

The Power of Prayer

A pastor's young daughter comes to him after one of the services and asks, "Dad, why do you always close your eyes for a few seconds before you start the sermon?"

And he responds, "Because that's when I'm praying."

And she says, "Well, what are you praying for?"

And he says, "I'm praying that I preach a good sermon."

And his daughter asks, "So why isn't God answering your prayers?"

Something I've noticed in our praying is a tendency to try to give God an out. We've kind of formalized this. The language that formalizes this is "not my will but yours be done." Just in case God doesn't want to do what we want God to do, we've got to give God the ability to get out of our prayers. It always makes me wonder if we might not be a little bit afraid of the power in a prayer.

I think there's a common feeling of wondering why God sometimes doesn't answer the prayers that we lift up. For all the times that God answers prayers and moves through our lives with healing and loving grace, there seem to be just as many times where we long for God to hear us, yet we are left wondering, "Has God even heard my prayer?"

I received a couple of questions this year on the topic of prayer, so I'm going to try to answer them in one sermon. Essentially, the question we are looking at today is: what is the power of prayer? And I like to think of three different levels of praying.

There's that surface-level prayer, when we simply ask God for the things that we need, or probably just as often, the things that we really want. There's a deeper level, where we begin to have a living conversation — even a relationship — with God. And then deeper still may be the fullest image of prayer, where we desire that our lives be shaped and molded by God.

I put them on those different levels not because I think one is better than the other, but because I think the deeper we get into our prayer lives, the more we understand the power of prayer, and the fuller things get in our lives. So I talk about surface-level prayers and deeper prayers not to say that the surface-level prayers are bad, but to say that the more time we spend in prayer, the deeper we learn to get.

Surface-Level Prayer

On that surface level of prayer, I ask God for those things that I need or want. But to say that better: I ask God for the things that I *think* I need, and the things that I *think* I want.

We see this with the Israelites. We heard this in our Old Testament scripture reading. The Israelites come through the sea. They are in the wilderness with nothing to drink, and they pray for water. They cry out for a drink, and God provides. It is that simple prayer: need, ask, answer.

When we find ourselves in moments of crisis, when we are hurting, when we are frightened — maybe that's all we can bring ourselves to do. We can simply ask God, cry out in our hearts, and trust that God listens, that God cares, that God is willing to act. I call it a surface-level prayer, but in many ways it is our baseline. It is the prayer that we come back to when nothing else in our lives seems to be working.

But the problem with that surface-level prayer is that when our prayer lives never get beyond the "I need" or "I want" statements, we never let God really intervene in our lives in prayers that go deeper and deeper.

A Deeper Prayer

So let's go deeper, because that deeper level of prayer is a prayer that is prayed because we want a life-changing, life-affirming conversation and relationship with God.

Walter Wangerin Jr. used to talk about prayer having four distinct acts. He noticed that a lot of times when a person discovered that their prayer life was unfulfilling, it was because they had only ever stayed at the first act of prayer.

That first act of praying, he said, is when we speak. We know that part pretty well. We know that we speak unto God our issues, our problems in life, asking God to intervene. And we know that when we speak, it's not always in language — sometimes it is what we call the cry of the heart. Sometimes our speaking to God is simply a call from within.

The second act of a prayer is one we might not think about as deeply: the second act is that God listens. We acknowledge that ours is a listening God who hears us.

The third act of a prayer is that God speaks to us. This is our desire. This is what we want — we want God to speak into our lives, to fix all our problems, to right the wrongdoings, to cure the illnesses, to repair the misdeeds.

And I think the fourth act of praying might be where most of us go off the rails. The fourth act is: we listen. The prayer requires that we listen for God.

For a prayer life to become rich and affirming in its relationship between us and God, it takes speaking and listening. Sometimes it's easy to speak to God. Listening gets harder. But we've developed tools to help us — spiritual tools that help us listen. How many worshipping with us today have walked a labyrinth? What an amazing tool that is, to stop

thinking for a moment and learn to listen. Or how many of us have journaled before, or done some creative artwork that forces us to turn our brains around for just a moment, forcing us into those spaces where we listen rather than speak.

You see, when we learn this movement of prayer — speaking and listening — our prayer lives become richer, our prayer lives become deeper. It takes us from "God, this is what I want you to do for me," and it gets us listening for what God wants us to do in the world.

The True Power of Prayer

And then we can go deeper still. We can take the deeper level of prayer another step further and learn the true power in praying.

Our epistle reading came from James this morning, and James gives us some instructions on praying. I really like how James begins to shift in his language, because James starts off at that surface-level prayer: if you're suffering, pray about it; if you're sick, pray about it. But then there is a quick shift that takes prayer from an individual thing to a community thing. If you are sick, call the elders of the community together to pray. Don't pray as an individual — pray as a community.

James shows us that there is a rich and powerful prayer life that is not about the strength of belief of the individual praying, but about the community striving together before God. What a powerful way to pray.

When we pray as a community, part of this deep, rich prayer life also reminds us that prayer isn't something that we sit back and receive. It is something that we are called to participate in.

Go back to the story that we heard from Exodus. The people pray for something to drink, and God invites Moses: "You see that stick on the ground? Pick it up. Throw it in the water." God invites Moses to participate in answering the prayers of the people. It's a very similar thing to what happens when the Israelites are standing on the shore of the sea with the Egyptians coming up behind them. God tells Moses to take his staff, hold his staff up, and the waters will be parted.

It is these examples that show God requires participation in the life of a prayer. To have a prayer answered sometimes means that we get involved in the answering of the prayer.

You see, the deeper part of a prayer is that a prayer calls us to action, unites our hearts with God, so that we can participate in the work that God is doing. Rather than our prayers putting all the onus on God to change the world, the true power of a prayer is that it changes our hearts just as much, if not more, than it speaks to the heart of God.

When we pray for peace, that prayer molds our hearts into the hearts of peacemakers. When we pray that the hungry might have food and the unsheltered may have a place to sleep, it reminds us to be the kind of people who share the gifts that we have received with those who are less fortunate than we are. And even when we pray for those things that seem beyond our ability to control — when I pray for a loved one with dementia, or somebody with cancer, something that I can't actually physically participate in the healing of — it still shapes my heart to be more compassionate, more caring, more kind.

You see, that is the secret power of a prayer: that prayer melts and molds the heart of the one who is praying, and the community in which it is prayed.

One of the great powers of the civil rights movement was that these were people who prayed before they acted. They prayed in community, and then they put their feet to that prayer. That is the power of a prayer — that it speaks to the heart of God, but that it changes how we live.

Closing

I believe that all these different levels of prayer all work together. I believe in the power of prayer. I believe that God does move in the life of a person who prays, and I believe that movement is unique and powerful. But I also believe that prayer invites us into a deep and fulfilling relationship with God as we bear the fullness of who we are before the grandeur of God.

And I also believe that for a prayer to truly be meaningful, it has to transform us. It has to invite us to participate in the sacred, beloved work of God. I believe that to be the power in a prayer.

Let us as a community now pray together.

Holy One, shape us that we may more resemble the love of Christ — love that sat with stranger and friend alike, that offered healing to those who thought they had everything figured out and those who knew their lives were broken. Transform our hearts to resemble the heart of Christ, within whom I pray. Amen.