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PRAY SHAMELESSLY

How many of you are praying a lot these days?

- How many of you are praying for our country, our world, our police officers, our cities...for just so many things?
    - How many of you feeling like giving up because the prayers just don't seem to be working?
      - That's how I've been feeling, too, lately. "Why pray at all?"
  - And if you're not there, you've probably had moments like that:
    - moments when life seems so overwhelming, if not unbearable;
    - when GOD seems incredibly far away;
    - and when you can't help but wonder why in the world should I bother to pray?
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It would be easy today to preach on JESUS' encouragement to pray persistently.

- Like the little boy wanted a baby brother, so he prayed persistently every night, but after weeks, he finally gave up.
    - A few months later, mom had triplets.
    - "It's a good thing I stopped when I did," he said.
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I could talk about praying persistently, but that's what many of us have been doing already.

Or I could teach about how to pray and talk about THE FIVE P'S OF THE LORD'S PRAYER:

- Person: Our FATHER in heaven, holy is YOUR name.
- Program: YOUR kingdom come. YOUR will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
- Provision: Give us today our daily bread and forgive us as we forgive others.
- Protection: Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil.
- Promise: The kingdom, the power, and the glory are and always will be YOURS.

But somehow that doesn't seem to me to be what we need today, either.

- Because I suspect many of you are asking questions like:
  - Does GOD answer prayer?
  - If yes, then why are some of my prayers not answered?
  - Even if GOD does answer prayer, can I really pray for anything—healing, wealth, relationships—and expect GOD to answer?
  - And if GOD doesn't seem to answer, does that mean that I prayed wrong?

To be honest, these questions are extremely difficult to answer, at least without a somewhat simplistic explanation like, "GOD always answers, but sometimes the answer is 'no'."

- And that's not really what JESUS says here.
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So let me suggest something a little different this morning.

- Let me suggest that rather than talking about how prayer works (or doesn't work) in relationship to GOD, that we consider how prayer works *in relationship to us*.

I suspect that most of us think of prayer as a rather passive activity.

- Not passive in the sense that I don't believe what I pray or don't care deeply about that for which I'm praying.
- Rather I think that we can be passive in praying in that we pray, and then wait around for GOD to do something,
  - for GOD to fix it or not, or to say "yes" or "no" or "wait."
  - We are passive in that we tell GOD what we want done and then wait for GOD to take care of it.

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A man was in desperate straits, and prayed day after day for GOD to let him win the lottery.

- He never did, and he died and went to heaven.
  - Coming before the throne of GOD, he said, "LORD, I prayed faithfully for YOU to let me win the lottery. Why didn't YOU?"
  - GOD answered, "If you wanted to win the lottery, you at least had to buy a ticket."

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What if prayer isn't simply a request that I send to GOD, but rather is part of a more active and full relationship with GOD?

- What if prayer is less like putting a message in a bottle and throwing it into the ocean,
  - and more like the regular conversation we have with others with whom we are in relationship.
- In Paul's letter to Timothy, he encourages him to "pray without ceasing."
  - I don't think that means spending all day every day sitting with your hands folded and eyes closed.
  - I think, rather, that Paul imagined that our whole lives—our thinking and very being—should be offered to GOD as a prayer.

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There's one word in today's reading from Luke that I believe supports this.

- The word is *anaedeia* in the Greek, and most translations, translate it as "persistence".
- But a better translation would be the one in our translation today: "shameless audacity."
  - I think JESUS is saying that our prayers to GOD ought to be bold, daring, and unfailingly confident.
  - Praying shamelessly reflects a certainty that GOD will act and that GOD might even act through me.

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How might we act, really live our lives, if our prayers were offered to GOD confidently, trusting that GOD will respond so much more generously than any earthly parent could.

- Verse 3 of Psalm 138 says, "When I called, YOU answered me; YOU greatly emboldened me."
- Perhaps if we had that kind of confidence, we wouldn't just sit back and wait for GOD to answer,
  - but would start moving out, getting to work, and actually begin living into the reality of that for which we've prayed.

Verse 8 of Psalm 138 says, "The LORD will vindicate me; YOUR love, LORD, endures forever."

- Again, that sense of surety, that belief that GOD not only will but actually is in the process of answering our prayers, and sending us out to accomplish the outcomes for which we have asked.
  - And as we do that, we become part of GOD's affirmative answer to our prayer.
    - It's like going out and actually buying a lottery ticket.
    - (And, by the way, I don't think winning the lottery is the answer GOD has in mind for most or even any of us.)

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So, let me offer some suggestions of what I'm talking about.

- Rather than just praying for someone who is lonely, go and visit.
- Rather than praying for an end to violence, protest when police use unnecessary force or go visit the police station and tell officers that you're grateful for their service.
- Rather than praying for a particular political outcome, write to those who represent you and campaign for the candidates whose platform supports that goal.
- Rather than praying for an end to the labeling that creates division in our society, challenge those who use labels to simply refer to others as "people" or "fellow citizens".
  - This is what I mean to pray shameless and to believe that GOD is answering your prayer—even through you.

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I know this doesn't answer all of our questions about prayer and it certainly doesn't ease the frustration when we feel our prayers seem not to be heard.

- But it does invite us to imagine that as we live into the future we pray for, we are in fact praying shamelessly.
- As we work for the dignity and rights of others, we are praying shamelessly.
- As we comfort those in need, visit those who are imprisoned, feed those who are hungry, we are praying shamelessly,
  - and perhaps are even being used by GOD as the answer to another person's—or even our own prayer.

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Certainly, prayer is the words we say alone in moments of thanksgiving or desperation.

- At times prayer is the words we share with others, gathered in the worship center or around the hospital bed.
  - But at other times, prayer is the action we take and the work we do as we try to live into and even bring about those things for which we've prayed.

All of this is praying shamelessly—praying with the confidence that the GOD who came in JESUS understands our hurts and disappointments because that same GOD took them on.

- Because GOD in JESUS not only endured the life we live, but also died the death that awaits us, and was raised again to show that even death does not have the last word,
  - and that with this GOD, all things are possible.

And so, we pray with confidence, trusting that if we know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will GOD give us as we embrace GOD's HOLY SPIRIT and live, as well as speak, our prayers.

- There are so many people who need our prayers—prayers understood as words, actions, and our very lives.
- There are so many people who are dying and don't need to.
- There are so many people who are lonely and would welcome friendship.
- There are so many people who are excluded and are waiting to be invited in.
  - So, in closing let me simply say to you:
    - "Christians, pray shamelessly."