

PRAYING FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

Luke 11: 5-13; 22: 39-46

One of the great theologians of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, tells a story from his early days in the ministry, a story of two women in his congregation dying of cancer. The one woman had been a prominent member of the congregation with a family of high standing in society and strong leadership in the congregation. She had been head of the women's guild and led many of the congregational fund-raising events. Her husband and two sons also held responsible positions on various boards of the congregation. They were also strong financial supporters of the congregation. But now, she was found to be with cancer and it had spread throughout her body.

When Reinhold visited her, he was taken aback by the anger and bitterness he witnessed in her. She was angry at God. How could God have let her down like this? She was such a good Christian, a leader in the church and strong supporter of God's work in every way. She had prayed for healing and a way through, and here she was dying! Reinhold found it hard to know what to say to her and she certainly didn't want any scriptures read to her or prayers offered on her behalf. God was a great disappointment!

The other woman had quite a different story. She was certainly not prominent in the congregation and had only been able to come to church here and there, as she had spent whatever spare time she had caring for a husband with debilitating mental illness and raising their two daughters. Now, after having supported her daughters through college and having cared for her husband lovingly till his death, she was looking forward to a retirement enjoying her family and especially time with her grandchildren. But sadly, she was diagnosed with inoperable cancer and would die before she hoped to enjoy any of that retirement rest and family time.

And yet, writes Niebuhr, when he visited her he encountered a woman who was full of gratitude. She had been able to care for her husband and provide him with dignity to the last. She had provided a loving home for her girls and supported them throughout their growing years. Yes, she would have enjoyed having more years to enjoy a more restful time with family. But God had been good to her and had given her the strength and resilient love in her heart to fulfill her purpose.

She asked the young pastor to read to her especially the psalms of thanksgiving and to pray with her. The accent of the prayers was gratitude and she was at peace with the way things had turned out. So much of her life had been about choices in the face of so much she had

not chosen to be as it was. Life was not in any one's control. How would anyone find the strength and inspiration to make good choices and carry-on life's responsibilities with the courage, love and grace necessary? God had been with her all the way. And even though she had not been able to be involved at the church as much as she would have liked, she had done what she needed to do with God beside her all the way.

Wow! The young Niebuhr was empowered and uplifted visiting this woman. He drew strength from her and he needed such strength to face the anger and bitterness of the other woman in the same hospital wing. But there's something more Niebuhr took out of this experience as well. How well do we know ourselves? How would we end up being in the same situation as these women? Would we be like the one woman, full of anger, bitterness and despair? Or would we find our way to peace and gratitude, and see the sunlight for all the clouds?

What Niebuhr also began to wrestle with out of this experience had to do with prayer. What expectations do we have from our praying? Is there a certain focus to our prayers we must discern that will lead to a better outcome when the time of crisis hits, as it will for all of us in some way at some point? Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom.

In our first reading, Jesus teaches all about prayer. Once again, like in last week's sermon, the teaching is that praying with intention and persistence pays off. Jesus offers an illustration. An imaginary friend knocks on your door in the middle of the night. He needs some supplies for he has unexpected guests arriving. This is obviously before a time of cell phones, text messaging and 24/7 grocery shopping and delivery. Even though he's a friend, the last thing you need to be doing is having your sleep interrupted and having to get up and get together supplies. So, you tell your friend he must come back in the morning for everyone is asleep.

But this friend, who maybe won't stay a friend much longer 😊, just won't give up! He's persistent. So, because of his persistence you get up, turn the lights on and invite him into your kitchen where you get together whatever supplies you have. So it is with prayer, says Jesus. Keep at it. God will answer. Don't give up. "Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened..." even if the door is opened with some irritation 😊.

Ok, so what is it exactly that we receive in our asking and find in our searching? What door is opened for us in our knocking? The first thing Jesus says is that it will be something good. “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?” But then here’s the real kernel of the teaching: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give **the Holy Spirit** to those who ask?”

So here it is! What are people supposed to be praying for more than anything? The Holy Spirit. Why the Holy Spirit? Because the Holy Spirit is what we need in order to find the best path through a situation and get equipped with the right discernment, courage, groundedness and gratitude to pass through it. We often ask for something external – a cure, a resolution to the conflict, better weather, the sale to go through, safety and protection for our loved ones... The best answer we may often get, though, may not be so straightforward. It may be about how we are changed to best face whatever may come our way and the persons we will become to bless the world in return.

Whether we have one day left to live or a whole lifetime, how will we bless the world? What have we to receive? What treasure must we find? What door may open we were not necessarily knocking on or didn’t even know existed? Praying for the Holy Spirit covers a lot of bases. It’s expansive enough to include all the healing and blessings we’re looking for and much that we haven’t discovered we have yet to receive and find. Have you ever prayed for the Holy Spirit?

And this line of thinking is also inline with our second reading. In this case, though, there is distress in the praying... distress and struggle. Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane is among the most misunderstood passages in all of scripture. Jesus prays for a certain outcome, but then he also surrenders to God’s will. Jesus is stressed, afraid and anguished. He really doesn’t want to go through with what he anticipates will come: his arrest, torture and death. And so he prays for a different outcome even as he knows what the outcome will be if he goes through with it all.

But is this outcome God’s will? Here’s where the misunderstanding lies. Traditionally, this passage has been interpreted to mean that God’s will is that Jesus be crucified. Jesus came into the world in order to die on a cross because someone has to pay for the sin of collective humanity and only Jesus is the pure and righteous candidate. And being divine, he cannot ultimately die, so resurrection will come, along with forgiveness. I completely disagree with this theology.

Think about it. If God's will is that Jesus die and from the beginning, why all the stress, fear and anguish? Because the crucifixion is plan B. Plan A was Jesus' whole ministry aimed at inspiring the people and their leaders with a different vision, a vision of love rather than revenge against enemies, a vision of healing and reconciliation, which must include loads of compassion for the victims and capacious forgiveness for all the wrongs committed by gentile oppressors and religious authorities, tribe against tribe, class against class, men oppressing women, Jews against Samaritans, free folk enslaving the vulnerable and healthy folk blaming the sick for being sick, and on and on it goes.

If the people, along with their leaders embraced Jesus' vision, there would be no crucifixion. But the leadership were able to keep the anger, hate and despair fuelled in the people, and in the end, those who were not down and out and especially those in power, amassed the kind of opposition to Jesus that ensured he would die a humiliating death.

So, what should Jesus do? Run away? Give up? Or go forward in the name of a higher justice and love, living love as forgiveness for enemies and solidarity with the crucified to the last, entrusting his life to the God above him and in him who would raise him up? His prayer at Gethsemane is about receiving the inner strength, being empowered with the Holy Spirit, so that he be given the strength and courage to face his last and fiercest ordeal.

Even if the whole world rejects you and even if they trample on divine love to crush it, it must rise up again and again. And so, Jesus prays: not my will (which is to escape the whole ordeal), but yours be done (to die as he lived: in the name of love) ... not my will but yours be done. And so it happens, and so Christianity is born... Love will face the worst and rise up ever more brightly. That's the victory.

OK, so what's the teaching on prayer here? You can't control what people will do. You can spread love all you like and those ready and open-hearted will absorb it and be changed. Love is never wasted. However, we are also vulnerable because people, our bodies, and the natural currents of the earth are not in our control. Prayer to God is not a control mechanism because God's movement in the world is not about controlling the world to anyone's favour because they pray. No.

Prayer is about healing and transformation that happens as love flows. I pray for healing and love flows through me. As I find my ground, my peace, my reconciliation with what is and what will be, not only my spirit, but my body is best positioned for healing to happen in and through me. The more I'm grounded and at peace, the more healing energies can flow in

and through me. The less I'm blocked by anger, hate, denial, bad stress and anguish, the less love's healing energies can flow through me.

But how will healing come? Jesus didn't avoid crucifixion. Some people experience physical healing or a better health outcome through what prayer does in them. Others may still suffer and die but they already begin to experience transformation and resurrection in the peace they discover even before they die, and they leave a beautiful legacy for those left behind. Healing and transformation come in many rich and varied ways. Praying for the Holy Spirit, for God's healing will, is praying expansively for any and all the ways divine love-energy may pass through us.

Pray to God, whether you think of God in more person-like terms as Father or Mother, or whether you pray to an expansive presence that is love flowing through the universe as an energy ready to enter open and prayerful hearts. Pray for healing, pray for transformation, pray for God's will of love to be done for all your fear and doubt... and pray for the Holy Spirit! Amen.