

“Outstretched Arms of Love”

Moving Outward through Petitionary Prayer

The Seventh Sermon in the Series *Perspectives on Prayer*

1 Corinthians 13; Deuteronomy 9:25-29

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I.

An ordained Minister of the Word and Sacrament sits in the corner of a local coffee shop conversing prayerfully with God. The pastor is relieved not to actually see God in the form of George Burns or Charlton Heston, but glad to nonetheless sense God's living presence. So the clergyman asks, "Lord, why do I need to tell you what I need in prayer?" Somewhat expectedly, she discerns God saying in reply, "Because I love you, my child." She knows this, but feels a need (born of her seminary training) to intellectually wrangle on. "Yes, for that I am forever thankful," comes her next contribution to the conversation, "but You are all-knowing. You know my heart inside and out, you know what I truly need even before I do. Why do I need to tell You what you already know? Surely You will act with love and mercy whether I speak to You or not of my needs." She waits for the reply, feeling little beads of spiritual sweat pouring down the sides of her soul. Silence. She sips more coffee, touches her open Bible a few times, questions her own line of questioning. More silence.

About forty minutes and three saucers full of ground up caffeinated bean juice later, she detects a whisper. "My dear child," it says, "we are family. You and I ... we have a unique, tight-knit relationship. It's one born of the love I personally bestowed upon your being. Loving relationships, most especially the one we share together, need good two-way communication. True enough, my actions are divinely determined with respect to entire universes in my keep. I will act as I will act, which needs to always remain somewhat of a mystery (lest you start to believe you possess or control my power!) But this does not mean for one millisecond that our relationship is one of those necessary but annoying One-Way streets you human beings have constructed. I do have dominion, but I also desire dialogue. You didn't enjoy not hearing back from me, right? Nor do I enjoy when I do not hear from you."

II.

Late one night, after yet another wild show, the heavily tattooed and body pierced songwriter and lead singer of a hardcore rock band pauses instead of passes out (for once) underneath the heavens. He takes note of how the stars outshine his own

overblown superstar ego. They seem to dissect him in a most soul-stirring way. They call him to some sense of homecoming long absent since the days of growing up with his preacher dad. Totally sobered in that starlight, he begins to pen the words to a new song, writing, "I looked up at the sky tonight, to see Your face and feel Your presence now. I need You here right now. I came from a lonely place, the windows closed on my darkest hour now. I need You here right now. 'Cause You won't leave me lonely. 'Cause I can't go on. You won't leave me broken, in a world that's not my home." (Josey Scott of the band Saliva). More words like this pour out in the shadow light of the stars -- building a highway between his sin-sick heart and God's holy heart. So much so, the collection of songs, that become his band's first non-rated "R" CD receive the Christ tinted title "Blood-Stained Love Story."

III.

In the middle of the day, a stay-at-home mom pauses from daily chores in order to approach her Lord in prayer. A life-long and self-dubbed "devout" Christian, she speaks softly but aloud, saying, "Most gracious God, heavenly Father, eternal in heavens, Alpha and Omega ... I hesitate to bother You with such petty details of my life. But I'm tired. My spirit is sagging even more than my aging skin. I need energy, some new joy. If You, according to Your most glorious, everlasting, wise, powerful, and omniscient will, would see fit, please grant these things to a humble soul such a myself. Oh, I do hesitate to ask. I'm just a sinful little speck on the spacious screen of Your sacredness. I'm a sinner, of the same idolatrous heart as any and all mayhem makers. I'm not worth Your time. But I read in Your Word of how You care for even the smallest sparrows who have fallen from their nest. My nest, oh, Lord, feels like it is falling. So, I pray, dear Jesus, if it be your glorious, everlasting, wise, powerful and omniscient will, please hold it up."

Overhearing his mom's petition from the stairwell of the family home, the ten year old son wonders why on earth talking to God needs to be so complicated. He is confused, for he, in fact, learned from Sunday School that people should approach God with faith like a child. He suppresses the urge to run to his mom and instruct her to simply say to God, "Daddy, I've got a boo-boo. Please make it better."

IV.

This is the seventh sermon in my series “Perspectives on Prayer,” based largely on Richard Foster’s interpretation of classic Christian spiritual disciplines. In my first two sermons, we considered together how prayer helps us seek the inner transformation we all need. The three following were focused on how prayer helps us grow spiritually intimate with God. The most recent sermon started the final section that continues today. That sermon, on healing prayer, like today’s message on petitionary prayer, intends to emphasize how prayer enables us to answer the call to ministry. As such, petition is addressed before intercession, because if we aren’t comfortable asking God for what we need then we are most likely not comfortable asking God for what other people need.

As the opening vignettes hopefully illustrated, however, making personal petition isn’t as obvious and easy a thing as it may seem to be. We can get caught up in intellectual arguments about the power of God and whether or not we lowly beings can or even should try actually tapping into it. We can get caught up totally ignoring God for long periods of time, only to return when light from beyond us pierces our inner darkness as surely as stars in the night sky. We can get trapped in tongue-twister petitions, more concerned about how to properly address God than with expressing the content of our soulful desire. Personally, I’ve been in all three of those places and then some.

So what’s the best approach? How do we come to experience what the poet John Greenleaf Whittier once affirmed by saying “every chain that humans wear crumbles ‘neath the weight of prayer”? For Foster, there is no better guide to petitionary prayer than the Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13. The elements of this prayer all but command us to leap forward into the great power and outstretched arms of God preached about by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy. And the elements of this prayer invite us to more fully discover the wondrous aspects of love preached about by Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. Modeling our personal petitions after the Lord’s Prayer, then, has Foster inviting us to focus on three words – *give, forgive, and deliver*.

V.

Jesus teaches us to ask God to give us our daily bread. After having seen the movie *Ratatouille* last weekend, I’d really like some of the deliciously illustrated French baguettes it showed in abundance! Okay, well the bread mentioned here may indeed

mean food, but more broadly it means ask God for the little things in life. “What if,” writes Foster, “the only things we were allowed to talk about [in prayer] were weighty matters, the important things, the profound issues? We would be orphaned in the cosmos, cold, and terribly alone. But,” he goes on to conclude, God “welcomes us with our 1,001 trifles, for they are each important to [God]. We pray for daily bread by taking to God those trifles that make up the bulk of our days.”

Trusting that even our trifles may be given to us can help us to then ask for something far bigger – the forgiveness of sin, those things we do against God and neighbor as well as do not do for God and neighbor. Believing that God is giving empowers and equips our belief that God is forgiving! Foster really hits a great stride when he invites us to consider what forgiveness is and is not. It does not mean “that we will cease to hurt ... that we will forget ... that [we can pretend] the offense did not really matter,” it is “not acting as if things are just the same as before the offense.” What it does mean, and this is why it’s so crucial to our personal petitions, is that forgiveness “is a miracle of grace whereby the offense no longer separates.” It means that God helps us not to use any offense to “drive a wedge” into our relationships. By our understanding this, we far more can experience how God, through Jesus Christ, does not use our sin to punish us. It is instead forgiven, and we are invited back to fellowship.

The final petitionary part of the Lord’s Prayer is the request to be delivered from times of temptation and from evil itself. This is a plea for protection, to be safeguarded against the seductions and devastations of sin. I trust we’ve all wrangled with temptations great and small. Jesus certainly did. And so he taught us to invite God right into the core of all temptations, for there, and only there, can be found the true source of spiritual resilience. I like the perspective on this once preached by the great church reformer Martin Luther. He taught that “God delights in our temptations and yet hates them. He delights in them when they drive us to prayer; he hates them when they drive us to despair.”

So we pray for even our simplest needs. We then pray for our greatness need – forgiveness. And finally, we pray to be delivered from anything and everything that separates us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

May God give, forgive and deliver you this very day. For whoever you are, whatever your experiences of prayer, such petition is foundational to life of faith. It keeps the lines of communication open and your relationship with God strong and

intimate. It gives you eyes to see beyond yourself, into the Light that shines through every darkness so that you may approach God with faith and hope and, of course, love. It reminds you that you do not need to wax eloquently every time you talk with God, that even your simplest words, and simplest requests, will be taken into and attended to in the very heart of heavenly love. So I encourage you to stretch your faith out through this perspective on prayer. I promise on all the sacred assurances of Scripture ... God is stretching right back. Amen.