

“A Praying Congregation: Answered and Unanswered Prayer”  
Luke 11:5-13

Whenever I think of prayer, I think of the movie clip from “Bruce Almighty” where Bruce is given the job of God and he is trying to answer prayers: <https://youtu.be/n0cG11ITS1E>. While this is funny, it hints at the way we often think of God listening to prayer.

In her book *A Praying Congregation*, Jane Vennard tells of a time when she got a serious case of West Nile Virus which has no cure. She wrote, “As I lay in bed with a high fever and in terrible pain, I knew I was being prayed for...I did not expect these prayers to cause God to heal me. What I did know and trust was that God’s intention was for healing and wholeness and that God was interacting with me and all those who were participating in my care...In the same period many people died as a result of the virus. Did God cure me and not others? Were the prayers of my community more effective than the prayers offered by other communities?”

When we suffer, we reach out for help and one of the ways we do that is through prayer to God. Yet sometimes we feel that God is either absent or not listening to us. When reading a scripture like the one for today from Luke 11, we are left thinking that all we have to do is ask things of God and we will get them. Let’s listen to what Jesus said according to the witness of Luke 11:5-13:

<sup>5</sup> And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.” <sup>7</sup> And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” <sup>8</sup> I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

<sup>9</sup> ‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>11</sup> Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup> Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? <sup>13</sup> 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 him!’

Jesus seems to be saying that all we have to do, is persist in prayer and then God will give us what we need. But our experience seems to suggest that persistence does not always pay off. Even the disciples of Jesus didn’t have it easy. Their lives were filled with challenges and many of them ended up being persecuted for their faith. Prayer didn’t seem to exempt them from suffering.

I will share with you a few of my thoughts to help us along the way of looking at intercessory prayer.

First, Jesus' main focus of life is doing the will of God and so prayer was about always seeking to align his life with the vision and values of the kingdom of God. In chapter 12:31, Jesus invites his followers to seek first the kingdom of God, "Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." The kingdom of God according to Jesus was not something separate from who we are. In Luke 17:20-21, "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; <sup>21</sup> nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.'"

Much like remembering that we are a part of God and not separate from God, prayer is about reconnecting and realigning our lives with God and thus seeing the world through the eyes of the eternal reality of life. Last week someone shared a reflection with me about prayer when he was sharing the words of one of the Russian Orthodox priests who urged people to pray for Russia's victory, "Today is the time to mobilize our spiritual forces to ask the Lord, the Most Pure Queen of Heaven, that from above power be given to our people to stop the enemy and protect our borders, which means preserving the independence and freedom of Russia." This is a clear example of how prayer can be so misunderstood and misused. Even when we are praying for good causes, it is easy to forget that even when things turn out badly, God can still bring healing and wholeness to the situation.

Second, since we are a part of God, our prayer, which is a conversation with God, is about staying aware and connected to God in all circumstances. Barbara Brown Taylor once told the story of her seven-year-old step-granddaughter who refused to make a wish while blowing out the candles on her birthday cake. "I don't know why I keep doing this, my wishes never come true. Last year I wished my best friend would not move away but she did. This year, I want to wish that my mommy and daddy will get back together again..." When she was told that was not going to happen, the little girl thought that birthday wishes were useless. Barbara Brown Taylor likened her granddaughter's wishing to prayer... particularly when prayers do not seem to be heard by God. She wrote, "prayer works because it keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It is how we bother God and it is how God bothers us back." Taylor also notes that, "The problem, I think, is that divine response to prayer is one of those beauties that remain in the eye of the beholder. What sounds like an answer to one person sounds like silence to another. What seems like a providentially big fish to someone registers as blind luck for someone else. The meaning we give to what happens in our lives is our final, inviolable freedom. Only you can say whether God answered you. If you have any sense, you will ask someone with more experience than you to help you decide what the answer means, but even then, the choice is yours. Are you still waiting for God to answer you, or is your life the answer you have been seeking, hiding in plain view?"

The third insight comes from Jane Vennard and the shift in her understanding of God. Her faith journey has led her away from a God that is up in the sky controlling the world to the God of Jesus Christ who is an active participant in creation. This has meant a shift from seeing God as intervening to seeing God as participating in all of life and intending

goodness for all while empowering us to help others and to be the hands and feet of Christ. This means that God can use us to be the answer to prayer when we care and help each other. It also means that prayer is about cooperating with God in all circumstances. Vennard writes, “an image that has been helpful for me in trying to understand prayers of intercession comes from Douglas Steere, a Quaker philosopher. Steere likened the process of intercessory prayer to the lowering of a threshold. He wrote that when intercessory prayers are offered, the threshold in the other person is lowered ‘to make the besieging love of God...slightly more visible and more inviting.’ The threshold that Steere refers to is our resistance, often unconscious, to experiencing God’s loving presence. Steere also wrote that when we pray for others and the world, our own thresholds are lowered and we become more available to God’s besieging love. Therefore, intercessory prayer affects the hearts and lives of others while transforming our own hearts. The prayer does not bring God to the person or the situation, for God is already there.”

So today we are invited to follow the commission of Jesus to ask God, search for God’s will, and to knock on the door of God’s love, trusting that God is ever present with us and calling us forth in love.

We will end with cupped hands prayer.

### Cupped Hands

Cup your hands near your heart and imagine a person or place or situation you’d like to pray for. It could be someone you love, or your pet, or a place you care about, or something you’re worried about. Take a moment to hold whatever you are praying for close to your heart. Pause

When you are ready, stretch your cupped hands out in front of you in the space shared between you and God. Imagine you and God together loving the person, place or situation you’re praying for. Pause

When you are ready stretch your arms to the ceiling lifting what you are praying for to the light of Christ. Then release your arms to your sides, releasing what you are praying for into the wellbeing of the Spirit.

When you are ready cup your hands near your heart and imagine another person, place or situation you want to pray for...repeat the sequence.

Before you close spend a moment in quiet, arms over your heart loving God and being loved by God. Then say amen.