



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 7 Proper 12 (C)

Prayers

[RCL] Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

In the face of devastating events and in our polarized political climate, “prayer” has become code for: “I don’t know what else to say.” Or, “I want to say something neutral and inoffensive,” or, “I don’t want to take action.” So often politicians, leaders, even clergy people offer “thoughts and prayers” in response to tragedy or injustice because it is the easiest thing to do.

But Jesus didn’t teach us to pray so that we could be passive or inoffensive. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus offers a parable about a persistent, or in other translations, “shameless” neighbor whose audacity to keep asking will eventually get him the help he needs. Jesus teaches us that prayer should be like knocking on your neighbor’s door in the middle of the night demanding loaves of bread. When the neighbor doesn’t want to get up because he is already in bed, Jesus’ advice is to keep asking until he gives in. It doesn’t matter if he wants to give you the bread or not; he’ll do it eventually if you bother him enough.

Prayer is meant to be bold, persistent, uncomfortable; it’s meant to get results. Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” It may be unlikely that adding a petition to the Prayers of the People is going to lead to any kind of radical, lasting change. So, what does Jesus mean when he says, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened”? It just doesn’t always seem true. Probably 9 times out of 10, a politician who offers to pray isn’t going to pray at all, and even if he or she does, it won’t mean anything practical in terms of policy or resources.

So, why do we pray? How does Jesus want us to pray? How can Jesus promise us that God will hear and respond to our prayers—that we will receive what we ask for, that doors once locked shut will be opened?

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was living and working in Montgomery, Alabama, he came home late one night, and the phone rang. He picked up and, on the line, there was an ominous voice—a man threatening to kill King and his family if he didn’t stop leading in the struggle for civil rights. King and others had received similar threats in the past, but for some reason, this one stuck with him. It scared him. He couldn’t get back to sleep. So, he went into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and he began to pray. He describes this moment as a moment of reckoning with his faith. He had never questioned before; he had never doubted. He doesn’t say this exactly, but he hints at the possibility that he had also maybe not really believed. In this moment, he knew

that he would either need to put his trust in God wholeheartedly, or he would be consumed by fear and despair. If God wasn't really with him, then how could he possibly go on? He prayed all night and eventually the spirit of God overwhelmed him, and he was filled with deep peace and conviction.

Days later, his house was bombed. Years later, just months after sharing this story publicly in a sermon, he was shot and killed.

If we can think of an example of someone for whom prayer informed his living, Martin Luther King is certainly among the most powerful. For him, prayer was not just a private practice of piety, it was the fuel and reassurance that inspired remarkable action in the world. It was the energy and life-force behind a movement of social change. Through bold persistence, Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders—and thousands of others who didn't make it into the history books—were able to move the needle forward on issues that had seemed immovable.

This is the kind of prayer that Jesus was talking about. Yes, prayer happens in dark, quiet, private places. Prayer happens in moments of deep fear, of yearning, of reckoning. But prayer is not meant to stay just between us and God. Our prayers need to have feet and hands. Prayer is the practice of seeking God's presence and guidance as we work toward creating a better world. Prayer is one way we know God is with us, even when the challenges ahead seem insurmountable.

At the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Bryan Stevenson has helped create a museum and memorial that tell the story of racial violence and oppression in our society from slavery to lynching and Jim Crow to mass incarceration. Stevenson's work is also rooted in a deep sense of prayer in action. At a Sunday morning forum at Christ Church, Charlotte in 2016, Stevenson offered this prayer extemporaneously:

Dear God,

Thank you for this amazing space,
thank you for the amazing people
that you have brought to this place.
We thank you for your love.
We thank you for your grace.
We thank you for your mercy.
God, we are praying for your courage,
for you to give us the will,
give us the heart,
give us the mind,
give us the spirit
to draw closer to you.
And by drawing closer to you,
drawing closer to your people -
your people who are suffering,
your people who are struggling,
your people who are incarcerated,

your people who are hungry,
your people who are naked,
your people who need us to be near them
to show them your grace and mercy.
Lord, teach us to go to difficult places and say, “I am here.”
Teach us what it means to change narratives.
Teach us what it means to be hopeful.
Teach us what it means to do uncomfortable things in your service.
God, we bless you for the opportunity and privilege of being able
to represent you on this earth.
Empower us to represent your grace,
your mercy,
your calling for redemption and transformation.
We ask that you give us all the blessings that we need to do these works,
to live this life in your name. Amen.

— *Bryan Stevenson at Christ Church in Charlotte, 2016*

Jesus wanted our prayers to lead us to difficult places; to challenge us to do uncomfortable things in his service; to give hope. If you're tired of hearing people offer their thoughts and prayers in the face of devastating situations because it doesn't seem like enough, then it's time for us to change how we think about prayer. It's time for us to reclaim what it means to pray the way Jesus taught us. It's time for us to be shameless—to keep asking for God's presence in our lives and in the world, despite how daunting our challenges may seem.

Martin Luther King, Jr., faced the threat of bombing and death, but his connection to God through prayer gave him the courage to persist in the face of the unimaginable. His persistence and the persistence of so many other civil rights leaders ended formal segregation and ensured voting rights for all people. Doors that had been sealed shut began to crack open. Questions that had gone unheard began to be answered. Needs that had neglected began to be met.

What is happening in our world today that requires our shameless persistence in prayer? What is happening in our lives that needs to change? What are we seeking? What are we hoping for? Jesus promises us that if we knock the door will be opened, but we might have to knock hard and often; we might have to ask others to join us. Jesus invites us to pray with the assurance that God is listening; and not only that, but God is acting on our behalf, ready to respond and to transform our lives and the world around us.

And if we have moments when we feel like our prayers are weak, or like we don't know what to say or do, we can be like the disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray,” they asked him. Jesus stands ready not only to answer our prayers, but also to show us the way.

This sermon was written by the Rev. Anne Marie Witchger and ran for Proper 12 (C) in 2019.