

“Bothering God”
Luke 11:1-10; 18:1-8
2nd Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
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When I had my hip replacement surgery last summer, a friend of mine said to me, “Ben, even though I don’t believe in intercessory prayer, I’ll be praying for you.”

Now I was grateful that he said that.
And I was grateful for his prayers.

But....what did he mean by that?

What did he mean that he didn’t believe in intercessory prayer?
I think I know what he meant by that.

I think he meant that he didn’t believe that his prayers or anyone else’s prayers would change the outcome of what happened. That the outcome of my surgery was in the doctor’s hands,
the hands of the medical team that helped me that morning,
and not in the hands of God.

I think that’s what he meant.

Or maybe he meant that the outcome was in God’s hands, but that his prayers wouldn’t change God’s mind, or God’s love, or the way God would or would not work through the surgery—that God had a plan, and God was going to stick to the plan no matter the prayers.

But my friend doesn’t seem like the kind of person who believes that God has a plan.

So...maybe he didn’t believe God has a plan, but neither did he believe that we cannot influence God in any kind of way.

Maybe he meant that no matter how much or how hard we pray, we cannot change God—God is Love beyond our imagining and capacity to change—we can only, when we pray, change ourselves.

Or open ourselves to BEING changed by God.

Come to think of it, I'm not sure at all that I know what he meant when he said he would be praying for me even though he didn't believe in intercessory prayers...

But I'm still grateful that he kept me in his prayers.

Do you understand prayer?

Do you understand how it works?

Why we pray?

Whether it changes our lives?

Or whether it changes the heart and mind of God?

I ask because we are in the midst of our sermon series on the Gospel of Luke.

And the topic today—is prayer.

Why prayer?

More than any other Gospel writer, Luke paid particular attention to the prayer life of Jesus: the times that Jesus prayed, and what Jesus had to say about prayer.

Jesus told TWO PARABLES about prayer.

They're only found in Luke's Gospel as well.

You heard them both today.

In the first, a friend knocks on another friend's door at midnight with a request for bread...and even though the first answer is no, this person is persistent, and finally his neighbor just wants to stop being bothered, so the answer becomes yes, I'll give you some bread.

Keep at it, says Jesus.
Don't stop when it comes to prayer.

In the second parable, same point, right?

A widow pesters an unscrupulous judge for justice, and even though he denies her and denies her, finally—because she's really getting under his skin—he grants the widow her request to make her go away!

Now...be careful with these parables.
The comparison is not—God is like the judge.
The comparison is from least to greatest.

Jesus is saying:
If an unjust judge will grant justice...how much more so with
God?

Because God is not a God who cannot be bothered after bedtime.
And God is not an unjust judge.

God is the one who WANTS to be bothered by us, who loves us and looks with compassion on all of God's children...so how much more then will God respond to us when we go to God in prayer.

“Ask, and it will be given you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.”

That's what we heard in our first text for today.

But is that all there is to prayer?
You and I also know it's not quite so easy.

What happens when we ask, and do not receive?
What happens when you and I knock and knock and knock,
and we're left with no answers whatsoever?

Following the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis wrote:

“After the death of a friend, years ago, I had for some time a most vivid feeling of certainty about his continued life...I have begged to be given even one hundredth part of the same assurance about [Joy...my wife].

“There is no answer.
Only the locked door, the iron curtain,
the vacuum, absolute zero.”¹

Maybe that locked door is why Luke wrote what he did in our second text.

Listen again to the first verse of chapter 18:

*Then Jesus told them a parable
about their need to pray always
and not to lose heart.*

Not to lose heart...

Do you know what that struggle is like?
Especially when it comes to prayer?
The struggle not to lose heart?

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam Books, 1961.

During the past few years, Sarah Wildman has written a series of essays for *The New York Times* about daughter, Orli.

About Orli's cancer diagnosis.

About how she and her family dealt with the diagnosis.

About what it has been like since Orli—

who was 14 years old—

died in the spring of 2023.

Wildman is Jewish, and in one of her earlier essays, she describes being in what “rabbis call the meitzar, the biblical narrow place—a place of compression. The meitzar is an expression of all the things that can make life impossibly hard. It appears in Psalm 118: From the narrow place I called to God....”²

Wildman writes:

“In the heartbreaking time since she left us, we have struggled to understand how it’s possible such a big life is no longer here...”

“Recently, several people quietly told me that [Orli] had helped them in some way... If she could continue to engage, to be concerned beyond herself, they could, too. [Orli’s] instinct was always to assist, to write to the kid on the other side of the country struggling with chemo-related hair loss [like Orli did]...to see if a newly diagnosed child wanted tips on making life in cancer care more bearable, or even to encourage someone going through a divorce to dance.”³

² Sarah Wildman, “My Child Is in an Impossible Place, and I Am There With Her,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2023, [Opinion | My Child Is in an Impossible Place, and I Am There With Her - The New York Times](#).

³ Sarah Wildman, “My Daughter’s Future was Taken From Her, and From Us,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2023, [Opinion | My Daughter Was So Alive. How Can She Now Be Gone? - The New York Times](#).

What was one of Orli's gifts?

Even as she was going through her cancer treatment,
 she had the gift of giving others COURAGE,
 the gift of helping others not to lose heart.

According to Jesus, it's this business of **not losing heart**
 that lies at the heart of our prayers.

In other words, prayer is not a transaction—where if we pray hard enough, or long enough, or with enough faith—we'll FINALLY get what we pray for.

I cannot explain why some prayers are answered affirmatively, and others are met with mysterious silence. I do not believe God PLAYS FAVORITES when it comes to answering prayer. Why someone like Orli loses her life, it's not fair. It's not right. It's not just.

So what does that say about all the prayers that were offered for her?

How does prayer work?
 I have no idea how it works!

And yet even in the face of the cruel and inexplicable, do I believe that our prayers have an effect on God?

You bet I do!

I believe that they touch the very TENDERNESS of God, that God is not IMPERVIOUS when we ask God for help, or cry out in anger at God, or give thanks for some gift, large or small, that takes our breath away...

I believe God is deeply moved by our prayers.
So how does prayer work?

Jesus never tells us how it works.
What Jesus says is pray always...**so we don't lose heart.**

In her book, *Holy the Firm*, the writer Annie Dillard describes her experience, years ago, at a very small church on Puget Sound:

“On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there...
The members are of mixed denominations...

“Once, in the middle of the [minister's] long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world—[when he was praying] for the gift of wisdom [for] its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, [help] to the oppressed, and God's grace to all—in the middle of this [the minister] stopped, and burst out, “Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.”⁴

Well—THAT got everyone's attention.
It was as if he was saying:
Are these empty words, to you, O God?
Do our pleas and prayers mean nothing to you, O God?

What would you do, if Nick or I did that in the middle of our prayers of intercession some Sunday?

Dillard writes:
“After a shocked pause, he continued...

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977. I am indebted to Tom Long's book, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2024, for this reference.

[but] Because of this, I like him very much.”⁵

I know what she means.

Even if you never hear me say that kind of thing in a prayer, you can trust—that I’ve said that, and WORSE than that to God when I’m in my car by myself...and no one but God can hear me.

Because God doesn’t want some made up version of who we are.
God wants the real thing.
That’s what prayer is all about.

Our love for God.
And God’s love for us.

Picture Jesus, in Luke’s Gospel, praying after his baptism about what his ministry will look like...praying before he selects the 12 disciples, asking God whom he should choose...praying on the last night of his life, for strength to go through with what he needed to do...Jesus didn’t pray because...he had to do it.

He prayed out of love.
His love for God. His love for his friends
His love for his enemies. His love for us.
It’s no different than the reasons that we pray...

The preacher Fred Craddock died 10 years ago this month.
This is a name that’s known among many pastors and preachers.

⁵ Ibid.

He was enormously influential, through his teaching and his writing, probably shaping the careers and the preaching of more mainline ministers in the latter half of the 20th century than anyone will ever know.

I remember reading, shortly before he died, about how Fred had dodged death very early in his life.

I say “he” dodged death.
In fact, he had nothing to do with it.

When he was 8 months old, he contracted diphtheria.
This was the winter of 1928-29.
There was no penicillin back then.
No DPT shot.
Diphtheria was a killer of babies at that time.

His family was poor, so they tried the home remedies:
vinegar, honey, homemade whiskey,
kerosene, sugar, seltzer...nothing was working.

They called the doctor.
The doctor came.

He used “his best medicine, his best methods...his most comforting words...but the baby’s breathing”
--that would be Fred’s breathing—
“came with increasing difficulty,”
until it became a “rattling gasp.”

The doctor told Fred’s parents to leave the room.
He gave Fred a shot, and he said he would sit with the boy until daybreak.

And Fred Craddock’s mother, she ran outside to the barn.

And she lay down on the hay.
And she prayed that God would save her boy.

She told God that if the boy lived, she would pray every day that her child would become a minister in service to the Lord.

Finally, she fell asleep.
When daylight broke, she heard...nothing.
Terrified, Fred's mother ran from the barn to the house.
The doctor was half asleep by her child.

"The crisis is over," the doctor said.
"He is sleeping. He'll be all right..."

Fred's father said, "We will pay you, Doctor, when we can."
"I know you will," he replied.
"I will send you a bill."⁶

But the bill never arrived.

What did arrive, somewhere along the way, was a sense of calling in Fred Craddock. Amazingly, his mother never suggested to him that he go into the ministry. Never said a word to him about that scary night when he was so, so sick...never spoke to her son about her prayers to God.

It wasn't until, as a young adult, he mentioned one day that he was thinking of becoming a preacher. And he did.

He became a teacher of preachers. And he had a great influence on many, many preachers, including someone else who went on to become a seminary professor.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach: Connecting the Dots*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009.

And that professor had in his class, one day, a student whose own call to preach was profoundly shaped by that professor and that class.

And that student went on to become my pastor—mind you, this is some 60 years after Fred’s mother offered her all-night prayer. And my pastor told me—when I was 22 years old and didn’t really know what I wanted to do with my life—that I needed to go into the ministry.

Now...is that how prayer works?

Is one of the reasons that I’m standing here today because way back in the late 1920s, a mother prayed fervently for her 8-month-old boy to survive diphtheria and he lived, and she made a commitment, that only God knew about, to pray every day that he become a minister, never telling the boy...any of that???

Well, give me a break.
That can’t be how prayer works.

God doesn’t make deals in prayer.
God doesn’t play favorites in prayer.

Surely, that mother’s prayers had NOTHING to do with the fact that you and I have known each other now for the past 6 and a half years...how I’ve come to love y’all, and treasure your faith, and how your faith has influenced MY faith and MY family.

How I’ve watched you walk courageously—
not losing your faith during times of sorrow and struggle...
how I’ve learned from you how not to lose heart.

Surely, that mother’s prayers, from almost 100 years ago...surely those prayers have nothing to do with THIS...

What if they have something to do with this???
What if it's ALL connected?

What if it's like quantum physics?
(Mind you, I know next to nothing about quantum physics.)

What if some indescribably small prayer over here...has an effect
on someone else's life...over there??!!

What if, when you say your prayers before you fall asleep tonight,
what if one of the results of that prayer will take place almost 100 years
from now, spreading the love of God to others, and you may not get to
see everything that happens because of your prayer, but God can see it,
and God will do something miraculous with the prayers you offer
tonight.

Is that how it works?
I don't know if that's how prayer works.

There's a possibility that could be how it works...why do I say
that?

**Because one day Jesus told them a parable
about their need to pray always
and not to lose heart...**

Amen.