

The Power of Prayer

About 10 or 11 years ago, Deb Fleming was supposed to be preaching in new Kingston, and for some reason, she forgot.

We were all sitting there waiting – me included, when Jean Gray, a long established member of our congregation spoke up.

She said to me – “what are you waiting for? Get up there and lead us through our service!”

I hadn't been preaching for many years then, and yet, when it came to the sermon, I drew upon a very small book that I had seen on a recent retreat for lay preaches. I found it in the library of the church we were visiting. It wasn't a big scholarly book with deep meaningful passages. It was this little book that I have here in my hand. It was called: “unless we pray” and it is so

relevant to what we just heard in the gospel passage from Luke.

Today's gospel passage is split into 2 parts. The first is the story of how Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer.

How powerful is that prayer? It is the one prayer that unites all Christian churches; it is the one common denominator between Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christians. It is the distinctive prayer of our faith – even if we don't all use exactly the same words.

The Lord's prayer embodies everything that Christ taught:

The love, adoration and respect of God.

The fact that he does and will provide.

Forgiveness for our sins and

Love for our neighbors.

It's pretty straightforward.

It is the second part of the message that seems to raise challenges and questions, and why I think that this little book struck me and captured my attention and interest at the time, and why I wanted to tell all of you about it.

Each page in the book is a simple statement about prayer.

I am going to open it at random and read a few pages before I continue with my message:

.....
I find every page in this book thought provoking.

Which brings me to my message for you today.

We could say we are a praying church here. That we pray for those in need, and that we all truly believe that our prayers have an effect.

In that respect, we are truly blessed. But there are some – and I think it happens to more than those who would be prepared to admit it openly - there are some, who very often question the effectiveness of prayer, even as they pray, and it is for those that I would like to share my message.

First of all, let's take a look at the second part of today's gospel passage – right after Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's prayer:

“⁵ And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; ⁷ and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I

cannot get up and give you anything'? ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ And *I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.* ¹⁰ For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ What father among you, if his son asks for ^[b] a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ 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!"*

It's this part of the passage that is so thought provoking, and that creates doubt and discussion in so many of us.

And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ¹

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the passage to preach because our experience contradicts Jesus' words. So often we have asked and not received; we have searched and not found. In spite of our most fervent prayers for their health and safety, we have lost loved ones to cancer and senseless accidents. In spite of the fervent prayers of people around the

world, daily we hear of tragedies of violence, hunger, disease, and natural disasters.

If God is like a loving parent who desires to give what is good and life giving (11:11-13), why do so many prayers seem to go unanswered?

Some people, when faced with unanswered prayer say: “What is prayer all about, anyway? What's the point of prayer? Why do we pray?”

I know of some who believe in God but question prayer. They say, after all, if God is all-knowing and all-powerful, why bother with prayer? God can know what we need and desire, and God has the power to change the situation should God choose to do that. So why bother asking?

Well, the disciples gave Jesus the chance to say all that. If anyone would know whether prayer is worth while, it would be him, right? He could have said, Oh, don't bother praying. God knows what you need and desire, so just leave it in the divine hands and get on with dedicating your whole lives to building the kingdom. But he didn't say that. Instead, he gave us a prayer we still say together every week, and that many of us say at least once a day. He told us that prayer is important.

For whatever reason, God wants our prayers. If we are to have a true, living relationship with God, we must stay in touch. God longs to hear from us.

But that doesn't answer the nagging question about unanswered prayers.

We have heard about the scientific studies that show that those who are prayed for heal faster than those who are not, regardless of whether they know they are prayed for. And that's wonderful, and that by itself would be a good reason to pray. But what about those who are not healed, for whom the situation doesn't get better, those who die? How many say that they have asked the Lord for a fish, and been handed a snake?

Let's think about praying for a few minutes, then. If God doesn't answer some prayers, why do we do it?

I firmly believe that it's because prayer changes the one who prays. **Praying changes the prayer.**

Remember the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed. He was in trouble. He asked that the cup of suffering that he was about to taste be taken from him. But he ended his prayer with, "Not what I will, but what you will." And when the soldiers arrived with Judas to arrest him, he seemed to be reconciled to what must happen for God's purpose to be accomplished. His fear and sadness were changed by his prayers into strength and determination to see things through to the bitter end.

Thy will be done. We say it. But how often do we want to say, "Thy will be changed." How often do we hope that God's will for a certain situation is the same as ours? I am sure we have often said something like "Please God, let this be the way you want things to be, so that everything can turn out the way I want it to."

I do not believe that God's will is for us to suffer. I believe that God loves us infinitely, and God wants us to be happy, to be at peace. But God's kingdom has not yet been fulfilled, and in this world there is suffering and there is pain and there is death and there is evil.

So, knowing all this, why did Jesus tell us to ask, to seek, to knock at the door? Why did he talk about asking for an egg and not being given

a scorpion, when he knew, perhaps better than anyone, just how far this world has fallen from God's purpose? Was he raising false hopes?

Let's look again at how the reading ends. *"How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask."* We may be praying for an end to wars in the world, we may be praying for healing for someone who is terminally ill, we may be praying for the safe return of a loved one who is traveling, we may be asking that it's not me who will be laid off at work.

But what God ultimately gives to God's people is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of God's presence with us. In this world, there is evil and

suffering and death. But we are gifted with the Spirit of God to help us get through all of that.

And God's Spirit, given to us as we pray, does change us. We cannot truly pray for peace in the world without then going out into the world and acting peaceably. We cannot truly pray for justice and then buy our clothes from a company known to use child labor. We cannot truly pray for peace in our families and then provoke a fight. We cannot truly pray for the environment and then waste the resources we have been given. We cannot truly pray for governments to do God's will and then vote without taking our faith into account as we do so, or not bother to vote at all.

When we pray we should always remember that when we pray, God gives us what we need to be empowered and to grow.

It has often been said that "Prayer does not give us what we want, but prayer helps us want what we need. Prayer is not designed to change or persuade God; it is designed by God to change us! Prayer is a spiritual discipline through which we are formed into disciples of Jesus Christ.

The whole point of this lesson is not so much that we should persist in prayer, but that we should be constant in prayer precisely because God is always eager to generously provide us with everything we need. (Though we should also be aware that from God's perspective, what we need may not be what we are praying for.)

But above all else, Prayer gifts us with God's Spirit. God's Spirit living in us strengthens us through the trials of our lives, and makes us more deeply aware of the blessings we have been given. God's spirit living in us prompts us to live out God's kingdom in the world. God's Spirit gives power to our prayers and helps us understand his will and his love

And the power of God's Spirit living in us helps us to all pray, with truer hearts and to accept and trust in him forever – That's the true power of prayer - Amen