

## THE POWER (AND LIMITATIONS) OF PRAYER

(09/16/18)

Scripture Lessons: Luke 11:1-13; 22:39-46

*“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”*  
(Luke 22:42)

Two weeks ago, as we concluded our study of the Letter of James to the early church, we reaffirmed our belief in the power of intercessory prayer. The focus of our reflections was James 5:13-16, which reads,

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

This verse is a powerful articulation of our identity and our mission as a church. As you will note from our Sunday worship bulletin,

*We are a community of faith  
believing in the power of prayer,  
seeking earnestly to deepen our spiritual life,  
and share the love of God with others.*

Following the worship service, several parishioners asked if we could continue our reflections on prayer this coming year in order that we might understand its importance in our spiritual journey and in deepening our relationship with God. This morning I would like us to think about the limits or limitations of prayer, about what prayer is and what prayer is not. We will think about what we should pray for. We will also consider the sort of things or states of affairs, no matter how worthy they might be, that should not be the object of our prayer.

First, I would like us to think about whether it makes sense to ask God to do something that goes against the laws of nature. I know that God can suspend the laws of nature but, for the life of me, I have no idea why God would want to do this. Why would God establish the laws of nature several milliseconds after the moment of the creation of the universe in the Big Bang, which took place approximately sixteen billion years ago, and then set these laws aside?

I believe in miracles, but I do not believe that a miracle is the result of God setting aside the laws of nature in a specific situation. I believe that many of the events that we call miracles

are not arbitrary or willful violations of the laws of nature by God; they are merely indications that we do not fully understand nature and the presence of God in the universe. This is how I understand the power of intercessory prayer--not as a setting aside of the conditions that govern the human body, but as activating, strengthening, and empowering the healing process that is already present within us in a way that, from a secular perspective, might be viewed as mysterious or miraculous.

Let me give you a silly or facetious example of a prayer that asks God to accomplish something which is impossible. Let's say that I park my car at a parking meter in Boston. I go about my business only to discover several hours later that I have forgotten to return to the car to put more money in the meter. As I hurry back to my car, I say a little prayer: "Please God, don't let me have a parking ticket."

What is it that I am asking God to do? I may be asking God to reverse time. No matter how much God may want to do this, and I can't imagine why God would want to do this or why God would want to save me from the consequences of my own carelessness, it can't be done.

If there were no meter maids covering that street at that particular time, there will be no ticket on my windshield when I return to the car. When I see the windshield unadorned with a ticket, should I praise God? I confess I have done this--I have actually said, "Thank you, God!" But I know deep down that God had nothing to do with my not receiving a ticket, that is unless we believe God micromanages the universe to such an extreme degree that he foreordains the paths that meter maids take on their daily rounds. I'm sorry, but that strikes me as excessively controlling and not just a little pathetic. I wouldn't be interested in worshiping such a God.

The other option is that a meter maid did indeed ticket my car. If this happened, what do I expect God to do in response to my heartfelt prayer? Do I really think that God will not only remove the ticket from my windshield but also remove the record of it from the meter maid's ticket book? Such an expectation strikes me as not only narcissistic but bizarre.

Ok, it's a silly example, but I still think it makes a point. We need to distinguish between what we want, what we desire, what we wish for, and the true object or focus of prayer. Instead of trying to involve God in the resolution of my self-induced predicament, I would have been better off to say that I *hope* I didn't get a ticket.

Actually, whether I was ticketed or not is the luck of the draw. Sometimes I get a ticket and sometimes I don't. I seriously doubt if the pattern is of spiritual significance. In addition, I always feel a little sheepish when I ask God to spare me from the consequences of my own

actions. I know God loves me, but I am not sure why God would want to do this. A good and loving parent would not seek to spare his/her child from the consequences of the child's decisions, at least not if the parent wants to help the child grow.

Sometimes our desires are far more noble than my narcissistic parking ticket example. For example, when I pray for someone who is struggling with cancer, is this a legitimate prayer? I believe it is. As I understand it, I am not asking God to set aside the rules of nature to save that person. All I am doing is strengthening the power of healing that is already present within that person through the deep connection of prayer. Sometimes the strengthening of the healing power within the person for whom I pray is enough to help him/her recover; sometimes it is not.

We have just embarked upon a new football season. Let's push through the veils of pain from last year's Super Bowl. Does it make sense for churches throughout New England to ask God to bless the New England Patriots this coming year? I don't think so. God blesses everyone--even the Philadelphia Eagles. I don't believe God determines the outcome of professional football games. That would be a prime example of God micromanaging the universe and messing with the point spread. The outcome of a football game is more often determined by a coach's mysterious decision to bench a star cornerback for the entire game.

I know that we have a habit in our religious heritage of seeing God as a tribal god, as, for example, the God of Israel and no one else, or the God of Christians and no one else. From this perspective, it may make sense to think of God as a New Englander. But we are now getting further and further away from the God of Jesus.

It is legitimate to hope that the New England Patriots will win in Jacksonville this afternoon. It is not legitimate to pray for victory. If the Patriots lose, which I hope will not happen, it also does not mean that God heard our prayer but answered our prayer in the negative. It just means that this type of self-serving utterance may be legitimate as a wish, but it is not really legitimate as a prayer.

Several years ago, in one of our study groups we read a little book entitled *The Power of Prayer*. This book contains short reflections on prayer by distinguished spiritual leaders like Mother Teresa, Henri Nouwen, Dale Evans Rogers, Brooke Medicine Eagle, Jimmy Carter, and Billy Graham.

The preface to the book contains a quote from William Law. Law, who lived from 1686-1761, was a clergyman of the Church of England and a fellow of Cambridge University. Law was trying to breathe life into the increasingly empty religious forms and rituals of his day. This

may be why he was quoted in a book that is trying to help people discover or rediscover the meaning and power of prayer.

Law tells us that prayer is a mighty instrument, “not for getting our will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.” Think about it. Prayer is a mighty instrument not for getting our will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.

How can William Law’s reflection help us distinguish true prayer from human desire, whether the desire be noble or less than noble? First, it is a warning against the use of prayer to bend God’s will to ours, and our willingness to have God set aside the laws of nature to do this.

When I pray that I didn’t get a parking ticket or that the team on which I bet to beat the point spread does so, I am asking God to bow to me, to set aside the laws of nature and the needs of other people to make *my life* better or happier. This type of prayer is narcissistic; it is moving in the wrong direction. Instead of asking God to do what I think should be done, I should be asking God to help me do what God wills.

When Jesus tells us to pray that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven, he tells us that instead of thinking what it is that *we* want or need, we need to think about what it is that *God* wants and needs. If we can do this, then we can bend our wills to God’s. We can then pray with Jesus that not our will, but God’s be done because if our prayer is a true prayer, God’s will and ours will be the same.

In our worship throughout the coming year, and also in our personal devotions, let us discover or rediscover the true meaning and the transforming power of prayer. As we take on the heart and the mind of Jesus, we will become increasingly clear about what prayer is and what prayer is not. As we receive the risen Christ into our hearts, we will find ourselves praying as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: “not my will, but yours be done.”

Through our prayer, as we open ourselves to God’s presence, we strengthen God’s power within us. Prayer can help us see more clearly, clear enough to discern God’s will for our lives. When this happens, we can then make God’s will our prayer. This is quite different from praying that God will fulfill our desires, no matter how noble those desires may be.

Our hymns say it so well. In 1892, Lucy Larcom wrote the words to a hymn which reminds us that in prayer we are meant to draw close to Christ, to make our wishes one with his.

*Draw Thou my soul, O Christ,  
Closer to Thine;  
Breathe into every wish  
Thy will divine:*

*Raised my low self above,  
Won by Thy deathless love,  
Ever, O Christ, through mine  
Let Thy life shine.*

*Lead forth my soul, O Christ,  
One with Thine own,  
Joyful to follow Thee  
Through paths unknown:  
In Thee my strength renew;  
Give me Thy work to do:  
Through me Thy truth be shown,  
Thy love made known.*

*Not for myself alone  
May my prayer be;  
Lift Thou Thy world, O Christ,  
Closer to Thee:  
Cleanse it from guilt and wrong;  
Teach it salvation's song,  
Till earth, as heaven, fulfill  
God's holy will.*

In our worship as the gathered church and in our personal devotions, let us be with God in prayer. Let us seek not to bend God's will to ours, but to bend our will to God's. Let us pray not that our will be done by God, but that God's will be done on earth both in us and through us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
September 16, 2018*