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There was a little boy that was getting ready for bed and before getting into bed he shouted to his parents, "I'm going to say my prayers. Does anyone want anything?" I'm afraid that is the way a lot of people approach prayer. It is seen as Heaven's toll free number or an Aladdin lamp to be rubbed whenever you want something - it could be anything from an ice cream cone to a new car. That is the danger in hearing some of the words that Jesus said in the gospel today, "Ask and it will be given you; Seek and you will find; Knock and the door will be opened to you."

Prayer sounds pretty simple doesn't it? Unfortunately, prayer is often seen as a matter of approaching God as a Divine ATM. If we ask the right way and get all the codes right, we stand a pretty good chance of getting what we want. And it's wonderful when the answers to our prayers are quick in coming, when the tragedy is averted, when the illness is cured, or the relationships restored then prayer makes sense.

But what happens when you believe your prayers don't get answered. Then believing in prayer is not always easy, is it? Haven't there been plenty of times when you've asked and haven't always felt you were given what you wanted, or that you didn't find what you needed, or that the door remained closed. We've all felt that way. Some of you might even be feeling that way right now in your life that God is being silent when you are crying out, or that if God is hearing you, you are not seeing the answers you need.

What do we do when we believe God hasn't answered our prayers? I think we all struggle with all kinds of questions about prayer. If God is love, why doesn't God answer my prayers the way I want? If I'm faithful and pray every day why doesn't God answer my prayers? Doesn't God know how much more we would love God if God answered all our prayers? What can we believe about prayer and its efficacy while at the same time struggle with these questions? First, I believe it's understanding what prayer is, and, for that matter, what prayer is not.

Years ago I read a book by theologian Matthew Fox that started me thinking about prayer in an almost totally new way. In his book On Being A Musical Mystical Bear. Fox points out that in the beginning Israel didn't even have a word for praying. Rather the word for praying was simply rejoicing, laughing, crying, hoping, imploring, singing.

In other words, prayer in the tradition of ancient Israel, was first understood as a response to life and to all of life's mysteries. In addition, in ancient Israel, there were rarely prescribed times for prayer nor was there any special language. In fact, you could say anything to God: you could lash out at God; you could even curse God; you could plead with God; you could cry with God; you could sing, speak, dance or chant; or you could simply be silent before God. According to ancient Israel there was really only one rule: absolute, utter honesty. Come to think of it, maybe that's not such a bad definition of prayer--'being utterly honest before God'.

But, I must admit, it was something else in the book that really caught my attention. It was a chapter entitled 'What Prayer is Not'. Among other things Fox argued that 'prayer is not causing God to change by our prayers. What do we mean by that? It means that if we believe that by our prayers we can prod God to act or intervene in ways that we want then that causes other kinds of problems. Think about that for a moment.

If we believe we can change God through our prayers then we are saying that God helps some but not others depending on prayer. To me that turns God into an unjust

judge who is by such actions or inactions, basically arbitrary and heartless. This turns God into a mercurial kind of God. What kind of God is it who will intervene when a group of people pray for the healing of a sick child in your town but who will, seemingly, ignore the pain of a starving and un-prayed-for nameless and faceless child in Kenya?

Nor can we avoid the question where has God been. If God be the answerer of prayer where was God in the modern world's killing fields, from Armenia to Auschwitz, from Cambodia, to Bosnia or Rwanda? Surely many of the victims prayed to God for deliverance. Why such maddening variations in God's responses? On the other hand, which is worse, or to put it another way, which is more bearable—to believe that God helps no one, or to believe that God helps some but not others because of prayer? One has to admit that we walk here on very thin ice.

But then you have Jesus' absolute belief in the concrete efficacy of prayer when he says: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. So where does all of this lead?

I believe this trifecta that Jesus speaks about goes back to how the ancient Israelites prayed. Think about it this way; what is it that you yearn for or hunger for or want fiercely, persistently and passionately? What if Jesus's lesson here is a lesson of permission? It's permission to name our longings and to acknowledge the desires which drive us? To state without reservation or embarrassment that all is not okay with us.

As I said, what the ancient Israelites understood was that prayer was being utterly honest before God and when we are honest we develop a deeper relationship with God. God becomes, in a very simple child like notion, a friend. Interestingly enough, this notion of friendship with God is a fundamental teaching in early literature on the Christian life. The early church leaders actually came to describe friendship with God as the goal of growth in the Christian life.

I am suggesting that it is from this place of friendship that we will find ourselves able to pray in good faith and hope more honestly. Think about the close friendships that you have and the qualities of that friendship. Qualities such as sharing deep concerns, being totally honest and transparent with each other. Always being there for that person no matter whether it is for support, a shoulder to cry on or to celebrate with. God longs for the healing and well-being of all human beings and for us to develop this type of friendship with God through prayer.

From this perspective, prayer becomes a matter of adding our concern and commitment for ourselves, for others, and for the world, alongside the concern of God. It is a kind of 'conspiring with God toward the healing of creation'. But it also goes to say that we shouldn't expect our friendship with God means getting what we want when we pray. Terrible things happen—and are happening at this moment—which we simply can't understand. What we do know is that God desires our friendship and that God is always with us.

You know what consistently gets overlooked in this passage about prayer is the last line of the gospel. In that last line Jesus promises one thing and one thing only about prayer. He says, "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!" What Jesus promises us in answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit. That's it. That's all. There is no other promise or guarantee. Here's the actual promise: when we pray, when we persist in prayer, when we name our longings in prayer without fear or compromise, God

will never fail to give us God's own, abundant, indwelling and overflowing self as the answer we actually need. Even when we resist prayer, God will not withhold God's loving, consoling, healing, transforming, and empowering Spirit from us. When it comes to no-holds-barred, absolutely self-giving generosity, God's answer to all of our prayers will always be Yes I am with you.

So, we pray. We pray because Jesus wants us to. We pray because it's what God's children do. We pray because we yearn and our yearning is precious to God. And we pray because what we need most — whether we recognize it or not — is God's own Spirit pouring God's self into us. With words, without words, through laughter, through tears, in hope, and in despair, our prayers usher in God's Spirit, and remind us that we are not alone in this broken, aching world. God's Spirit is our Yes. God's Spirit is our guarantee.

I'll end with this poem by Edwina Gateley that sums up prayer beautifully. It's called Silent God.

This is my prayer—
That, though I may not see,
I be aware
Of the Silent God
Who stands by me.
That, though I may not feel,
I be aware
Of the Mighty Love
Which doggedly follows me.
That, though I may not respond,
I be aware
That God—my Silent, Mighty God,
Waits each day.
Quietly, hopefully, persistently.
Waits each day and through each night
For me.
For me—alone.
Amen.