



Does Prayer "Work?"
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
June 28, 2020
North Congregational Church
New Hartford, Connecticut

WORSHIP FOR THE SEVENTEENTH TIME
THAT WE ARE NOT GATHERING IN OUR SANCTUARY
BECAUSE WE WISH TO HONOR THE NEED FOR PHYSICAL DISTANCING
IN ORDER TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS

.....

FOR YOUR MEDITATION

I used to believe that prayer changes things. I now know that God changes us, and we change things.

-Mother Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu (Mother Theresa), (1910-1997), honored in the Catholic Church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, Albanian-Indian Roman Catholic nun and missionary

The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.

-Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author, widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher

.....
THE PEACE OF CHRIST

It is normally our custom when we gather to extend the Peace of Christ to one another. Even though we are physically apart at this time, may you know that peace.

INVITATION TO WORSHIP

Come into to safe space, a sanctuary, where you will find respite and comfort.

Enter into a home that is familiar, where you will experience welcome, love and acceptance.

Come to a place where you can lay down your burdens in an atmosphere of honesty authenticity.

Come into an atmosphere of learning, to receive wisdom and new insight.

Come knowing that you will be sent forth healed and renewed, challenged and inspired to go out into the world to live and serve in Christ's name.

OPENING HYMN

Sweet Hour pf Prayer

Tune: NEED OF PRAYER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5sko7-bEa0>

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Psalm 54

1 Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might.

2 Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.

3 For the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life; they do not set God before them.

4 But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.

5 He will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness, put an end to them.

6 With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.

7 For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

Ephesians 3: 14 - 4.2

... I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

4 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

Matthew 21.22

“Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.”

MUSICAL PREPARATION
NEED

I Need Thee Every Hour

Tune:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO-I8XgU5ac>

MEDITATION
Cox

Does Prayer “Work?”

The Rev. Marcia Lynn

-A member of a former church was looking for a new job and he came across an advertisement for one that he greatly desired and he asked his friends to pray that he might be hired. His many friends responded, assuring him that they would not only pray for him but that he was bound to get the position.

-Another person was about to be admitted to the hospital and asked for prayers for a successful surgery. Like the friends of the job-seeker, they readily agreed.

-On March 30 of this year, Kenneth Copeland, a television evangelist, demanded an end to the coronavirus [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSIrQBGfUtw>]

I imagine that like most “people of faith” you have been known to pray. So this morning I ask you to consider these questions: How is your prayer life? Where and when do you pray?..and for what? What can we expect from our time with God?

In my experience, I have found that most people pray to ask God for a favor, to answer a need that they cannot obtain for themselves or a loved one. It usually is related to a matter of health, livelihood, safety or even success. But where did we get the idea that God helps us with these matters? First, we find it in the culture. Motivational speakers or even mega church pastors who preach the Prosperity Gospel promise us that all we need to do is to ask God for something and God will deliver it up. Television evangelists often qualify this offer by telling us that we need to give a generous amount of money to the church and/or “accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.”

But scripture, too, is full of assurances about, or stories of, God hearing and answering requests. Here are a few examples from the Hebrew bible:

-Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. (Genesis 20.17)

-Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (Genesis 25.21)

-But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. (Numbers 11.2)

-The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous. (Proverbs 15.29)

-In the book of Psalms, we read 32 passages such as this one: “Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication.” (Psalm 55.1). And in Psalm 54, which we read this morning, the Psalmist prays for protection from his enemies.

-St. Paul, in his letters, asks for prayers from the early Christians, particularly for success in his missionary adventures. He prays, too, for wisdom and growth in the faith for the early Christians. (Ephesians 3.14-4.2, one of our scripture readings for the day)

-And Jesus, though infrequently promises, according to Matthew, “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.” (Matthew 21.22)

But at the same time in scripture, we read of the faithful petitioning God, who seems to be absent, or at least does not answer prayers.

-The Psalmist cries: “O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? (Psalm 80.4), as does Jeremiah: “Though I call and cry for help, [God] shuts out my prayer.” (Lamentations of Jeremiah 3.8)

-And on the night of his betrayal, Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane... “threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.’” (Matthew 26: 42)

I would venture to say that most of us in the course of our lifetimes have received both what we believe to be answers to our petitions as well as little or no response.

After her surgery, which was successful, the woman who had requested prayer, thanked everyone by email, writing “Prayer works.” But the man who requested prayers for a job interview, did not receive the offer he so desired. And the television preacher who ordered God to put an end to the coronavirus, as we have seen, found his demand To go unheeded.

So what do we make of the fact that God seems to answer the prayers of some people and not others?

The man who did not get the position for which he had interviewed, rationalized, saying that God knew that it wasn’t the right situation for him and that he would find him

another one. But that explanation begs the question: If God is in control and everything that happens in our lives is already pre-determined, then why pray? And what about the prayers for health or safety that go unanswered? Does God seek suffering and premature or terrible deaths for some people and not others? Does God only reward faithful believers, big donors to churches and serious “prayer warriors?” Look around the world and see if that is true.

Do we then decide that God doesn't exist, or that prayer doesn't “work” because God doesn't give us what we pray for?

I suspect that most people who have dismissed, abandoned or even ridiculed “religion.” have come to this conclusion. Madalyn Murray O'Hair (1919 – 1995) was an American activist supporting atheism and separation of church and state. In 1963 she founded American Atheists and served as its president until 1986. She was often called “the most hated woman in America.”

She wrote this: “No god ever gave any man anything, nor ever answered any prayer at any time - nor ever will.” and “An Atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that deed must be done instead of prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanished, war eliminated.”

Reasonable Christians know this, but we still seek to follow the teachings of Jesus, despite the fact that we don't necessarily have easy lives or receive the things we desire. Christians, too, “want disease conquered, poverty vanished, war eliminated.” But we still practice prayer.

So, what, then, for practical, existential Christians, is prayer? Why should we pray, and what might we rightly expect?

Here I turn to Jesus.

-In scripture, he shows us by example and instruction to set a significant amount of time aside, in a quiet place, where we can spend time away, in deep reflection.

“...whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6.6)

“Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.” (Luke 6.12) Here Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what transpires, or what

we can pray for, but simply by separating ourselves from the busyness of the world, we will find ourselves in a safe place, where we can allow ourselves the opportunity to express our thoughts and feelings and feel heard and calmed.

-At the same time, in the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who art in heaven...") he is very specific. In this prayer that we say at least every week, we can and must rightly ask God to enable us to help to bring heaven to earth, to provide everyone with life's basic necessities, to seek forgiveness for wrongdoings as we offer it to others, to keep us from temptation and evil and to acknowledge that the earth is God's kingdom of good. (Matthew 6: 9-13, Luke 11: 2-4)

-A third passage in the New Testament that I find both reassuring and slightly amusing is in one of the parables of Jesus, found in the gospel of Luke, is about the importance of persistence in prayer.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"

⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. (Luke 18: 1-6)

While Luke presents us with an anthropomorphic God here, a CEO-like figure who is too busy to hear us sometimes, Jesus seems to be saying, "Don't lose heart."

But also, as with all matters of faith, we hold the teachings of the church, as dare I say of Jesus, up to our experiences. So I turn to some theologians, wise people and saints.

When we pray, seeking transformation, we acknowledge that we need to turn to the One who has far greater wisdom than we do. Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), leader of the Republic of China from 1928-1975 and then Taiwan until his death, simply observed this: "When one prays he goes to a source of strength greater than his own."

But too, we pray not because we see it as just one more task on our list of responsibilities, but in a spirit of graced and awe. As the popular Christian writer, Philip Yancey wrote,

“It's too bad prayer comes bundled in a package of 'spiritual disciplines.' Really, we should see prayer as a spiritual privilege. We don't do it as a callisthenic exercise to gain points with God; we do it, because it is good for us in every way.”

Mother These of Calcutta, a 20th century saint, observed this about prayer: “I used to believe that prayer changes things. I now know that God changes us, and we change things.” This is similar to what philosopher Soren Kierkegaard observed a century and a half earlier: “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.”

Sometimes when people talk about or offer prayer, I get the sense that they use it as way to end a conversation, a relationship or avoid engaging seriously with a person or a situation. Often, in times of national tragedy, a leader will simply say, “I offer my thoughts and prayers, ” but not do anything to change the situation or policy that caused the tragedy in the first place. Or if we bare our souls, or share a challenge, to a friend, colleague or conversation partner, they will avoid walking with or listening to us, if only for a time, by saying, “I'm praying for you.” But as Mother Theresa and Soren Kierkegaard observed, God may not necessarily fix a situation, but God changes us so that we can.

So then, let us pray, not because we must but because it is a privilege to come before God with all manner of things that are on our hearts. We pray to give thanks, to receive comfort, the healing of our souls, forgiveness, courage and strength in facing life's challenges, an ever-deepening understanding of God's will for our lives and our participation in the bringing of heaven to earth. We pray for others, not to dismiss them or relieve us of our responsibilities to them, but to be reminded of their dignity and needs, to acknowledge our concern their welfare as well as our own, and the ways in which God will direct us to care for them. AMEN.

MUSICAL REFLECTION *The Prayer*

music, David Foster; words, Carol Bayer Sager
Andrea Bocelli and Katharine Mcphee
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5vrPaE5Y1o>

PRAYER

O Holy One, originator and bearer of all that is loving, good and just, we thank you for your powerful presence in our lives and in our midst. We thank you for everyday blessing, things that we too often take for granted, for purpose, family, friends, life's

basic necessities and the beauty that surrounds us. Despite life's challenges, make us more aware and appreciative of all of the good that surrounds us and enable us to thus be more hopeful and joyful.

In your Presence we seek to be continually transformed, growing into the people you have created us to be. Enable us to flourish in the light of your will for our lives and our participation in the common good. We pray for wisdom, discernment and compassion.

Enable us to help to put an end to feelings of hatred and displays of violence.

We pray for all people who are living without life's basic necessities and ask that you give the people of our nation the wisdom to support leaders who will promote policies that bring about more employment opportunities and economic and racial justice.

In the Spirit of understanding and empathy, we are mindful, healing God, of all who are suffering from diseases of the body, the mind and the spirit, especially.....

For those who are preparing for medical procedures....

For those who care for the sick and the dying....

For those people facing death

For all who have passed into care and for family and friends who mourn their loss.....

In our own lives, we bring to you now our joys and concerns....

All these things we offer, using the words of the prayer that Jesus taught us,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. AMEN.

OFFERING

Although we are not gathering in the sanctuary for worship on Sundays for the time being, the church continues to have expenses. So it would be most appreciated if pledges and offerings could be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 307, New Hartford, CT 06057. Thank you for your generosity.

CLOSING HYMN PRAYER

Standin' in the Need of Prayer Tune: NEED OF

(two choices)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVyVw2Wtd6E>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ix3VprAGXtk>

OUR COMMON COMMISSION

Let us now forth into the world in peace.
Being of good courage.
Holding fast to that which is good.
Rendering to no one evil for evil.
Strengthening the fainthearted.
Supporting the weak.
Helping the afflicted.
Honoring all persons.
Loving and serving the Lord,
And rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BENEDICTION

May God:

Help us to be wise

Lead us to good places

Guide us with His grace

Help us to find His light

And hold it to our hearts

As darkness falls each night. Amen.

(Carol Bayer Sager, *The Prayer*, very loosely adapted as a benediction)