

When You Pray
Questions of the Congregation Series
I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Prayer

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June 28, 2020

Matthew 6:9-15; 7:7-11

⁹“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. ¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

⁷ ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Journalist Sally Quinn has written a spiritual memoir called *Finding Magic*. It is a bit of a wild ride through her life, because she has dabbled in spirituality from a broad range of sources. Growing up she learned about the Gullah heritage of her grandmother's low country home near the coast of Georgia where she learned about voodoo and hexes and gained a confident trust in the presence of ghosts in certain places. As an adult, she became interested in astrology and defends its merits for guidance. Her family exposure to more traditional religion call forth bits of Christianity and Judaism sprinkled into her lifelong quest of the transcendent.

The book, *Finding Magic*, follows her spiritual discernment through many and varied experiences, but the most compelling part of the book is how her quest actually began. Sally Quinn's father was a career military man, which meant the family lived all over the world; she attended twenty-two schools before going to college, and she was also exposed to various world religions while growing up.

When World War II ended, her father came home with photographs of the concentration camp at Dachau taken the day after its liberation. The scrapbooks were bound and tucked away in a semi-hidden place in the family's small library off the living room in Arlington, Virginia. When she was just four or five years old, Sally found the books and saw those photographs of Holocaust victims, piles of bodies that had starved to death and emaciated survivors. The pictures were seared in her mind and filled her with horror and curiosity and disbelief. After secretly looking at the photo albums and putting them back in their hiding place, she finally admitted finding them to her mother who was horrified.

When her father came home from work that day, he pulled his little girl into his lap, and they looked at the scrapbooks together. He described what the pictures were and answered all of her questions.

Then she remembers asking him, “Did God know about this?” “Yes,” her father said, “God knows everything.” “Then why didn’t he do anything about it?” “That’s part of the mystery of God,” he answered.

She writes all these years later, “I got up and ran out my room, threw myself on the bed, and began to cry.... God – kind, loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God – had let this happen. The God I prayed to every night on my knees had let this happen. Those people must have been praying too. Their children must have been praying. God didn’t answer their prayers. He let these horrible thing happen to them. In fact, if there really were a God, the God I believed in, he wouldn’t have allowed this. Suddenly, it became clear to me. There was no God. There couldn’t be. I stopped crying. I quit saying my prayers. There was no God.”¹

That is a powerful childhood memory of one life-long seeker, with which I think just about everyone of us can identify. Who among us has not found ourselves – at one time or another – asking: Does God really hear the prayers of everyone who lifts them up? Why does God sometimes seem not to answer our most fervent requests?

When Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray, I am not surprised that he uses the image of a child... *If your child asks for bread, what kind of parent would give a stone?* Jesus says, because I think even among adults who wonder about the efficacy of prayer, there is an innocence in our asking. Then Jesus says God responds to our asking.... our searching.... our knocking on the door of heaven with the image of a Father who patiently attends to what the child really needs – as if to say – prayer is being present in the lap of God.

There is something about the nature of our prayers to God that is characterized by pure dependence, like the young child Sally Quinn in the lap of her loving father responding to her questions about the

¹ Sally Quinn, *Finding Magic: A Spiritual Memoir*,

disconcerting horrors of human behavior and the mysterious ways of God. There is something about the nature of prayer that causes many of us to ask with childlike wonder, what we are doing exactly when we pray, and how is God responding on the far end of yearnings.

Many of you asked for a sermon on prayer in this summer series. These are obviously timeless questions because in multiple places throughout the gospels Jesus instructs his disciples in prayer. He instructs them by his own disciplined practice of pulling away from the crowds and going to quiet places to pray. And he instructs them by giving them one prayer as a model for all of our prayers – in what we have come to call *The Lord's Prayer*.

Now, each word of the Lord's Prayer could be parsed and explained, but given our current circumstances – of the global pandemic and our national unrest, I feel called to point out a couple of things about this teaching – for the time in which we find ourselves. First, we note that the pattern of the Lord's Prayer discloses something about the nature of God. It addresses God who is both close to us as a loving parent, and who is a distant from us as the heavenly provider of all creation. *Our Father in heaven...* Next, the Lord's Prayer pleads for God to set things right; to realize God's own holy intentions for all creation. *Your Kingdom come; your will be done.*

Then, the prayer shifts its focus from God to the needs of God's people: bread, forgiveness, rescue. Which is an aspect of prayer so relevant for this moment in our life together. The pattern Jesus gives for praying is plural. I can ask, seek and knock for whatever I boldly want God to attend to, but the Lord's Prayer is not a first-person singular endeavor. It is always meant to be plural when we pray as Jesus taught us using the words "our" and "us."

When we pray for *daily bread* and *forgiveness* and *rescue in our times of trial* we are praying for ourselves and on behalf of others. Jesus teaches us to pray the imperatives of this prayer - Give, Forgive, and

Deliver and always for daily bread and forgiveness and rescue in times of trial for others.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote about how hard prayer can be for us who have grown accustomed to getting a response when we call upon another, even when the other is God. He said: “We tend to think that for religion to work, for our prayers to be answered, we should get what we ask for. When we pray sincerely and intensely for something... when we shower God with pleas and promises and still don’t get what we prayed for, we are left wondering what went wrong? Was it something on our end? Were our prayers not fervent enough for God to heed them? Or is there something wrong with God - that God is not moved by our desperate plight and honest pleading?”

But Prayer is not a matter of coming to God with your wish list and pleading with God to give us what we ask for. Prayer is first and foremost the experience of being in the presence of God... the experience of being in the presence of God. Whether or not we have our requests granted, whether or not we get anything as a result of the encounter, we are changed by having come into the presence of God.

We need to be reminded that prayer involves listening perhaps even more than speaking,” Kushner writes. “It involves opening ourselves to what God wants us to hear, in a setting purified of the noise and distractions of the everyday world.”²

Friends, we will emerge from this pandemic changed. We will emerge from this tense season in our national life changed. I hope we will emerge as a people stronger and more confident in our life of prayer. I know you miss this sacred space of the sanctuary. But you have sacred space whenever you look out the window, whenever you look up at the starry night sky, whenever you look around at the warmth and comfort of your home. Because God is there.

² Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God*, p. 146-8.

And I know you miss your church friends. I miss you every day. But you do not need your pastors or your church friends to accompany you, even in corporate prayer. Because you have the prayer that Jesus has taught you to use when praying. Even when you are alone – that prayer is plural and joins you to the Christian communion, praying with your church family and with those all over the globe for God's will to be done.

Someday – we will return to worship together in this space. We will join our voices again in hymns of praise and have that feeling that we enjoy about worship so much that what we are doing is so much more than the sum of our parts.

But in the meantime, every single one of us has direct access to God through prayer. Wherever we are, we are invited into God's gates with thanksgiving, and we are united in God's courts in prayer and praise. Today we need, the world needs, our asking, our searching, our knocking on the door of heave in prayer for the sake of the world.

AMEN.