

Why Do We Pray?

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Why do we pray? I mean, what is that we expect to happen when we pray. For most of us, we often fall into the trap of telling God how we want the world to be. Heal that disease, fix that body, find my lost keys, do the thing I want and do it immediately. Now there's nothing wrong with laying it all out before God; but, it becomes a problem when we expect that the answer to prayer is getting our way. That puts us on the Throne and tells God that we'd rather be the Ruler of the Universe than let God be God; the consequences of our decisions being irrelevant to us as long as we get our way. With attitudes like this so prevalent in our prayer lives, is it any wonder that Jesus told us, who act like children, to start our prayers by appealing to our Divine parent?!

You've heard it said that the answer to prayer is either "yes, no, or maybe later." The problem with this way of thinking is that it reduces God not just to a computer but a computer that's running Windows 95! No matter the input of words, God outputs a one, a zero, or a loading bar that you never quite know if it'll reach the end or just hang there. It also means that if we don't get the result we want, it means we failed to enter the right command. We should have prayed harder, or longer, or with more people. If God doesn't work like a genie in a lamp, then it's our fault for not making the wish with exactly the right words. Clearly, this is not how God works, it's not how prayer works, and it's not how we are supposed to work.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus provides another way. Not only does He give us the language of a prayer that avoids these issues, but also He teaches us to re-frame our expectations of how God answers prayer. God doesn't respond with a binary reply; God shows up. Jesus says that God's response to prayer is to send the Holy Spirit. What the Holy Spirit does when She arrives is not the answer to prayer – the answer is Her coming in the first place. So, we need to learn to expect, to look for, the Holy Spirit responding with being present when we pray for a person or a situation. And, we need to be ready to hear from Her that She is going to show up by having us bring Her into the situation we are praying for.

I would like to tell you a story about what this looks like when it happens; but, I first must warn you that this story is tough to tell and I know that it will be tough to hear. It, however, is beautiful and powerful, and is about a time when the Holy Spirit showed up in response to prayer. Last summer, I worked as a chaplain at a large hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee. An experience like this is required of nearly all seminarians in our tradition; and, this experience brought me to the bedside of people who had experienced every form of bodily trauma. I sat with car accident victims, prayed with motorcycle accident victims, prayed for the staff working on a patient who had fallen over a high waterfall, and so much more. But this particular Saturday morning, I got a call to come and do an emergency Baptism. Now, I had never done a Baptism. I had trained for this day; I was technically prepared; but, I still doubted that I, a lay person at the time, was ready to be the one to bring a Sacrament to another person. Wasn't this supposed to be reserved for a priest to do?

But, with no time to waste, I grabbed my Holy Water off my desk and headed to the elevator. When I arrived at the right floor, I presented myself to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and met the most beautiful family. I met a father and mother who had just given birth to twin boys. They were born prematurely, on purpose, because there was a complication. One of the brothers had been developing on the normal schedule until about two weeks before; the other brother was well behind on development and had major issues with his lungs been underdeveloped. This family had made the impossible decision to bring both of their children into the world so that one might live and knowing that the other would be born alive but that he would not survive the day. That was who I was called to Baptize.

When I spoke with the family, they said that they weren't church-goers; in fact, they said, they hadn't been since they both were small children. But, the mother told me, when the nurse asked if they

wanted their son Baptized, something compelled them. They didn't know why; but, they felt like this was something important that they had to do – and so, they were very glad that I had been called. They then asked what a Baptism entailed; so, I laid out the simple act of pouring water upon his head and saying the words. As I explained it, though, every fiber of my being told me that this family needed more than that. They called me here to pray with them. What could I possibly say, though, that could capture the extreme reality of giving birth to a child and losing another all in the same morning?! My mind was blank. I didn't know where to begin. Everyone was in place for this Baptism and they were looking at me to start.

I had to become calm. I took a few slow breaths; and, without the thought even entering into my mind, these words poured forth: “Lord, open our lips, and our mouths shall proclaim your praise. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.” From there, I don't remember every word that came forth; but, the Holy Spirit had taken over. I had invited Her in. I know I recounted the Scriptures: the Spirit hovering over the waters at creation, the passage of Moses and the Israelites from slavery into freedom through the sea on dry land, the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. But, it was when I got to paraphrasing St. Paul that things changed. When I said, “And we are Baptized with Jesus and are therefore one with Him in His Body. But if we are in the Body, then we are united to Christ in His death. And if we are united to Him in death, then we are united to Him in the Resurrection!” a peace descended upon the room at that point. The father stopped crying, the staff were drawn into that moment; after I said those words I looked into the mother's eyes and where there just a moment before was only grief there was now also hope. It was in this moment that I reached in to Baptize their son.

The prayer did not prevent his death; he died eight minutes after being Baptized. But prayer brought peace, and peace that passes all understanding, to a family that was grieving. It brought life where there had been only death. Hope where there had been only sorrow. The Holy Spirit showed up and changed the world because She was invited in prayer. That's why we pray!

So, go ahead and pray for your lost car keys, for that parking spot up front, or even for the sick to be healed. But know that the answer to those, and all, prayers is not the finding of the keys, or the parking spot, or even the bodily healing if that comes to be. The answer to prayer is the Holy Spirit showing up. The answer is that Peace that passes all understanding that keeps our hearts and minds in the knowledge and Love of God washing over the situation we are praying for. The answer to prayer is God walking with us through the toughest days we can imagine. And since we need that kind of peace, that kind of freedom from anxiety, more than ever, we must be a people who pray. We must be a people who invite the Holy Spirit into the world, into our world. We must invite Her in and then be ready to go if She sends us out to bring Her into the world. And, if ever we don't know where to begin, may I suggest, “Lord, open our lips, and our mouths shall proclaim your praise!”

~The Rev. Dr. Derek J. Quinn, Deacon