

January 6, 2013
The National Presbyterian Church

The Lord's Prayer: Prayers That Work

Matthew 6:1-15

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Over the next six weeks in our Sunday morning sermons we're going to be thinking together about the subject of prayer, and in particular we're going to be looking together at the prayer that Jesus taught his first disciples that we call "The Lord's Prayer" ("Jesus' Prayer!"). You can find the Lord's Prayer in the Bible in the 6th Chapter of Matthew's gospel. It's part of Jesus teaching in what we call "The Sermon on the Mount," and later this year we'll be looking at more of that teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. But for now our focus is on the Lord's Prayer, which we're studying

- not only because we're followers of Jesus (he certainly wants his followers to know about and to practice prayer);
- We're going to do so not only because this is the beginning of a new year and I would hope that we would all make a new year's resolution to be more faithful in prayer in 2013 than we ever were in 2012. What would God do in the life of our church if every single one of us left here today making that resolution? Even if half of us kept it, it would change the nature of our life together. So we're going to look at the prayer not only because Jesus teaches it, because it's the New Year.
- But we're also going to look at this prayer because it's part of our Presbyterian heritage. If you look at our Constitution as a Presbyterian church, there's part of our Constitution called the Book of Confessions. It's filled with theological statements that go back to the beginning of Christianity. From four centuries ago, in the 1500s and 1600s there are three statements which take time to analyze the Lord's Prayer. The Heidelberg Catechism is one, the Westminster Shorter Catechism is another and the Westminster Larger Catechism is the third. Catechisms teach the faith by asking

and answering a series of questions (like “What is prayer?”). And these catechisms take time to analyze this prayer. Presbyterians have looked on the Lord’s Prayer not only as a prayer to remember, not only as a prayer to pray, but as a model for all prayer that Jesus gives to us, a prayer that teaches us about the God to whom we pray, and the manner, the focal point of the prayers we’re to offer to God.

So given the fact that it’s part of our heritage... that it’s a new year... and that Jesus teaches on the subject of prayer... this is why we’re focusing at the beginning of this new year on the Lord’s Prayer.

As we do so, by way of introduction today, I’d like us to think about prayer in general. I’d like us to think about our premises when it comes to prayer: *the foundations of prayer, what we fundamentally believe about prayer and the reason for praying*. And I want to do so because I believe that there is a blind spot that many people have when it comes to understanding the nature and the purpose of prayer. If you read books on prayer, teaching about prayer, to understand prayer, I think many books skip this premise. And if you skip this premise then it becomes all too easy to become disillusioned with prayer and to give up on prayer and say that prayer doesn’t work. Indeed, I have no doubt that some of us here today have that blind spot, and we may well be among those who are disillusioned with prayer!

Now blind spots are not that uncommon. That’s why we confess our sins every service that we share together. Every sin, in a sense, is a blind spot! Blind spots are not uncommon.

We live in a moment in time 150 years almost to the day after the Emancipation Proclamation, and we look back 150 years and say *“how is it possible that a whole nation, especially of people many of whom had an allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God their creator, how is it possible that we could have permitted that enslavement of a huge portion of our population, and yet claimed to be followers of God through Jesus Christ?”*

There is this enormous blind spot in our civic life together, and we ask, how is that possible? I’m not sure I know the answer, except to say that 150 years from now will people be looking at us, too, thinking of some other issue and saying how did they have such a blind spot? It’s the human predicament, the human dilemma, *that there will always be blind spots* – some of them small, some of them pretty significant in our lives together. And we always have to

come before God and say “Lord open our eyes, keep opening our eyes so that we see more clearly what your plan and your purpose is for us.”

Well, in the matter of prayer, I’m convinced that there is such a blind spot as this, which leads many people to despair in prayer and to give up on it all together – millions of people. And I’m going to call this blind spot “the Huckleberry Finn blind spot of prayer.” The Huck Finn blind spot! *That blind spot has to do with the understanding that prayer is essentially, fundamentally, about asking and getting* – that prayer is foundationally about asking and getting. That’s the blind spot. Let me read you Huck Finn (or Mark Twain’s view through Huck Finn) of prayer. This is how this little passage goes (in Chapter one):

Miss Watson, she took me in the closet and prayed but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it weren’t so. I tried it. Once I got a fish line but no hooks. It weren’t any good to me without any hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times in prayer but somehow I couldn’t make it work. By and by, one day I asked Miss Watson to try for me but she said I was a fool. She never told me why and I couldn’t make it out anyway. I set down one time back in the woods and had a long think about it. I said to myself if a body can get anything they pray for why don’t Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can’t the widow get back her silver snuff box that was stolen? Why can’t Miss Watson fatten up? No says I to myself, there ain’t nothing in it.¹

Perhaps Huck Finn’s right: *Nothing in it, not worth it, disillusioning... if, in fact, it is first and foremost about asking and getting; asking for something and expecting to get it, and when you don’t get it? Why bother?! Why bother.* You ask and ask and ask and it doesn’t work.

But perhaps that very disillusionment begs the question. Perhaps it opens the door. Perhaps, just perhaps, Huck has a blind spot that is shared by millions of people about the very essence and the purpose of prayer: that when it comes to the meaning and the purpose of prayer: *perhaps it’s not first of all about asking and getting.* Maybe there’s something else going on in prayer. Not that prayer doesn’t have anything to do with asking and getting; but that when you put it at the

center you get it wrong. Asking and getting may be important, even critical, but not the center.

Think for a moment about our Lord Jesus. We can't accuse Jesus of being faithless. We can't accuse Jesus of being disobedient to God; Jesus is the perfect one; he is the righteous one. And yet when he prays we know of at least one occasion when he does not get what he asks for. He prays in the garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion, the night before he dies, "Lord take this cup of suffering, my impending crucifixion, away from me" (Matthew 26:36ff). And does God say "yes?" No! God doesn't! Jesus goes on to suffer on that cross, he hangs on that cross. But he doesn't despair about prayer. He doesn't say "This doesn't work, it doesn't add up to anything." There on the cross with his hands stretched out in agony we see in the gospels Jesus still praying, still talking to God (Luke 23:34, 46; Matthew 27:46).

For Jesus while asking is important – he asked – it's not at the center of his understanding of prayer. It's not the rationale for prayer; it's not the foundation of what prayer is about. Not the first thing, not the main thing, and not the most amazing thing.

I've seen many amazing answers to prayer but they shrink in significance compared to the foundation of prayer, the fundamental miracle of prayer which is *that God should hear us – you and me – at all. Now that's the miracle, and that is a foundation and that is the blind spot; that we are not stunned, I mean absolutely stunned and amazed, that when we open our mouths and say "O God!" that God should actually listen to you and me, and wants to hear us. And not only wants to hear us but to enter into a conversation with us, and not only enter into a conversation with us, but enter into a relationship with us.*

This may seem ordinary and shallow but it's the foundation and when it's missing all of prayer no longer makes the sense that it's supposed to make with us. Always it should stun us and overwhelm us that God should listen to us and that we should have this incredible expectation that God hears us whether we get what we want or not. That's secondary. What's first is that there is one who hears us.

Now let me put it like this. Let me tell you a story (yes, it's a 'story' – it didn't happen, but just imagine!!), and maybe things will become a little clearer as I tell you this story.

This last week I was talking to some of my relatives on the phone, chatting with folks on the phone and one of my good friends if you can believe it is Robert Griffin III. Now some of you may not know who Robert Griffin III is, so just in case you don't – he plays professional football for the Washington Redskins (who happen to be in a critical playoff game this afternoon).

So I'm making these phone calls to all of my friends and I call up my friend Robert Griffin III and he doesn't answer, which you may say is not surprising. But actually 13 seconds after I called him he was answering. He's on the phone and he apologizes to me. He says, "I'm so sorry that I didn't pick up the phone when you first called. I was in a meeting." And I said, "Who with?" and he said, "Coach Shanahan. I was in a meeting with all the guys who are playing football on Sunday and it was a very important meeting and the phone went off and I just checked it. And I said to Coach Shanahan, 'Listen I've got to get out of this meeting just now because a friend of mine has just called and I need to talk to him.' So Coach Shanahan says 'Who is it that called?' And RGIII says 'It's my friend David Renwick who called.' And Coach Shanahan says, now get this, Coach Shanahan says 'Hey guys drop everything for an hour or so, RGIII needs to talk to David Renwick. Though we've got this busy schedule ahead of us and an important game coming up he needs to talk. Pastor David has called and we're going to back off this training session for an hour or two.'

So RGIII and I are on the phone for about an hour and we talk about this that or the next thing. And he finally says, "I've got to get back to work." And I say "Well thank you for giving me time," and he says, "No problem at all." Then he adds, "You know it was just wonderful speaking to you today. It just made my day." That's what he says to me: "It just made my day that you called me, and that I had the opportunity to speak to you." And I say, "Listen, you made my day as well, by returning my call, by calling back to me."

So just imagine that situation. Now the first surprise would be this: if you thought it was true. And actually I really should quit the sermon there because you laughed: you see, that's my point: if it's laughable that RGIII, unthinkable, that he should answer my call, how much more

so with God? How much more so with God! That God should pay attention to us? That's just stunning. In fact, it would be quite natural for a whole stream of questions to follow: how did you make the connection? How did you know him? How did you get his number? The questions would flow.

And these kinds of questions would make sense; questions about how the conversation was even possible!! **But** what would not make any sense (if you believed me), what would be strange and really surprising would be for you immediately to say, "*So what did you get from him?*" *What did you ask of him? What did he deliver on?*" If you were to ask me that I'd say, "Now wait a minute, wait a minute. I didn't call him to get anything from him."

But (you might say) "He's got a lot of money."

"But that's not why I called him: *I called him because he's my friend, and we just wanted to talk, and that conversation was significant to my life and I believe to his life as well. And in that conversation our relationship grows stronger. It's an important part of my life (anyone's life, I'd think) to be linked with another person who I think of as significant, and for him or her to think that I'm significant too. That is why we talk with each other. Not to ask and get.*"

"So you didn't ask for anything?"

"Well actually we did. We talked about the game, we talked about this and that, and we argued about things we disagreed with, and then I asked him for something, he asked me for something else. Yes we did ask, and we got. But that wasn't why I had the conversation; it was about the relationship first. That's what it was about. And part of that, yes part of that, as in every relationship is about asking and getting."

And that's how it is with prayer. That we should have this kind of access to God, the superstar of superstars, should stun us. And, not first of all to ask for this or that, but to enter into a relationship with God that will last through this life and on through eternity, which nothing in Heaven or Earth or Hell can break. The connection is good from now forever to all eternity.

In our passage of scripture in Matthew Chapter 6, in verse 5,

- Jesus says "Whenever you pray don't be like the hypocrites when they love to stand and pray in the Synagogues and at street corners

so that they may be seen *by others*.” I mean, seen “*by others*”? Who are you trying to impress when you have a connection with God?

- And then Jesus goes on, “Whenever you pray, go into your room, shut the door and pray to your father in secret.” We tend to take this access to God for granted, that God is there wherever we are. But think of the context in which Jesus was teaching; where people believed that God’s presence was in the temple in Jerusalem. And Jesus is saying “No! *You don’t have to go there to that special place. That is not where the hot line goes. The hot line goes into your bedroom.*” Think of your teenager going into their room, shutting the door and getting on the phone and talking for hours and hours and hours. Jesus’ implication is that it’s as intimate as that. You have that privilege in your room. Now go do it, use the privilege.
- He says “Your father who sees in secret will reward you.” Ahh, at last, asking and getting!! But surely not with everything you want? What father who loves us gives us everything we want? That would not be love. Everything we need, to be sure! And what do we need most of all? Well, relationship!!

We need to know that in this life we are not alone but that there is a significant other who thinks that we are significant and whose life is bound to us and who gives us significance by giving us unlimited access to himself now and through all eternity. And prayer is the gift by which that access and relationship comes into existence and is nurtured and grows. It is the conversation, the amazing conversation that God has offered to us, by which he will “pick up the phone” every time we call and will take time with us no matter what else is going on.

You and I have been invited to pray. Jesus calls us to pray.
May we pray more in 2013 more faithfully, more regularly about this that or the next thing than we ever did in 2012.

May we be aware of the prayer that Jesus taught us so that it will become a guide for us.

May we be aware of our Presbyterian heritage which has always taken the Lord’s Prayer as a teaching tool, a model by which we grow closer to the living God.

And if we have that “Huck Finn blind spot,” which is hung up about asking for things and not getting them (and surely all of us at times have been disappointed like that), may we be enabled to shift our vision so that ‘asking and getting’ remains a part of prayer, yes, but not the center.

May we see as we’ve never seen before that the miracle is in the gift itself that God gives to us by which you and I can know him, know him and trust with confidence that God is on the other end of the line when we open our mouths and our hearts to God in prayer.

1 Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Dover Publications First Edition edition (May 26, 1994).

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