

“Going through the Roof”

Psalm 28:6-9

Mark 2:1-8

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Let's start with the obvious question: Does prayer work?

In one of my favorite sermons by John Buchanan, pastor at Fourth Church, this question is approached head on: “Does praying make any difference and if not, why bother with it? Does it really work?” He answers by saying, “The first thing a theologian or preacher does with that question is get away from it as quickly as possible. That's the wrong question, we are inclined to say. That's a typically American question, the utilitarian, functional approach to a complex matter. ... [Yet] the simple fact is, ‘Does it work?’ is the question we ask and if the preacher won't address it or ask it, [others] certainly will”

So let's start there. Does prayer work? Well, if it never did, we probably wouldn't keep doing it. But it appears to sometimes, and there's the rub. But, Buchanan warns,

“It's probably not a good idea to play the old church game of my answered prayers are more dramatic than yours. It's easy to sound arrogant and condescending. Millions of people believe that God responded to a direct request ... and I'm close enough to that never to presume to challenge it. There are, after all, limits to empiricism and rationalism. ...”

But, Buchanan also warns, there are limits to this trajectory too:

“There are plenty of folk whose theology includes a God who arranges parking places and mortgage approvals The trivialization of prayer becomes a theological problem when the God involved sounds like a celestial errand boy who can be prodded into activity by our prayers, or worse yet, a heavenly politician who lives by opinion polls and whose

love and healing and miraculous intercession will be prompted if we get enough people praying.” (Citation lost; from a sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, in 1999.)

So, does prayer work? Not if we’re basing it on a vending machine model. Put in a dollar and you get the parking spot of your choice; have a million people put in a dollar and you get a cure for cancer. So, we might well ask, why bother?

Precisely because God is *not* a vending machine: God is the author of life, the one the psalmist calls our mother hen, the one Jesus invites us to call our heavenly Father. And we are God’s beloved children. If you who are parents or grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and godparents love the children in your care, how much more does our heavenly Father love us, his children, and long for us to come to him with our cares -- and more than our own cares, but the needs of our brothers and sisters, whom we are called to love as our own kin?

I’ll be honest. There’s a lot I don’t know about how prayer works. There’s a lot we’ll never know, until we reach the gates of heaven. But today I want to testify to what I *do* know – what I know about our prayers and about the God who hears them.

1. The first thing I know is that something happens when we put our needs and the needs of others into the hands of the author of life. This doesn’t substitute for other things we do to get help – I’m not a Christian Scientist, and I did not hesitate to get strong antibiotics to knock out my pneumonia. But we are more than our bodies, and God desires wholeness for us that is more than physical healing. I think about the word “salvation” – which is the same as wholeness or healing. When the Bible speaks of salvation, it’s addressing much more than a lack of bodily illness. This kind of healing encompasses a wholeness of spirit, a softening of the heart, a wisdom of the mind, a reviving of relationships, that may or may not involve healing of bodily afflictions. When we pray,

we are praying to our God who gave us life itself and longs for us to be made whole in every sense of the word. This I know.

2. And second, this I know: I know how it feels to be prayed for – from prayer shawls to soup to intervention. I know how it feels to have friends go through the roof for you when you can't get there yourself. As I look around this room, I'm aware that many of you know this too: how it feels when the church reaches out with a prayer card ... how it feels when a Stephen Minister walks with you through your grief ... how it feels when the Deacons or neighbors bring you a meal ... how it feels when total strangers are praying for you and your well-being. It is powerful to be lifted up and cared for. It is life-giving to know that you are not in this alone.
3. And thirdly, I know this: I know that when we pray, it opens us to be available and useful in ways we might not have imagined. Our Lenten study booklet on Prayer reminds us that “as Christians, we are baptized into a community of faith that shows love by praying for those in need. ... In some way – and no one understands this very well – we become a point of contact, a channel for Christ's activity that would not be there without us and our prayer. Prayer opens us to God and others, especially to the suffering of the world – to the pain of those who cause it and those who experience it. We begin to want to respond in some way, even though we can't solve or even understand the problem. Prayer makes us available as one way that God can reach, save, and bless people. We may be used directly, or indirectly, but we find ourselves becoming willing, through our prayer, to become part of the answer. We become partners in God's work.”
4. And finally, this I know: I know that, perhaps above all, prayer presses us more deeply into our own relationship with God. It was prayer that got my through my third miscarriage. I was 42 or 43. Five years before I had lost a pregnancy halfway through for no apparent reason. Then we went through years of pointless trying, then lost another pregnancy. Now, suddenly, I found myself pregnant again. The conception itself seemed like a minor miracle. And then the loss came ... which felt like a cruel joke. At my lowest point, I remember walking – no, pounding – on

the treadmill in the basement, and screaming – *screaming* – at God. It wasn't pretty. Maybe this is more than you want to know about me. I called God all kinds of vulgar names, threw back in God's face everything I'd tried to do right, tried to do in faith and love and kindness and service. Between sobs and screams I swore off believing. The worst of it was feeling that God was useless – utterly useless – that it didn't make one bit of difference whether there was a God or not. But even as I screamed, I was aware of how absurd it was. I kept talking to God. I couldn't turn away. I couldn't *not* believe. It was the worst irony, even at the time – knowing that if I really didn't believe I wouldn't be talking to God, but I kept talking anyway. And eventually, I started laughing. It was a wry laughter, a fairly cynical laughter, but laughter nevertheless. God had won. And I knew that, even though I didn't particularly want to go on, even though I especially didn't want to believe, I didn't have much choice. God wasn't going away.

“We don't always understand how prayer works,” my friend Jon Walton understatedly says ... Jon, who as a child, had to bury his father, who, by the time he was 40, had two open heart surgeries, and recently survived a third one, who left his beloved church in Delaware in September, 2001 to begin work in lower Manhattan, two weeks before the World Trade Towers fell.

“We don't always understand how prayer works, any more than we understand how God works at all, except that it is a reaching out from our darkness. But we would be foolish not to pray anyway ... We pray because we must. We pray because we can do no other ... We pray because we struggle amid the darkness. We pray because without prayer we are cut off from God, and cut off from God there is no life at all.” (Citation lost; Jon Walton currently serves as Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, New York, New York.)

This I know: we pray not because God is a vending machine, but because God is *not* – God is the author of life, our mother hen, our loving Father, to whom

we go in need. And we pray because it feels too strong to be cared for, to be carried when we cannot walk in faith ourselves. And we pray because we might become useful – more useful than we were before – because prayer opens us to the practical imagination and deepest sympathy in the heart of God. And finally we pray, believing or not, trusting or not, we bang God's door down, we take God's roof off, for ourselves, and for others, simply because behind that door, beneath that roof, within that house there is the healing the world needs. Just because it's the heart of life and love that's in that room.