

McCabe United Methodist Church

Prayer 101 (Part 1): What Good Does Prayer Do?

Psalm 3 * Luke 11:1-4: January 18 & 19, 2014

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Let's begin by singing the first verse of the song *Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying*. The words are printed in your bulletins.

Lord, listen to your children praying, Lord, send your Spirit in this place; Lord, listen to your children praying, send us love, send us power, send us grace.

"Lord, listen to your children praying." Praying. It's not hard to do. It's figuring out why we pray that's the hard part. It's figuring out the purpose of prayer that's difficult.

Today, we start a series I'm calling *Prayer 101*. It's the basics of prayer. It's the ABCs of prayer. It's the *whys*, the *what's*, and the *how tos* of prayer. Hopefully, by the time we get done with this series we'll understand the difference between simply talking and praying. And there is a difference.

When Ulysses S. Grant, the 18th U.S. President, lay dying in bed with cancer, he was visited by an old army buddy, General O.O. Howard. They had fought many battles together during the Civil War. Howard was known as *The Christian Soldier* because of his strong faith in Jesus Christ.

General Howard walked into Grant's room that day and started talking to Grant about some of the battles and campaigns the two men had fought together. Grant listened for a little bit, but then he interrupted his old friend and said, **"Howard, tell me what you know about prayer."**

Grant was dying. He wasn't interested in reminiscing about past battles. He was interested in his relationship with God. He wanted to know about prayer. **"Teach me, Howard,"** Grant asked, **"teach me to pray. I need to know."**

In our passage from Luke today, we heard one of Jesus' disciples asking the same question. **"Lord,"** he said, **"teach us how to pray."** He

knew that praying was more than just talking. It was more than just asking God for stuff. He wanted Jesus to teach them to pray.

I think it's safe to say that most of us, if not all of us, pray. Some of us pray several times a day, some of us pray less often. But, we pray. The question I want to ask today, is this one: Why do we pray? Is it to get stuff? Is it to ask God for help or healing or guidance?

A family went camping one weekend. The fourteen-year-old daughter happened to lose one of her contact lenses. She was upset. The father asked her what was wrong and she explained to him. **"My contact lens. It's gone."**

The father looked on the ground and he saw nothing but leaves and twigs and grass. He knew that the contact lens could have fallen into one of a million different places. He did the first thing he thought of. He said to his daughter, **"Don't move. Let's pray about it."**

The fourteen-year-old, having heard those words before, rolled her eyes and sarcastically said, **"Prayer, dad? What good does it do? God doesn't care about my contact lens."**

Again, why do we pray?

As children, many of us were taught to pray. We said our *'going to bed prayers'* and our prayers before eating. We said prayers in church and in Sunday School. Some of you even said prayers in public school. We were taught that God hears all our prayers. Nothing is too big or too small for God.

So we pray and pray and pray, but sometimes, like the fourteen-year-old daughter who lost her contact lens, some of us start asking the question, **"Why bother? What good does prayer do?"**

Guilt doesn't help. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, **"Something must be wrong with me. I must not have enough faith. God answers the prayers of others, but not mine?"**

Maybe some of you have said something like that. **"Well, God answers the prayers of others"** (meaning God gives them the stuff they

ask for), **but not me. It must be my lack of faith.**”

And so we make prayer into some kind of faith contest. If we have this much faith, God will hear our prayers. But if we fall under a certain level of faith, well, God won't hear our prayers.

Our American culture doesn't help us either when it comes to praying. We have a different attitude in this country than in other places. We're busy people! We don't like slowing down and taking time to pray. We have things to do, and places to go, and people to see. **“Prayer? Not now. Maybe later. I've got work to do!”**

And of course, when later does come, we're too tired to pray or we're not interested in prayer. **“Besides,”** we say to ourselves, **“it doesn't do any good.”**

So again, why do we pray? Is it to ask God to give us stuff? Is it to ask God to keep us healthy? Is it to ask God to help us solve some problem? Or, is there more to prayer?

Look, there's nothing wrong with asking God for stuff or for guidance or for help even the help to find a lost contact lens.

Do you remember the fourteen-year-old daughter who lost her contact lens? The father thought to himself, **“Self, if I pray now and we don't find the contact lense, my daughter is going to say ‘I told you so’. She might never pray again.”**

But, the father prayed anyway. When he finished praying, he bent down and through all those leaves and twigs, he just happened to find the missing contact lense.

I'm sure we all have stories about prayers that have been answered and prayers that haven't. But again, is this why we pray? Or, is there something else going on when we pray?

When I was in Minot, I had a friend named Howard Wilson. Howard was about ninety years old when I first met him. He was one of those spiritual giants who was always in church on Sunday mornings, he served on several different boards and committees and he prayed.

One year, one of my confirmation students asked Howard to be his mentor. Howard agreed. One night, we were talking about prayer and I asked the class to define prayer. The room was silent and then Howard raised his hand and said, **“I believe that prayer is communicating with God.”**

For Howard Wilson, prayer was talking to God and it was listening to God. The purpose, for Howard, wasn't to get stuff or to ask for favors, but rather, for Howard, the purpose was to grow and maintain his relationship with God.

I think Howard had it right. In prayer, we communicate with God and as we communicate we come to know God better than we do.

It's like a friendship. In every friendship, one of the key ingredients is communication. It's talking and listening to each other. It's creating a relationship that's based on love and respect. How can we be friends with someone, anyone, if we don't take the time to talk to them and to listen?

Is God any different? We miss knowing God if God is nothing more than a Santa Claus god who might or might not give us what we want.

Some of you might not know this, but we have a chapel at McCabe. It's located in our Music wing. In our chapel, there's a painting of Jesus knocking on a door. Maybe you've seen it. The painting is loosely based on a passage from Matthew 7, **“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find and to those who knock, the door will be opened.”**

I believe answering the knock, when Jesus knocks on our doors, is the first step toward a healthy prayer life. Jesus knocks and we open the door. Jesus knocks and we invite him into our lives. Jesus knocks and we start a relationship with him. Jesus knocks and we start praying.

Something amazing happens to us when we open the door and invite Jesus into our lives. He becomes real to us. He becomes alive to us. He becomes present to us.

Why do we pray? It's to know God in Jesus Christ better. As we pray, we discover who God is and who God wants us to be. And in the process, we also discover who we are and who we can be. We change. As we grow closer to Jesus, we start changing from within. We start growing toward the persons we were meant to be.

Come back next week and we'll talk about prayer some more and how we can learn to pray like a child.