

**Is Anyone Listening?  
A Sermon by the Rev. Mary Marple Thies  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – July 24, 2022**

**Please Read:  
Genesis 18:20-32  
Psalm 138  
Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19)  
Luke 11:1-13**

Last week I received a survey from my congressional representative asking me to indicate the issue that was of greatest concern to me. The list I had to choose from included the January 6 insurrection, reproductive rights, inflation, the economy and jobs, supporting LGBTQ+ youth, climate change, tax breaks for the ultra-rich, funding public schools, healthcare, gun violence, finding common ground for bipartisan legislation and, if that were not enough, there was an option for “other.” And what else might we throw into that category—the impact on Western democracy if Putin is successful in taking over Ukraine? People suffering from hunger in Africa? Structural racism? New strains of Covid? Will my well run dry if we don’t get some rain soon?

I know that my representative is testing the waters, wanting to make sure he has a good read on the concerns of his constituents, but his list is also a list that keeps me up at night. It represents the complicated, real, enormous situations and issues that can overwhelm me and make me feel helpless. Maybe that is true for you, too. Well, maybe you aren’t too worried about my well.

We are people who know the importance and power of prayer. But we are in the midst of a long slog of challenging global and national situations, not to mention our personal concerns for a loved one with cancer or a dissolving marriage or a child sliding into addiction. With all that, we might be feeling a little weary in our prayer life. We pray and things don’t seem to get better. We pray and another disaster hits. We might be wondering if anyone is listening.

If that is the case, then hear what Jesus has to say to us. Jesus, being a good teacher, approaches the topic of prayer in a variety of ways, with some piety and some pratfall, a little poetry and a neat, concluding answer. So let’s see what he has to tell us.

First, Jesus jumps in, without benefit of introduction, with what we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer or in some traditions, the Our Father, though, truth be told, Luke’s version is a pretty stripped-down rendering of the one that we say Sunday by Sunday. His is more of a text message, a spare, abridged version, maybe the kind of prayer we would utter if praying were a dangerous thing to do or something we would say under our breath just to get through the next hour. The unadorned opening, “Father,” sounds like a demand, a shout to get God’s attention, like an impatient child calling a parent away from the computer. This address doesn’t plant God in heaven, but right here, right now. It reminds us of the personal, familial relationship between God and us. God is not a corporate boss, a Santa with gifts, or a judge weighing our merits. God is loving parent.

Still, “Hallowed be your name,” is the acknowledgment that this is no ordinary parent. This is the first expectation of the prayer, that the name of God be made holy, and who is able to do that, exactly? Well, you and I can acknowledge God’s holiness, we can try to live our lives with such integrity and faithfulness that God is revered and honored, but only God can make the divine

name holy. It is God's very nature to be holy, righteous, wholly other, undefiled and without fault, Pure Love, and worthy of complete devotion. This little phrase is a call to God to keep on being God and a reminder to us of who God is.

Now this prayer becomes dangerous. "Your kingdom come." Consider it carefully before you make this your prayer because this is asking God to turn our world and our lives upside down, to put an end to all those things that are not worthy of God, whatever is contrary to God's desire, whatever is unjust, untrue, unlovely, not peaceable. This is prayer as subversive activity.

Jesus then gives us three petitions, three requests that reveal our dependence on God, three entreaties for the necessities to keep body and soul together—food for this day, forgiveness, protection from temptation and evil. These petitions we lay before God because there is nothing we can do to make these things happen on our own. If we try to accomplish any of them while trying to save our lives on our own, we cut ourselves off from God. We deny what Jesus has accomplished for us in his death and resurrection. It is a refusal of the gift that God has given us and in denying our need, our total dependence on God, in trying to claim that we can somehow earn or merit God's gifts, that we can live on our own, then God cannot give us any gift, but particularly the gift of forgiveness. So we pray to not be tempted to even try.

Now Jesus switches gears on us and brings out a funny story to shake us back awake. He gives us a comic tale of three friends, each of whom makes a claim on another. The first is the friend who arrives late at night after traveling all day. She is tired, dirty and hungry and because she knows her friend will welcome her, even though it is late, she knocks on the door and wakes her friend. The friend is delighted to find the traveler there, welcomes her in, tells her to take off her sandals and cloak, and wash up, while the host goes to rustle up something to eat. However, the cupboard is bare, so he runs next door to borrow some bread. He knocks on the door and hollers to his neighbor, loud enough to wake him from a sound sleep. He barrages the neighbor with a list of arguments to try to persuade him to help out. "We need three loaves of bread because my dear friend, who just arrived after a whole day of travel, is starving. My pantry is bare. You are my only hope. Please help."

Now here is where this story may strike us as strange. You have probably figured out the friend next door is the God figure in the story and you would expect, even hope, that he would graciously open the door and load up the friend not only with the bread but peanut butter, too. However, the friend inside doesn't open the door, he just yells back, "Don't bother me. Everyone is tucked in. We just got the baby settled down. The door is locked for the night. Beat it." Of course, by now, the whole neighborhood is awake, what with all the knocking on doors and yelling back and forth. The baby is probably screaming and the dog howling. Everyone is now hanging out their windows, watching to see what will happen.

Jesus tells us. "Even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs." Now we have to pay close attention here, because it sounds like praying is a matter of nagging God, wearing God down until we get what we want. But the word translated *persistence* also means *shamelessness*. The host comes to the neighbor acknowledging, for all the world to hear, that he has nothing to offer his guest. He is a total loss as a host. He lays out his helplessness without

excuse, without guile. He comes with empty hands and a selfless admission that he is nothing without the neighbor's help. And so the neighbor gets out of bed, opens the door and gives his friend what he needs.

And this is what we do when we pray the prayer that Jesus taught. We come with empty hands and the acknowledgment that we have nothing; we are nothing without God's help. And the wonder is that God in Jesus has joined us in our helplessness, in our losing situation, even in our death, and made us alive in him.

And that is the basis for any hope we might have that someone is listening to our prayers. Jesus' own experience of prayer shows us that prayer doesn't promise fame or money, popularity or even safety. There is no guarantee that we will get what we want and ask for. So why does Jesus give us the comforting words, asking and receiving, searching and finding, knocking and having the door opened? He didn't get what he asked for in Gethsemane when he prayed to avoid the cross. But he goes on to tell us that our heavenly Father is a better parent than any of us is. This Parent gives us more than bread or fish; this Parent, knowing our helplessness, gives us the Holy Spirit, who is God's own self with us, the Spirit that gives what we really need, even when we are convinced that it is something else we require.

This whole lesson with its model prayer, funny parable, proverbial assurances and a remarkable promise, this whole lesson is about allowing ourselves to come to this Parent in complete trust and vulnerability, knowing that there is someone listening, someone who grieves with us the state of things, who is at work in the world even when we don't notice, and who gives us the divine Spirit to give meaning to our words, courage to our hearts, hope for the future and faith in the Giver. As God's people, even in the midst of doubt and fear and questions, still we pray. So the next time that list of things keeps you up at night or you feel like just can't face the day, try whispering the prayer Jesus gave us and expect to be held, challenged, blessed and changed by God's own Spirit.