

Unanswered prayer

I have occasionally told stories about my grandmother from this pulpit. She was a huge spiritual influence on me. A woman of strong faith with a good sense of humor and someone who could bring people together across divides. She was an equally great hostess and guest. Not to mention I was given her name. She was a Mary.

Since she was my grandmother - two generations ahead of me - I always knew she would die. Of course she would. But I had dreams of her at least being part of key moments in my adult life.

I remember when she was in her 80s she had a serious illness and we all thought it might be the end for her. She certainly did - and she was ready! She comforted all of us, told us she was at peace with dying, and prayed for an untroubled passing.

When she didn't actually die, she was a little miffed, which amused the rest of the family greatly. Sometimes you don't get what you pray for, grandma.

Several years later, when she was 91, her health had deteriorated significantly. I took my infant son to meet her and was immensely grateful she was able to see and hold him. That was an answered prayer - for her to meet a child of mine. To see her daughter become a grandmother, and me, her granddaughter, become a mother.

At the same time, I could see she was suffering. Easily tired, not as talkative, literally smaller. Within a couple of months she died peacefully with a rotation of family members taking turns at her bedside. An answered prayer for sure.

Six years later, I had another child and experienced another family death. This time it was my father, who was diagnosed with lung cancer a couple of months before my due date. This was not so peaceful a situation. I longed for him to see and hold my daughter. I also desperately wanted his suffering to end. He was surrounded by prayer and I am sure that most of our prayers conflicted with each other in their aims. His death felt like an unanswered prayer for lots of us, including him.

Sometimes we get what we pray for, sometimes we don't. Sometimes our prayers get an answer in a way that is different from what we expect or want. Not a yes or a no, just different.

When Jesus taught his followers to pray it was what we now call the Lord's Prayer. And while we have a multitude of ways to pray - both individually and here in a gathered community - this one is the most familiar to Christians for good reason. It has almost everything we need in a prayer:

- It addresses God as "Father," a reminder that we have an intimate relationship with the one who created and loves us.
- It has simple, straightforward language. We can take things directly to God even if we are not psalmists or poets. No fancy language necessary.
- It sticks to basics - feed us, forgive us, deliver us.
- It uses "we" language to remind us that we are not in this alone - we want everyone to have daily bread, we ask for forgiveness AS we forgive others.

Jesus also teaches us to ask, search, and knock on the door of God when we have a need or desire. "Go ahead!" He says. God will give, you will find, the door will be opened.

Except sometimes it isn't. Or at least it doesn't feel that way. Sometimes it feels like a door slammed shut. When my grandmother died it answered some prayers and dashed others.

But she was 91 and in frail health. But what about my dad who died too young?

What about the prayers for even younger lives lost?
Or the pleas from a hungry family for their daily bread?
Or prayers for peace from a bomb shelter?

What about those prayers? When the desired answer doesn't come, does that mean someone else asked the opposite and their prayer was better? Or that God didn't hear us?

“Do not bring us to the time of trial,” Jesus' prayer says. Yet sometimes it does actually feel like the trial, the tribulation comes anyway.

The loved one dies.

The job is lost.

The friendship is broken.

The car breaks down.

The flight is canceled.

The one moment of quiet you needed to get through the day is shattered.

It is enough to make us wonder what the point of prayer is anyway. If it is a conversation, who is listening? Do they hear what we actually say?

There are people who say if your prayer isn't answered it is because you didn't pray hard enough or use the right words. That your faith is not strong enough. As your pastor I want to assure you this is not the case at all.

And there are those who say that God is distant and doesn't act in our lives directly. Which is also not the case at all.

Remember, even Jesus prayed in Gethsemane to “let this cup pass from me.”

God is not indifferent and God is not setting us up to fail at prayer. Prayer is not a contest to see who does it better or more effectively. It is simply and magnificently the way we communicate with God and God with us.

As someone who has had her prayers seem unanswered, here's what I've come to believe. Ultimately, prayers are not primarily about answers at all. That may sound like an odd thing to say. Most of the prayers we say here this morning will have some kind of request, and we hope they will be heard and honored!

However, prayer is the conversation we have with God. In humility, we recognize that we are not the end-all and be-all of the universe and reach out to our Creator. In prayer we admit that there are things we cannot control and cannot understand.

God hears our prayers, every single one of them. In the conversation with God, when we admit that we don't know everything and can't make everything happen on our own, we also have to trust that whatever happens, it will be with the love and concern of God.

God is with us all the time, and in prayer we are consciously and purposefully with God, too. That presence, that being in relationship, is the answer we need to the wants, needs, joys, worries, and sufferings of life.
Amen.