

# THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## July 28, 2019

Let us pray: Ever-living and always faithful God, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray, and you generously give more blessings than we deserve, most especially the gift of the Holy Spirit in whose power we can face whatever comes our way; through your Son, our Savior, Christ the Lord. Amen.

Prayer is not only at the heart of the Christian life, but it is also at the heart of a lot of Christian frustration, misunderstanding, heartache and even pain. Sometimes, I believe, the anguish of unanswered prayers is because we are praying for the wrong thing. For example, I don't believe, my prayer that my beloved Boston Red Sox will score the winning run at the bottom of the ninth at Fenway Park, the score tied with two outs and two strikes, will be answered. Don't get me wrong, I pray nonetheless, even though I don't think God has a favored team! In the same way if the Eagles score a field goal to win their game, don't think it's because God answered your prayer. Certainly, God has far, far more important prayers to answer!

Nor do I see prayer as magic. The student prays to God to ace the chemistry exam, although he chose to party the night away instead of studying even a little. He better not expect an A as the answer to his prayer. Or someone drinks until they're drunk and then, getting behind the wheel of their car, pray that God will deliver them safely home without an accident or a fatality. We dare not believe that God is a heavenly vending machine into which we insert our prayers, like so many shiny quarters, and expect a gumball, or, in this case, the prayer answered to our liking.

For years, even as a priest, I believed that faithful, fervent, persistent prayer heals diseases, prevents car accidents, feeds the hungry mouths of the poor, prevents premature death, saves broken relationships, creates compassion and civility in our politics and government, and "stops the bad guys." But then reality rose up and kicked me in the butt! Good people battle disease, car accidents kill the innocent, young people, even children, die hungry, seemingly perfect marriages disintegrate, and far too often the evil flourish and win. So my prayer became: "Why is that God?" Fellow Christians sought to help me, giving at least two answers: 1) "Tom, you need to pray harder, longer, and with greater faith," or 2) "God did answer your prayer, Tom, but said no." They meant well, but their answers broke my heart.

And so I come to this morning's Gospel reading with trepidation, wanting with all my heart to strengthen your faith in prayer not jolt it. Yet, I would be remiss as the preacher, if, in a sermon on prayer, I didn't question what role prayer plays in the face of ongoing tragedy and crisis, of injustice and oppression in our lives personally and in the life of the world. Does God intervene directly in human affairs as a direct result of our prayers? Can prayer persuade God? I have known people who pray with full faith for everything from good parking spots and lost house keys to cancer cures and, for their children, Ivy League acceptances. They pray expecting the answers they want, and apparently they receive them. All I can say is that my experience with prayer has never been so certain or easy.

So turn I must, as I always do with faith questions, to the Holy Word of God, today these 13 verses about prayer in the Gospel of Luke. In these brief verses, Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer, teaches with a parable on prayer, and ends with several sayings on prayer, far too much to cover in the span of ten minutes; OK, fifteen minutes! For me the key to all these teachings is what Jesus teaches in the closing verse: "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!" Wow!

The very first truth this verse speaks to me is that our prayer, every prayer we utter, must be rooted in our trust that God is our loving Papa. Here Jesus is inviting his followers to call upon God almighty in the same way children call upon their loving and caring parent, trusting that we belong to God and that God for sure wants for us what is good and life giving. This trust is to be the foundation of every prayer we offer, that God is good, overflowing with compassion, and is totally faithful; that God is intimate with us; for this God knows our pain and suffering, has experienced our heartbreak and anguish, has endured fear and loss, even death first hand. This is the God who meets us most surely in the darkest, most excruciating, most painful moments of our lives.

If you don't believe bad things happen to good people, just ask Jesus, the Jesus of suffering, the Jesus of the cross, the Jesus of crucifixion, the perfect Jesus who, nevertheless, suffered horribly and died innocently. In the Garden of Gethsemane, this Jesus prayed that the cup of suffering would be lifted from him, but his prayer wasn't answered.

But, there's something else in this teaching of Jesus. Notice Jesus doesn't promise that our life will be easy, that his followers will enjoy prosperity, every material blessing imaginable, that they will have only good health, no worries, no stress, no anger, no suffering, no chaos and crisis, no loss. Instead, hear again: "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." Is Jesus saying the gift of the Holy Spirit is the answer to our every prayer for every need? Yes, I think so.

One of our members, Brenda DiMichele, this week texted me a devotion she had read on the work of the Holy Spirit. Thank God for texts! The Greek word for the Holy Spirit as the Comforter can be translated into five other names, each describing a different aspect of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives: Comforter, God who relieves us of mental and physical distress; Counselor, God who gives us advice through prayer; Helper, God who brings us relief and support; Advocate, God who pleads our cause; Strengthener, God who causes us to become stronger, enabling us to resist life's challenges, tribulations, and woes; and Standby, God who can always be relied on. No matter what our prayer, might its answer always be the Holy Spirit, that no matter what happens God is with us through the Spirit's power and will get us through any and every crisis! In this way, God answers our every prayer always. God will never fail to give us God's own, abundant, and overflowing self as the answer we actually need for every prayer. Papa God will not withhold God's loving, consoling, healing, transforming, self-giving, divine generosity. In this way, God's answer to our every prayer will always be Yes!

If God's guaranteed answer to our prayers is God's own self, via the Holy Spirit, can we live with that? Honestly, sometimes I can, and sometimes I can't. It's not easy for me to let go of my wish for a vending machine God, put in a prayer and out comes the answer I want. It's a challenge of my faith life to persist in praying and not receive the answers I'm expecting. It's hard to accept the Holy Spirit as God's answer when I want healing for my friend's cancer, or an end to the toxicity which currently governs our politics, or lasting freedom from worries and stress, or commonsense gun control, or the security of the ballot box, or the defeat of racism, or solutions to global climate change. Yes, often I want stuff from God more than I want God. I want God to sweep in, like Batman, and fix everything more than I want God's Spirit to fill me and accompany me so that I can do my part to heal the world and in God's power to be an answer to my prayers.

So we pray, so we need to, so we must, because prayer always, always strengthens our connection with God, assuring God is with us no matter how our prayer is answered, and solidifies God as the very foundation of our life. We pray because what we need most is God's very Spirit pouring God's self into us, filling us with God's power. Through laughter or tears, in hope and despair our prayers

usher in God's Spirit to remind us that we are not alone in our woes or in this broken, aching world. God's Spirit is God's Yes. God's Spirit is the guarantee even as that same Spirit brings the loving and caring and strengthening Christ to us this day in and through wafer and wine.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.