, as that we become what we should be”.

Friends, I invite you to open the door of your hearts, to tango with God, ask, seek, knock, argue, and shout. God is there waiting with wide open

arms...Amen.

Prayer: Now to the one who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen.