

Shameless Prayer
Luke 11:5-8

Prayer doesn't work . . . at least not in the way we wish it would.

We'd so much like it to work, wouldn't we? When our child is dying from an incurable disease . . . we so much want our prayers for healing to work. So, we pray . . . earnestly . . . fervently . . . desperately . . . and, still, our child, or husband, or wife, or best friend . . . dies.

But, we so much want our prayers to work that we take to heart the voices we hear that say: "You didn't pray hard enough . . . you didn't pray often enough . . . you didn't say the right words" . . . as if it is up to us . . . as if our prayers have the power to heal . . . as if our prayers have the strength to make change . . . as if our prayers *work*!

But, they don't . . . not in that way.

Prayers are not some special words we can use to manipulate the gods to do our will. Prayer is not some formula that magically alters the time-space continuum . . . reversing the events of the past. Prayer is much simpler than that . . . it is ordinary human words . . . ordinary human responses to our world and to God's action . . . (or, God's lack of action!) . . . in our world.

So, yes, we ask . . . we beg . . . we petition . . . we thank . . . we praise . . . we do all those things in prayer. But, really, they are secondary matters . . . before all those things the fact that we pray is an acknowledgement that there is a God and I am not her! Which means, first and foremost . . . fundamentally, a prayer is a confession of faith . . . like a creed . . . every time we pray . . . personally . . . corporately . . . whatever form it takes . . . we are reminding ourselves . . . we are reminding others . . . we are saying, "I believe . . . in God . . . I believe enough, at least, to pray!" We're saying, "I don't have the power to create the world, but I know the one who does! I don't have the power to heal incurable diseases, but I know the one who does. I don't have the power to take away the guilt you feel, but I know the one who does. I don't have the power to give life beyond the grave, but I know the one who does. I know my prayers don't work, but I know the one who does work . . . who does work in our world . . . who does heal, and protect, and comfort, and forgive . . . the one who keeps working in our world . . . which is why I pray."

Every prayer we speak, or think, is a confession of faith!

Of course, that doesn't make praying any easier. Because, even as you prayed to the one who works . . . to the one who has the power to heal . . . to give life . . . to change the world . . . even then, your loved one still died . . . your marriage still broke apart . . . your world still collapsed around you . . . and, our world continues on its downward spiral.

Not only does prayer not work, but sometimes God doesn't work. God does not do what God is s'posed to do, does he?! God does not do what we want God to do! Then prayer is the hardest, isn't it? It's then that it becomes clear what prayer is: a confession of faith. When the voices around us – real or imagined, it makes no difference – when those voices are calling: "Where's your God, now?" Then, we are left with only two options: to pray, or not to pray . . . to confess, or not to confess . . . there is no middle ground.

But, let me tell you . . . even "Why God? Why?" is a confession of faith!

"Where are you, God?" is a confession of faith!

"God, you're not listening!" is a confession of faith.

"I hate you, God!" is a confession of faith!

I don't think any of us know which option we will take until we're there . . . in that space. But, I think it is good to remember who we are praying to . . . who is this God? Well, we don't pray to a God who is some impersonal, random force in the universe . . . a god capriciously rolling dice, or pulling strings. That's not the God I know. The God I know is the God who invites us to call him 'Father' . . . 'Abba' . . . 'Daddy!' This is a God who wants himself to be known . . . a God who didn't remain distant and far away from us, looking down on the world with detached disinterest . . . no, the God we know is a God who came near . . . deliberately . . . intentionally . . . personally. How do the scriptures put

it? 'God became flesh and lived among us . . . lived with us. My God is a God who listens . . . who touches . . . who cries . . . who rejoices . . . who comforts and consoles. My God is a God who is weak . . . and vulnerable . . . a God who gets hungry . . . and tired . . . and angry . . . and sad. I know a God who hugged little children . . . and blessed them . . . a God who touched lepers . . . a God who just wants to be near . . . to us.

You can be sure, whatever other questions you have when life gets turned upside down . . . when your prayers aren't working . . . that God knows your pain . . . your heartache . . . your confusion . . . your turmoil . . . because God has been there. God isn't a CEO, operating at arm's length from the action . . . God has walked a mile in your shoes . . . God knows the complexities . . . the difficulties . . . the heartache . . . of love . . . and God invites you . . . encourages you . . . welcomes you . . . to keep believing . . . even when there is no reason to believe. In those moments, whatever the words . . . prayer is the most profound confession of faith.

As Jesus was talking to his disciples about prayer he told a story about a person who bangs on his friend's door at midnight to borrow three loaves of bread. The friend is reluctant to get up, but finally does because of what is normally translated as persistence, but is probably better translated as 'shamelessness'. Don't be ashamed of banging on God's door. Don't be embarrassed about praying. There are no right words . . . there are no right ways . . . there are no right times . . . there are no taboo topics. Be shameless in prayer. Like Abraham . . . going toe to toe with God . . . he had no right to do that, and he knew it, yet he keeps pleading for Sodom. In effect, he's saying, "Lord, I know you . . . I know what you're like . . . you're gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love . . . I know you!"

Prayer doesn't give us the answers to the difficult questions of life, but every prayer is a confession of faith . . . and every confession of faith draws us closer to God . . . God who is good . . . God who works for good . . . even when it looks like God is not working at all. And, in the end, all we *can* do is trust . . . all we have is prayer . . . and a God who listens . . . and acts.

It's all Jesus chose to have . . . as he hung on the cross . . . weak and helpless . . . suffering and dying. If anyone had the power to change his situation it was him . . . if anyone had the power to stop the crucifixion, it was him . . . but, he chose not to . . . he chose instead to pray . . . a confession of faith . . . a statement of trust: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit". And, he died . . . trusting his Father would take care of everything.

He knew what his Father was like.

So, don't stop praying . . . don't stop knocking . . . don't stop asking . . . don't stop believing. And, even when we have no words of our own . . . when no words will come . . . Jesus gives us the words . . . he gives us his prayer . . . that prayer that reminds us who we are and *whose* we are . . . always. It's the prayer that begins with . . . Our Father . . . let's pray together . . .

Our Father in heaven . . .

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