

Two people came to my mind as I thought about today's Scripture readings. One was a dear friend who prayed for something only once. She said she had the faith that if God heard it the first time that was all that was needed and it was settled in her mind. No sense in bothering God with what she had already requested. The other was a colleague who kept a prayer journal his whole life. He noted when he first began praying for someone or something and then noted when the prayer was answered. He had one entry that he had been praying for for over forty-five (45) years. He kept praying for it daily.

Now most of us fall somewhere between the two poles of this spectrum. We pray. And we all, from time to time, wonder about the effectiveness of our prayers. We may pray once, twice or several times and then...

The disciples have observed Jesus praying. Luke says that Jesus was praying, "in a certain place" and his disciples come and ask him to teach them how to pray. Apparently John had taught his disciples how to pray and given them instructions in prayer. They want to be as effective in their prayers as Jesus seemed to be in his. They may have noticed a change in him after he prayed. He never hid his prayer time from them and in those moments he found strength to continue on.

Jesus responded with what we have termed, "The Lord's Prayer" (twice in the Gospels - here in Luke and in Matthew 6). It is a simple prayer (hope to examine it more closely in November and December, Lord willing). We are to acknowledge God - the one we are praying to. We are to pray for our daily needs. We are to practice what we pray for (the example is forgiveness-we must forgive as we have been forgiven) and we are to ask to have the strength to avoid the temptations that come our way. It is short, simple and concise (wonder where we got the image of long prayers?)

Then, as he almost always did, he tells a story. They would know about the need for hospitality. It must be shown at any hour of the day or night. They would know the desperation of the man who has unexpected guests late in the evening. He must offer them hospitality.

They would also understand the reaction of the neighbor. The family has retired for the night. The lamps have been blown out. The house is dark. The children are asleep. It would be a task to get up, light the lamp, get the bread, etc. in a one or two room abode. It is almost too much to ask even of a friend. But the need is there — and the man will not stop asking. He gets up and gives what is needed because of the persistence of the friend. Now this is not the only story like this. In Luke 18 Jesus tells of a judge who grants a widow's request just so she will stop pestering him!

Jesus continues with what I see as three aspects of prayer: Ask, Seek and Knock.

We never know until we ask. I often wonder how much we may miss because we don't ask. I recall a conversation with the clerk of a major department store chain. One of the group was saying that they shop on Tuesday because that is when most stores give a "senior" discount. They responded that their store also gives a "senior" discount, only they offer it every day. But, they added it has to be asked for. The clerks are not allowed to suggest it or to offer it but do give it when asked. They noted that they were amazed at how few people asked for it.

Teachers tell us that there are no dumb questions. Probably half of the class has the same question but no one wants to raise it. Jesus says our first task is to ask. Even the dumb questions!

The second phase is that we are to seek. Maybe the answer is already in front of us but we just have not opened our eyes or our minds to see it. I recall the story of man who is on the roof of his house with flood waters raging around it. A boat comes by and he refuses to get in because the “Lord will save him.” A helicopter flies over head, lowers a basket and he again refuses to get in, “the Lord will save him.” A second helicopter comes by a few hours later with the same results. The flood waters consume him and he meets God. He is angry. “God, I thought you were going to save me.” God replies, “I sent you a boat and two helicopters.”

If all we do is pray then we have only done a portion of the job. Maybe we are the answer to our prayers or the prayers of others. Read again James 2:14-17. James notes that if we see a person in need and have the ability to help them we need to help them. Don’t say, “I will pray for you” but feed, clothe or do whatever is needed to help them. Prayer is nice but action is better and is a part of prayer. We pray and then we seek.

Then Jesus says we are to knock. This almost seems like a repeat of the first and it seems so obvious. If I come to your door and I want you to let me in I need to knock or ring the bell. I could stand outside all day hoping you will see me and you would not know that I was there. Praying in an action verb. Do you remember the man at the pool in John 5? Every day he was carried to the pool and every day he waited for the water to be stirred. But there was no one to get him to the water. Jesus asks, “Do you want to be healed?” Have you been knocking on the door? Knocking is our signal that we want to be let in — The Psalmist prayed, “Restore us again, O Lord of our salvation...”

I have a book from Sylvia, 10 Prayers You Can’t Live Without by Rick Hamlin, the editor of Guidepost. It is an okay book. But what really caught my attention was that Sylvia has filled it with little post-it arrows. She has highlighted many passages and phrases throughout the book with these arrows. Wish I could ask her why on some of them!

One of the ones she highlighted is the bedtime prayer of Eleanor Roosevelt (Her son, Elliot, said she prayed it every night).

Our Father, who has set a restlessness in our hearts and made us all seekers after that which we can never fully find, forbid us to be satisfied with what we make of life. Draw us from base content and set our eyes on far-off goals. Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to thee for strength. Deliver us from fretfulness and self-pitying; make us sure of the good we cannot see and of the hidden good in the world. Open our eyes to simple beauty all around us and our hearts to the loveliness men hide from us because we do not try to understand them. Save us from ourselves and show us a vision of a world made new.

Ask, seek and knock

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988
Guideposts, New York, New York, 10016, 2011 (p. 223)