

## Prayer School

July 27, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Luke 11: 1-13*

I've not yet been here a year, and already I am going to reuse a story from a previous sermon. Sorry, but I just don't know any better way to enter into this topic of prayer. Tony Campolo, a pastor and professor, says that one day a woman and her husband walked into the church he was serving, and Tony was quite surprised. The woman had come often enough, but the husband had not been in church for ages, because he was angry with God. He had cancer and he knew he was going to be dead soon, and he hated God for letting it happen. He wanted to see his grandchildren grow up more than anything. At night he would lie in bed and curse God. It was horrible. And the angrier he got toward God, the meaner he was to everyone around him. It was unbearable to be in the same room with him. His nastiness just kept getting worse and worse and worse.

One day, after the man's death, the woman said to Tony, "Do you remember that Sunday when we came to church and you laid hands on him and prayed for him? When we walked out of church I knew something was different. I could feel it. He was a different person. The last three weeks of our lives were the best three weeks we ever had together. We talked and laughed. We even sang hymns with each other. It was a good, good time." She paused, then added, "Tony, he wasn't cured, but he was healed."

Prayer is a deep mystery. People have prayed for, well, for as long as there have been people, but no one can say what is really going on in prayer. In simple terms, prayer is based in the idea that we silly, transitory bags of star-dust can somehow be in communication with God most high, the one from whom all things came to be, and in whom we live and move and have our being. A mystery indeed. It was amazing to me to find again this week how many writers, pastors, scholars, and commentators say, yeah, prayer is one of the hardest things to preach about. The basic advice is to be honest, and don't feel you need to wrap it all up in a nice neat package.

I tend to think believe that prayer is rather like nitroglycerin. It can blow you to bits, so to speak, and it can heal your heart. Prayer can be deeply disappointing, and it can be a source of life. I'll say a little something here that I hope leads to the latter, rather than the former, that helps you lean toward the life-giving way of prayer, rather than the blowing to bits way.

First, what are we talking about? Prayer. Apart from all the theological baggage, the English word is rather simple: it just means to ask for something, or perhaps to ask earnestly, to beg, to entreat. But that definition really fails to get at the mystery that is prayer in the Bible. The Greek word is *pros-euxomi*, which at its basic root means to switch out ideas, one for the other. In human religion that usually means asking for some change in the Divine will, putting the human will into the Divine mind. But in the Bible, that's flipped, and prayer actually means to switch out human will and bring in the Divine will. There is a reason deep focused breathing is often an entry into prayer. It's out with the old will, in with the new.

In that sense, the classic scenes of kneeling at one's bedside to pray before sleep, or bowing one's head in prayer before a meal, or the praying we do here in worship each week, all of that is real and true prayer, but prayer is so much more. Times of intentionally focused attention are important and

wonderful, but perhaps we get closer to the heart of prayer when we remember the line in 1 Thessalonians that says we are to “pray without ceasing.” That points to the hope that our lives can be infused with prayer, infused with the constant willingness to welcome the will of God into our lives. It is good and right that we memorize and often recite the Lord’s Prayer, but it is rather hard to pray those words without ceasing. Perhaps the essence of constant prayer is captured in some other words that come from Jesus, “Not my will, but your will be done.” Maybe that can be our constant prayer.

But back to the nitroglycerin. Sadly, I think prayer can mess us up, and this is nothing new. God’s people have been struggling with this for millennia. In Matthew, Jesus teaches:

“When you pray, don’t be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the meeting places and on the street corners. They do this just to look good. I can assure you that they already have their reward. When you pray, go into a room alone and close the door. Pray to your Father in private. He knows what is done in private, and he will reward you. When you pray, don’t talk on and on as people do who don’t know God. They think God likes to hear long prayers. Don’t be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask.”

Clearly some people had taken the good gift of prayer and turned it into something that drove them further away from God, rather than brought them closer.

In the Old Testament we see the same thing and the situation seems utterly dire. A common theme of the prophets is that through prayer and worship, people were well, making God angry. Amos says:

*I, the Lord, hate and despise  
your religious celebrations  
and your times of worship.*

*I won’t accept your offerings  
or animal sacrifices—  
not even your very best.  
No more of your noisy songs!  
I won’t listen  
when you play your harps.  
But let justice and fairness  
flow like a river  
that never runs dry.*

Get prayer wrong – by using it to control or appease God, or hide from God what is really going on – and God can get pretty angry.

But that was more than 2000 years ago. The way to say the same thing today is that prayer hurts us when we try to use prayer to get what we want out of God. There is no harm in a seven-year-old praying for a pony, but hopefully we grow from there, for there is harm in a 17-year-old praying for a Porsche, or a 47-year-old praying for a second home in Puerto Vallarta. Be careful what you pray for. Whatever prayer is, it is not a way to enrich ourselves, and God isn’t too keen on us making the attempt.

But it’s easy to point out the problem with thinking of God as a divine ATM. God loves us and is never

going to respond to prayer that would in reality only distance us even further from God. But, of course, most of us probably aren't praying for cars or vacation homes to fall into our laps. What about praying for what we want, when what we want is good? What about praying for healing? For safety? For companionship? For hope or courage?

The way the church has traditionally approached this can be seen in the fact that we are taught always to pray "in the name of Jesus." Have you ever wondered why we always do that? Most prayers end with some version of those words: "in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen." Those words remind us that one of the ways Jesus comes to our aid is as a mediator with that part of the Trinity that Jesus called his heavenly father. We Protestants pride ourselves on praying directly to God, not believing in the intervention of Mary or the saints, but the way we understand prayer is that our prayers do still pass through the filter, you might say, of Jesus himself. The Bible is clear that most of the time we have little idea of what we are doing when we pray, we have little idea of what to pray for, because we have little idea of what, in God's eye, is actually good for us. But Jesus takes the bumbblings and mumblings of our prayers, he takes the true and deep longings of our hearts, and turns them into something intelligible to God. John Calvin said that "we pray through the mouth of Jesus."

So it is good and right for us to pray for healing, safety, companionship, hope and courage, and much else besides. If there is any element of self-centeredness to it, Jesus will filter it out, and God will hear the same words from us that God heard from Jesus, "Not my will, but thy will be done."

But back to the nitroglycerin again. If prayer can be bad for us, there is no doubt it can also heal our hearts. But how? There are at least two important things here. Prayer can heal our hearts because by the very act of praying we are taking the single most important first step toward well-being. We are acknowledging that our well-being is indivisibly intertwined with God. Indeed, praying is a radical action, because we are acknowledging that we don't have all the answers, that we don't even know what's good for us, that if we are to find well-being in life, it is to be found in drawing closer to God, or better, welcoming the God who is always drawing closer to us, and exchanging our will for God's will.

But there is more to prayer than that, more to it than the salubrious effect of acknowledging that our good is bound up with God. The truth is that God answers prayer.

Karl Barth, whom I take to be one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, said: "God yields to human petitions...he alters his intentions and follows the bent of our prayers." (Karl Barth, *Prayer* - 50th anniversary edition - p. 14) It's a striking claim. God yields to human petitions...he alters his intentions and follows the bent of our prayers. How can we believe that without lapsing into thinking of prayer as a divine ATM, as a way to work magic and control the world around us, as if God was a little genie in a bottle ready to give us three wishes, no matter what they were?

Well, Barth sees the danger with such a strong statement, but his response is to make us consider how it is that God answers prayer. The true longing of every prayer is that we might live and move and have our being ever more fully within the love of God. We don't know how to ask for it, we aren't very good at recognizing what is in the depths of our hearts, but as St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are not at rest Lord, until they find their rest in thee." God answers prayer, because if we actually knew ourselves, every prayer would sound like "God, you know me better than I know myself, help me know your will, be with me in my times of need, help me follow your way. Not my will, but thy will be done." So God answers prayer by working for our greatest well-being, whether we are aware of what that well-being

entails or not.

God loves us too much not to answer our prayers, and God loves us too much not to answer our prayers with the fullness of God's love.

So, good people, pray. Pray as Jesus taught. Pray the Lord's prayer. Pray without ceasing. Pray not my will, but your will be done. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

