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## ***“Praying As We Ought”***

Romans 8:26 – 39 NSRV  
Luke 18:1 – 8 (*The Message*)

Text: “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.”

. . . Romans 8:26

During the heat and humidity of this past week, I found my thoughts wandering toward prayer, perhaps because I found myself praying that it wouldn't be so hot and humid – after all, I am from Maine. And the more I thought about prayer the more questions I came up with; like:

- How do you know when you pray if you're just not talking to yourself?
- Does prayer really work?
- How should we pray?
- Should we be persistent in prayer?
- In today's reading from Romans, Paul says “we do not know how to pray as we ought.” Is Paul right? And if he is, well, how then should we pray?

Let's begin with the last statement, when Paul says in Romans 8 that “we do not know how to pray as we ought.” It's a rather amazing statement for one of the greatest minds of the church. But my suspicion is that Paul is more correct than we might like him to be.

There is a great distance between us and God. After all, God is the Creator, and as Jesus said in the Scripture for last week, “No one is good except God alone.” On the other hand we are the creatures – and as such we are a complex mix of inconsistencies and doubts, sins and errors. I say that I am humbly approaching God with my needs in prayer, but too often am I just dropping my wish-list on God? Is that really what prayer is? How do I know for sure?

I've noted that when we ask for prayer requests in our Joys and Concerns, most of the petitions are related to us, to our friends and/or to our families. And while there are some significant prayer needs there, what about the rest of the world? Isn't that a very limited view of our responsibilities in prayer?

Does prayer really work? Every now and then I receive an email from someone who tells me about some scientific study at some university or research institute that shows beyond much doubt that “prayer works.” Prayer lowers blood pressure, or prayer helps to cure people of various physical ailments. I find such claims to be interesting. After all we are modern people who greatly value “what works.” Do this; get that. So

we turn to science to see if there is evidence says that prayer “works,” and if it does we are then deferring to science to validate our faith. Hmmmm, the theologian in me tells me there is something wrong with priorities ordered in that manner.

I mean, when I am serious and most in touch with God and with my prayer life, I have found that praying is not primarily a way of getting what **we want** out of God but primarily a means of **God getting what God wants out of us!** I think of all those discouraged people who have told me, as a pastor, how they repeatedly went to God seeking deliverance from some problem, seeking to get something in their life fixed, and that it didn’t happen. They say to me, in as many words, that they have been told by God, in effect, “No.” When we do get discouraged when our prayers seemingly go unanswered, or when we see results almost the opposite of what we pray for, we need to remember that when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that “the cup be taken from Him”, the answer from God was “No!”

So let’s dig a little deeper into Paul’s advice as it come to us from Romans 8. Paul says “that the very Spirit [of God] intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” In other words, whenever we bring some person and their needs before God in prayer, we are, in effect, laying that person alongside God. The writer of Hebrews says that the chief interceder for the world is Jesus: “He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). In our prayers for others we somehow participate in Jesus’ high priestly ministry. Thus Paul says not only that “we don’t know how to pray” but also that Jesus intercedes. Jesus becomes the chief, model, *pray-er*. Paul tells the Romans that Jesus sits at the right hand of God, interceding for us. This means that we never pray by ourselves. Jesus prays for us and with us, prompting us through his Holy Spirit (as today’s epistle says) telling us, teaching us how to pray as we ought.

Nor should we be too swift to ascribe our lack of success in praying to our sins and inadequacies. Morton Kelsey tells how the first really dramatic healing he was ever involved in took place despite his resentment at having to go to the hospital at an inconvenient time and minister to people he scarcely knew. But he reluctantly went, met with the patient and family and said a prayer. He reports that God apparently ignored his attitude and healed the person anyway.

You see, prayer only begins to crack open the door to God’s miracles. Walter Wink reminds us in his book *Engaging the Powers, Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* that many of us were taught at an early age that God hears our prayers in direct proportion to the degree of purity of heart or sinlessness we bring to our prayers. But, remembering that great chasm between us – the creatures – and God our Creator, no one is really “good enough” to pray, once we accept those terms. The God revealed by Jesus graciously listens to all who pray, perhaps even especially to sinners.

Perhaps you remember Jesus’ story of two men going to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, a keeper of the Jewish Law; the other a tax collector. The Pharisee prayed thanking God he wasn’t like other people, especially the tax collector who robbed people. The tax collector simply prayed, “Have mercy on me, O God, for I am a

sinner.” Then Jesus tells us, that it was the corrupt tax collector, after all, not the morally correct Pharisee, who went home justified (Lk 18:9-14).

Sometimes we may think so conceitedly about our inadequacies and sins and think that they are so important that they can stand in the way of God answering our prayers. Trust me; God can overcome even the worst we can bring!

And then there is the issue of being persistent about what we pray for. There is no better illustration of what is meant here than the one that Jesus presents in our Gospel Lesson from Luke’s Gospel on the nature of prayer: that of the persistent widow who had an injustice done to her and the unjust judge (Lk 18:1ff.). Like the widow, who returned again and again to the judge despite his refusal to hear her, and who finally achieved her desire for “vindication” because of her sheer tenacity, so prayer must persist with God and its quest for understanding. The point is not that God is comparable to a hard-headed and unscrupulous figure like the judge, but that the human being who wills to be blessed – in the case of theology, blessed with understanding – can receive this blessing only through an enduring and determined endeavor to acquire and assimilate what is there as gift.

Let me try to illustrate.

I remember a woman telling me that her daughter was putting her through hell with her horribly irresponsible behavior. Every night, not knowing where her daughter was or what mischief her daughter might be getting into, she would earnestly pray to God to change her daughter, to lead her daughter to see the error of her ways.

She went on to say, “Eventually, in prayer, I began to see my daughter as God may see her – not as a rebellious, difficult young adult, but as a vulnerable, confused, scared little girl. I began to see my daughter more as a gift than as a problem. With time, she really did make some changes in her life for the better, perhaps because I began to look upon her with God’s eyes.”

Perhaps as this woman persistently prayed, God’s Spirit joined in the prayer and interceded in a way that helped both mother and daughter.

I remember the father who told me that he was so very worried about his wayward son. Then, after much prayer, the father said, “It was just like God said to me, ‘I’m eternal. I’ve got lots of time to love your son. It ain’t over until I say it’s over. This too shall pass.’” The immediate crisis was placed, in prayer, in a more eternal context and he was given a longer view.

In 1998 I had the opportunity to reunite – after 28 years – for a lunch with my former theology professor at West Virginia Wesleyan, Catherine Gunsalus, who went on to be the first woman to teach Systematic Theology in an accredited Mainline Seminary - Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. I was sharing with her some of the struggles Deb and I were going through with our children.

Catherine took that opportunity to tell me about her own life. Some twenty or so years ago, she had married Justo Gonzalez, a Cuban theologian, but his then 4-year-old daughter would continue to stay with her birth mother. When the daughter turned 14, the mother said “she had enough,” and it was Justo’s turn. Catherine said that having a

14-year-old come into their life fulltime after being rejected by her own mother was traumatic and unbelievably challenging to she and Justo – to their stamina, to their sanity, . . . and to their faith. But Catherine and Justo persisted and tried their hardest to love her. Then Catherine told me that just last week, at age 34, the daughter said to Catherine, “Mom, I think I am having a fit of maturity!” Catherine said to me – “my advice to you and Deb, is to love ‘em and keep ‘em alive.”

Sometimes we bring someone we love to God in prayer simply because we’re at the end of our rope and there is nothing else we can do. I suppose that we ought to chide ourselves for **waiting** until things are impossible and out of control before we bring someone to God in prayer. But still, it can be a great comfort both to us and to the one for whom we are praying.

But whether or not prayer works, helps, changes things or doesn’t, I find it helpful to remind myself that the primary purpose of prayer is simply to be with God in an unencumbered, intense, direct, focused way. Let’s keep remembering that the last thing that is prayed by any Christian at the end of any truly Christian prayer of intercession is the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He was crucified, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

Prayer: Gracious God, we give thanks to You that we don’t have to perfect to pray to You. We Give thanks that You know the needs of our prayers more deeply than we do. Give us the courage to hear whatever You have to say to us. And in hearing what Your will is for us and for those for whom we pray that we might be able to act upon Your will for our lives. Keep reaching out to us Lord; keep revealing Yourself to us, we pray in Jesus’ name and with Jesus. Amen.