

06/10/2018 – Pentecost 3

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***“If I am worried and pray to God for relief, and then return to worrying, can I expect God to answer my prayer?”***

***Scripture: Daniel 9:1-5, 15-21; Luke 11:1-13***

Our question this morning is really a question about how we pray and to whom we pray. What are we doing when we pray, and what is the purpose of prayer?

Let's begin by thinking about what 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christianity thinks about prayer. Maybe these things are true throughout time, but it seems to me that our understanding of prayer, as a culture, is this:

*Prayer is all about asking God for things and outcomes, and either getting those things or not. We can influence God, or rather, God responds to us according to how we pray and the way we pray.*

This is, in part, due to several generations of Sunday School training. There are right ways and wrong ways to pray. For instance, “*Never pray for yourself when you pray, because that is selfish.*” (no Biblical warrant for this). Or, “*Never be angry with God when you pray.*” (Many examples of angry prayers in the Psalms). Or, “*Always expect ‘No’ to be an answer from God.*” (Most Scriptural prayer is a ‘Yes’ from God in answer). Or, on the other side, “*God answers the prayers of the faithful, and if your prayer is not answered, it is because of your faith, not God.*” Or, “*God will give me what I ask for because that is what God does for God’s people.*”

These are examples of what we call a *transactional relationship*. I ask for something; you give me something; I express gratitude for you giving me what I asked for. This makes prayer all about what is right and what is wrong. Transactional relationships make prayer all about our behavior, as the one who prays, and God’s behavior, as the one who receives the prayer. The transactional attitude, which we all have been trained into, turns God into a ‘*logic gate*’, where the answer is always “*Yes*” or “*No*”. This way of praying also turns you into a machine that is always trying to hit the right gear. But the simple reality is that you and I are not machines, and God is not some computer that only responds according to binary code. We live in a complex, strange, and difficult world, and we are strange, complex, difficult creatures.

As creatures of God’s creation, one of the things we do is *worry*. Worry is the projection of fear into the future. Worry can encompass concern about whether something is going to happen for or to us or our family. Worry can surround concerns for another person. Worry can engulf worldly concerns, like global warming, thermonuclear destruction, overpopulation, the rise of totalitarian governments around the world, Big Brother, rogue AI, the baggage retrieval system at Heathrow airport. That last is from *The Worry Song* by Monty Python. It is worth a listen; it is a very funny song. I can go all day here with worries, though.

I will share with you one of my niggling worries. Our family has lived on the two largest fault-lines in the world. The biggest is the Mississippi River basin, from Minnesota to Louisiana. It is responsible for one of the 10 largest earthquakes in human history, the New Madrid, Missouri, earthquake back in 1811. But right now, we also live next to the second largest fault-line in the world – the Atlantic sea-shelf, just 30 miles from us. ‘They’ say it is stable, but because it is granite, if it goes, it will create a massive tidal wave all along the eastern seaboard. Now, you have something to worry about just because you live here in the beautiful Midcoast.

Some people are more prone to worry than others. Some of us are experts at it. We have been trained to believe worry is a character flaw, a behavior problem, and if we can just fix the behavior, then everything will be ‘normal’ and ‘right’. My question here is a common worrier question: ‘*But what about...?*’ What about the people who are deciding what is normal and right? What about all the machinations we go through to correct our behavior? What about?

The Lord’s Prayer, I think, recognizes our capacity for worry and what we worry about. Jesus understands that worry about ourselves and others is common.

The prayer addresses worry by starting with who made us.

*Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.*

The prayer addresses our worry about our human needs.

*Give us each day our daily bread.*

The prayer addresses the need for resolution in relationships.

*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

The prayer addresses the need for protection in a dangerous world.

*And do not bring us into the time of trial.*

If our expectations of prayer are dependent on our behavior and reactions to our personal situation, then we are in trouble regarding all our prayers and our relationship to God. But we are not in trouble. Our worry has nothing to do with God’s action or inaction. Worry has only to do with how great or little we trust in God. In other words, **worry is about you, not about God.**

If anyone had anything to worry about, it would be the Hebrew people at pretty much any time in their history. Daniel was a prophet in the time of the Babylonian captivity of the Hebrew people. Daniel prays the prayer we heard today right in the middle of this time in Babylon. People were falling away from the faith. The Hebrew people were adopting the religious patterns of the Babylonian people, who worshiped multiple gods and built icons and sacrificed animals and people alike. Those gods and goddesses in ancient Babylon all required particular ways of worship, and any deviation could often

lead to a death sentence for the worshiper. Prayers said in the right order were important. Any mistake meant the god or goddess would not answer the prayer.

But this is not like the God Daniel and the Hebrew people worshiped, nor is it like the God we worship. Our God is a god of reconciliation and forgiveness. This is why Daniel feels like, in the midst of all his worries about his people and the surrounding violence, he can pray the prayer he does in chapter 9.

The structure of the prayer is simple. Daniel's prayer begins by recognizing the sins of the people. It recognizes the wrongs done by the people of Israel. The prayer recognizes the power of God to free and change people and the world. Then the prayer requests that God listen to God's people, out of mercy, not out of the righteousness of the people, because they are not. Then the prayer seeks forgiveness, which also means freedom from oppression in the Old Testament, and then at the very end, Daniel says, and I paraphrase,

*“Forgive us, Lord, because we pray and attempt to live according to your name. So do it for your sake, not ours.”*

That seems gutsy, doesn't it? But it tells us something about God and prayer. It tells us God's answer to prayer is not dependent on our behavior. If we believe in an active, loving God, then we give ourselves over to God's mercy. God's mercy is where our expectation must lie, not on our own righteousness and behavior.

This is quite amazing and powerful. And hope-filled. In our Kierkegaard book group, we just finished reading his chapter called *“Love hopes all things - but is never shamed”*. Kierkegaard has one of the best definitions of hope I have ever come across. It is very simple. He begins by showing that hope is always focused on and grounded in the eternal. And then he says, *“Hope is the expectation of the possibility of the good”* (pg 234). It gets even better. If the possibility of the good is **hope**, then the possibility of evil is **fear**. Fear is, at its core, the choice of the temporal, the finite, the immediate and worldly, over the eternal and the good. Kierkegaard says it this way:

*To relate oneself to the possibility of the good is to hope...to relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of evil is fear.*

We do not have many things we can choose in our lives. Or to put it another way, because of circumstance, personality, status, and other qualities, our choices are always limited. Do not be deceived by advertising or the number of cereals you can choose from in the store. Kierkegaard tells us, rightly, I believe, that one of the places we can exercise choice is over how we expect and approach the future.

Remember at the beginning, I defined worry as the projection of fear into the future? Let's reframe worry, based on the Lord's Prayer, which is a prayer of hope, and the prophet Daniel, who even in the midst of sin, failing faith, unbelief, and separation from like-minded people, spoke hope and reconciliation. The reframe is simply this:

*Worry is a signal, a flare in the sky, telling us we are at the point of choice about the future. Will we choose the eternal possibility of the good – hope; or will we choose the finite, temporal possibility of evil – fear? This, and this alone, is all worry is. It is the opportunity for us to choose hope for the future.*

You may have to choose hope just once. You may have to choose the possibility of the good 5 times relative to your concern and worry. You may have to choose the eternal possibility of the good and hope 7 times 700 times.

Kierkegaard says that Christianity is the only future focused religion because it always seeks to live in the possibility of the eternal. We can only live in the possibility of the eternal by trusting in a God who always seeks hope for God's people. And hope is only possible in a relationship defined by love.

*1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 says, "Now Faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love".*

Love is only possible in relationship to another, and love cannot exist in a transaction. When we pray, we depend completely on the possibility of the good in our eternal, loving relationship with God. This is not a relationship of asking for things, but that in no way means we can't ask for things in the context of that relationship.

In the same way a child in a loving relationship with a parent asks for things, so it is with our relationship with God. If the child does not receive the thing asked for, it is not because the thing asked for is dependent on the loving relationship the parent has with the child. Instead, the receiving or not receiving of the thing asked for is merely a way of deepening the relationship of love already present. This is what we choose when we choose hope – we choose the loving relationship of a loving God for us in the same way a child chooses the loving relationship of the parent, even if the thing asked for is not received.

How does Jesus put it today?

*9 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

*<sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*

*<sup>11</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?*

*<sup>12</sup>Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?*

*<sup>13</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'*

You and I are the children in this statement about prayer. See, God changes us before God changes events and things. God changes us into people who understand they are in a loving relationship with a God who truly loves them. You, and I, are beloved children of God.

Our question, then, to begin was

***“If I am worried and pray to God for relief, and then return to worrying, can I expect God to answer my prayer?”***

My answer is this:

*In the same way a child asks a loving parent for things, we can expect God to answer our prayers in the same expectant way a child expects a parent to answer a request. The answer to the request may be different from our expectations. Our worry about the outcome of the prayer is only a signal, not a behavior flaw or character problem, that we are being asked to choose the possibility of the eternal good, hope, rather than the possibility of the temporal and evil, fear.*

Place your hope in the eternal, loving promise of a loving God, O children of God.  
Amen.