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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Luke 11:1-13

God of Wisdom, you promise to give your Spirit to those who ask. Overwhelm us with your word, that we may know you more fully, love you more passionately, and follow you more closely; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

11 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." 2 He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

3 Give us each day our daily bread.

4 And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

5 And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, 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.

9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 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!"

“Prayer”

Does God answer prayer? *Does God answer prayer?*

This is the question I want to explore with you today.

Does God answer prayer?

Even as I ask it, it seems awfully bold to ask it, because I don't presume to know the answer – I'm not sure anyone knows the answer – but I do have some thoughts to share that might help us poke around the edge of an answer.

The topic of does God answer prayer also seems timely, given all of the things we're being asked to pray for, or tell people we're praying for, what with all the violence in our country and world, not to mention our own personal struggles at home or at work or with family or friends. There's a lot to pray for these days.

When I learned of the shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, I quickly sent Tola a text message asking him to change the sign message that I'd originally planned. I wanted to say on the sign that our thoughts and prayers are with Orlando and the people affected – and I think we ended up with something to that effect on the sign. But I'll be honest with you and tell you that the phrase “our prayers are with Orlando” sounded a little too hollow and cliché to me, like it just wasn't enough anymore to say we're praying, because I'm tired of praying after such attacks. And what exactly am I praying for? Presbyterians don't normally pray for the dead, like our Catholic friends do, because we believe that in death people are with God, and if you're with God you aren't in need of prayer. So if I'm not praying for the victims, for whom or what am I praying? Well, I'm praying for

- The families of the victims, of course.
- The city of Orlando.
- The people affected by the tragedy, such as the first responders and medical personnel, friends, partners.
- But I'm also praying for an end to violence. To the violence. That this won't happen again.

Yet there hasn't been an end to the violence, has there? Baton Rouge, Dallas, Nice, Ballwin . . . all of these places have been affected by terrorism or gun violence. And of course there are the lesser known, less publicized violent attacks that occur on a daily basis.

So there's still violence even though I'm praying for an end to it.

Does God answer prayer or not? And if God does answer, why isn't God answering this prayer? Because this is an important prayer. It's not like I'm praying that great Janis Joplin song: "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? / My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends." I can see why God wouldn't answer that prayer, even if it would be really awesome if God did! I'm praying for something important. Praying for an end to violence is the same as praying for God's kingdom to come – and that's what Jesus told us to pray for when the disciples asked him how they should pray. So what's wrong here? Are you listening or not, God?

Some people will say that God always answers prayer, but sometimes the answer is no. Which I can buy if I am indeed praying for a Mercedes Benz, but I'm not. Nor do I believe God wants violence to continue any more than I do. Saying that God answers prayer but sometimes the answer is no in the case of a Nice or Dallas or Baton Rouge or Ballwin, is the equivalent of saying God is OK with these things happening, we just don't know **why** God is OK with it. And I'm not at all OK with saying God is OK. That is not in my theological wheelhouse of beliefs.

And telling people, "well, sometimes God says no", is not exactly what Jesus says in our Luke reading. Jesus uses the example of going to your neighbor in the middle of the night and asking for a loaf of bread. Which might sound to us like a weird thing to do, but hospitality was of paramount importance in the biblical world, and when a guest arrived -- even unexpected, even at midnight -- there was no question that hospitality must be extended. So when the man in the story finds himself without enough bread for his guest, he goes to a friend and asks to borrow some, even though he must wake up his friend's entire household.

"Do not bother me," the friend answers from within. "The door has already been locked, and my children are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything" (11:7). Today, we'd probably empathize with the woken-up friend and think that the midnight caller is pushing the limits of friendship . . . at least I would. But in the

culture of the biblical world, it is the woken-up friend who is behaving badly. The ability of his friend to provide hospitality, and thus his honor, is at stake.

Jesus says that the man will eventually respond to his friend's request, not because he is a friend, but because of his friend's shamelessness, which is a much better translation of the Greek word used in the original text than "persistence". (11:8). His friend displays no shame in asking for help to meet the requirements of hospitality. No shame at all.

And it's that utter lack of shamelessness that teaches us something very important about prayer, something we normally overlook, and it's this:

What if were to be utterly shameless in our prayers, meaning we prayed to God with utter boldness and confidence, trusting that God will respond generously?

In other words, instead of praying quietly with our heads bowed, "please put an end to this violence, Lord. We ask you, Lord, make it stop." We prayed with eyes wide open, shamelessly, audaciously -- put an end to this violence, Lord.

Maybe then we wouldn't just sit back and wait for God to answer, treating our prayers like they're a message sent to a genie in a bottle, but acted like we're praying to God – the very God who responds more generously than any of our parents would ever do. Maybe then we would start moving, get to work, and actually start living into the reality of what we've prayed for.

In other words, rather than only praying for someone who is lonely, we'd go and visit them after we'd prayed. Or rather than pray for someone who is sick, we'd lend them a helping hand. Rather than praying for an end to violence, maybe we'd campaign against the legality of military-grade semi-automatic weapons, or protest when police use unnecessary force, or go visit the police station to tell officers that we'm grateful for their service and pray for the safety. You get the idea.

Pope Francis: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works." Sounds good to me. Also sounds in keeping with today's story. Maybe this is why Jesus spent so much time teaching the disciples how to be do-ers of the word before he taught them how to pray.

Look, I know this doesn't answer all of our questions about prayer, and it certainly doesn't ease the pain of when we feel our prayers are not heard. But it does invite us to imagine that as we live into the future we pray for, we are in fact praying shamelessly. As we work for the dignity and rights of others, we are praying shamelessly. As we comfort those in need, visit those who are imprisoned, feed those who are hungry, we are praying shamelessly...and perhaps being used by God to answer another person's – or even our own! – prayer.

I want to add that none of this means that the words we say alone in moments of thanksgiving or desperation isn't prayer, or the right way to prayer or unworthy of offering to God. They are. Same goes for the prayers we share with others, gathered in the sanctuary or around a hospital bed.

But sometimes prayer is action, or needs to become action, as we try to bring about those things we pray for. So let us pray shamelessly, confident that the God who came in Jesus understands our hurts and disappointments because that God took them on. Because God in Jesus not only endured the life we lived, but died the death that awaits us, and was raised again to show that even death does not have the last word and that all things are possible for God.

And so let us pray shamelessly, because there are so many people who need our prayers. People who are dying and don't need to. People who are lonely and welcome friendship. People who are excluded and waiting to be invited in. All kinds of people. So let's get started praying... and let's do it shamelessly.

Amen.