

"The Difference Between Need and Want"

II Chronicles 6:12-17; Luke 11:1-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 25, 2015 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

An ocean liner crossing the Atlantic ran into a terrific storm and the ship began to sway with the rough sea. An elderly lady became quite concerned and sought out the captain. "Excuse me, captain, but is there any danger?" "No, madam," he replied, "not yet. The crew is still swearing, but if they start to pray, put on your life jacket!"

Well, the sailors in this story are like many people—they only turn to prayer when everything else has failed. It is considered the last resource, the only available recourse. It's even something a non-religious person might do, on the grounds that it can't hurt and nothing else has done any good. So, why not try it?

Prayer doesn't seem to come naturally for many people. We have a tendency to be self-conscious about it, or even to feel a bit foolish, when we hear ourselves uttering such words.

When we're asked to offer prayer in a group setting, especially when it comes without warning, we're apt to go blank. Our mind hurriedly rushes back to what is stored there, and brings up things like "Now I lay me down to sleep" or "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food." We know we can't use these, so panicky we start out, "Dear Lord ..." That's the easy part; it's what comes after this beginning that's the problem.

We usually hem haw around a bit, then finally come up with some words, any words. After we finish, we may have no idea at all as to what we've said, much less know if it was appropriate. The only positive thing may be it's over and that with such an inept response, perhaps we'll never be asked again.

If you occasionally have trouble with praying, take some consolation from the fact that you're in good company. The disciples needed some help with this as well, as we see in our New Testament reading this morning: "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'"

It was a sincere question they posed. They saw him regularly in prayer and they wished to be able to do likewise. And so they asked him directly, "teach us to pray." He knew how, and they very much wanted to learn. They knew there was a technique which they hadn't mastered yet. They needed to understand the form it should take. After all, this was Almighty God they were to address, and so not just any words would suffice.

"Jesus said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, may your holy name be honored; may your kingdom come. Give us day by day the food we need. Forgive us our sins, just as we would forgive those who do us wrong. And do not bring us to times of hard testing.'"

That's all he said. Certainly there had to be more to it than that. Why this prayer was almost like a conversation, and it was addressed to the creator of the universe with the Aramaic

word "Abba," which meant father. This was too simple and direct. Possibly they misunderstood Jesus or had failed to hear all of his words. But no, that's what he said in response to their question.

Then he told them a parable. It was about a man who has a guest arriving late. He finds he has no food in the house and is unable to show normal hospitality. So he does the only thing he can; he goes to a friend's home to borrow enough bread to meet his social obligations. When he arrives, however, he finds the family already in bed, which is to say lying together on a floor mat. The friend responds from the inside that the door is already barred and that to let him in would require the whole family to be disturbed. Yet, the neighbor persists and finally gets what he came for largely because he is determined not to go away empty-handed. His persistence results in getting what he came after.

Jesus is not saying that God answers prayer only after being badgered into it. The lesson here is made in the typical Jewish argument of lesser to greater. Which is to say that if a sleepy man finally accedes to continual request, how much more is God, who created us, likely to respond. We also should not be reluctant to keep putting our needs before God. "And so I say to you," advises Jesus, "Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Now this sounds good, but the passage may also prove troublesome. For haven't we asked at times, even repeatedly, and not received? What then are we to make of these words of Jesus? Do we just dismiss them and don't worry about it, or do we acknowledge that prayer doesn't always work?

Fulton Ousler, who wrote a number of best-selling religious novels, tells this little story. One rainy afternoon a small boy bounced a ball in the living room, although he had been told not to. As it careened around the room, the ball knocked a valuable cup off a shelf and it broke into a dozen pieces. No one was in the house at the time, so the frightened boy scooped up all the pieces and hid them in a drawer.

He was shaking at the thought of his punishment, but then he had an idea. He had been taught by his mother that he should pray if he wanted something to come true. Since he desired that the cup would be restored more than anything else in the world, he prayed hard all day and night for a miracle. When he got up the next morning and looked in the drawer, the cup was still in fragments. That man, Ousler wrote, told this story for the rest of his life and he always ended it by saying, "When people pray, nothing happens whatsoever."

The problem here is that he prayed to God as a kind of celestial sorcerer who could magically get him out of a tight spot. When the cup didn't come back together again, a six-year-old lost his faith in God. Perhaps that can be excused in someone so young. Yet, as an adult, he never matured in his understanding of prayer and still approached it as a child.

Contrast that story with an experience of Mahatma Gandhi, who said that he never made even a minor decision without prayer. Gandhi wrote, "There was a law directed against Indians [living] in South Africa and I had come there to oppose it. My ship was met by a hostile mob, and I was advised to stay on board for the sake of my physical safety, for the crowd had come with the announced intention of lynching me. I went ashore nevertheless. I

was stoned and kicked and beaten a good deal; but I had not prayed for safety, but for the courage to face the mob, and that courage came and did not fail me."

Gandhi's prayer is an example of praying for the possible, of asking for the correct thing. Surely it is within God's power to be a miracle worker, but God seldom answers prayer in that kind of way. There is a reason why the world operates by a complexity of natural laws that must stand even when they go against our individual needs. There is an order to life which serves the greater good of humanity by being so regular. Often, too, what appears to be best to us, may not be best at all in the long run.

Of course the broken cup was not going to magically come back together, no matter how much prayer was offered. It asked for the wrong thing. Gandhi prayed for what he knew God could do to allow him to face his future with courage. His prayer was answered.

Isn't this similar to what Jesus prays in the garden at Gethsemane? "My father, if it is possible, take this cup away from me. Not what I want, but what must be. If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done." Clearly It's a desire not to suffer, but it also recognizes a greater wish to serve. It is a prayer to have the strength and courage to do what needs to be done. Eleven of the disciples fall asleep out there with him and the twelfth betrays him; but Jesus is steadfast in his duty, which is his greater prayer. That prayer is answered fully.

The first thing we might take away from our Scriptures today is that we should differentiate between what we actually need and what we simply want. Then we should ask for the possible and not the impossible. Finally, we shouldn't be afraid to pray more than once for what we think we need. If that desire cannot stand up under the scrutiny of repeated petitions, maybe it's not so important after all.

The truth is that God knows our needs even before we ask; but ask we must. When we open ourselves to God through prayer, we evidence our faith and the sincerity of our longings. When we open ourselves to God through prayer, we are more ready to discover an answer in whatever manner it may come.