

Navigating stumbling blocks of praying for specific people and things: prayer of petition. Few stories to set stage. First a joke

Episcopal friends have a standard: *Why doesn't God fix world poverty?* He's too busy finding parking spaces for Evangelicals.

My story: *When daughter was 9, I couldn't find keys.* Amy saw my distress, "God, show Dad where his keys are—by count of 10" ...started count-down. Between 10 & 3 I'm crafting age-appropriate explanation why it doesn't work that way. By 3, I found my keys. At same time, son suffering from debilitating headache—missed most of 9th grade. Prayed every which way (and I had many)—including yelling at God, crying, vowing to stop praying.

Here's another: **Johnny & Amber** have had foster kids. They fall in love with these kids who are sometimes sent back to difficult situations. So intensely aware: some have massive advantages over others...like growing up in a stable family...but also having people who pray for you. If prayer has a positive affect on outcomes, that just seems to be part of gross unfairness of things.

Third: I have a praying friend, call her Annette. She prays for me and Emily and I pray for her when she asks. Often it's about her adult child, who like Annette is from a local first nations tribe. Her son has encountered some real discrimination in justice system—and this makes Annette really angry, at Creator—especially it seems like prayer doesn't override that discrimination. I feel that too because the more I pray for her adult child, I get angry too.

OK I've described the dilemma. Now how do I navigate it?

First, some perspectives that shape how I navigate this.

As people affected by Western European culture, we're pre-occupied with question: **Does it work?** But there are other questions, Is it beautiful? Loving? Good? Our culture tells us "Does it work" is important thing: "utilitarianism" pickled in it.

I don't stress too much about whether prayer works or not. Seems impossible to prove prayer works or doesn't. Correlation (two things occurring at same time) not cause. Many examples of prayer for someone occurring just before remarkable change of

fortunes (dad coming out coma) Nancy praying for Peace Corps woman—vision. No way to prove prayer *caused* this.

More convinced Spirit guides us in prayer than that prayer affects outcomes. (I hope, I think, but big mystery) Different kind of praying than petition. I like meditative prayer because in my experience it opens me up to Spirit guiding, nudging, prompting.

I think petition-prayer as something we can't help doing. Most people do this whether or not they have a defined spirituality or religious faith. We can't help ourselves. We can't help wondering if there's a benevolent power behind it all, in a pinch—we pray, even if we are atheist. It's not harmful, like smoking, why stop?

Also: don't think it's helpful to understand God as force that controls everything. (If it's true, it's so mysterious as to be incomprehensible.) Love in end, prevails. In meantime, we're free to be ourselves, creation is too. It's not all a complicated puppet with God pulling strings. God has agency-influence but not absolute control. Helps me not to blame God for everything.

Also helps me not fall into religious passivity.

Dream as a young pastor accumulating "Why God?" questions. Press conference in ante-chamber of next life. Take questions.

Now some navigational tips:

Diversify how you pray. Easy to get in a rut where prayer of petition is lion share of praying. Diversify: **AA** says memorize a few go-to prayers (Serenity Prayer.) Ease into **meditative prayer**— (like we do after sermons) Do prayer **with others** (like we do here). **Thanksgiving** "Don't be anxious, make your requests known to God with thanksgiving...and peace of God" [not outcome focus]

Fundamental point of prayer is to nurture contact with God.

It's part of dancing with God or involving God in your life.

Perplexing questions of petitionary prayer become more frustrating when we do it in **isolation**. (Another cultural tendency we have—rugged individualism which leads to isolation.)

Make a good chunk of your petitionary prayer **with others**.

- Prayer for loved ones on Sunday is so moving for me.
- Vespers prayers (format)

Try trading your prayer burden with someone else. A prayer burden is when you're praying for some chronic seemingly unyielding thing. You're getting frustrated. Trade your frustrating thing with someone else for a while. Your daughter is in-out of rehab and seems to be going nowhere. Fifth year. I have some tangled up financial mess that's distressing me deeply. When you think about your daughter, pray for my mess. When I think about my mess, I pray for your daughter ***"Bear each other's burden, so fulfill the law of Christ. Each person has their own load to carry"***

I keep doing petitionary prayer because it **seems to help enough** to keep going, and even when it doesn't "work"—doesn't seem to affect the positive outcome I was praying for—fact of **desiring the positive outcome and praying for the person** feels like a legitimate form of love. Love always helps.

Here's something you can take or leave: I think love is a **mystical power** that can be channeled by prayer over a distance and even if the prayer doesn't make what you want to happen happen, the love happens. The love has an effect.

That kind of mystical love is no replacement for loving people in ways that not mystical. Giving someone money who needs it is better than praying for them to get money. If you can't give prayer is good. Better to give and pray than to give alone.

Final thing. I relate to Jesus as a guru. He's extra gifted in spiritual things, so I try to take his advice and let him guide me.

I think Jesus uses petitionary prayer to **shape our desires** (credit Emily) and he gave us a prayer that **guides the things we pray** for: Lord's prayer.

To keep it fresh because it's so familiar, I'm using this translation that hews closely to the original language (David Bartley Hart)

Pray in this way: ***'Our father in the heavens, let you name be held as holy; Let your kingdom come; let your will come to pass, as in heaven so also upon earth; Give us today bread for tomorrow (or daily bread); Excuse us our debts just as we have excused our debtors. And do not bring us to trial, but rescue us from him who is wicked.***

Sidebar: experiment with **"our mother...your good realm come"**

Six petitions recommended—each is designed to shape desire.

(Emily: desire is **imitative-contagious**; prayer shapes our desires)

1. **Let your name (God) be held as holy.** Interesting: first one is prayer for God, not ourselves or others. Good for the whole she-bang if God isn't confused with not-God (esp. important in world where rulers claimed divinity). Channels our desire for fame.
2. **Let your will come to pass—as in heaven so on earth.** God wants to **inflame** our desire for justice. It's really not enough that things go well for us and our peeps. (MLK Long arm of universe tends toward justice; desire of God: justice for all—everywhere)

Johnny's dilemma: her feeling—it's not fair some people have advantages of birth (privilege) That's right—that desire is one shaped by God.

3. **Give us daily bread.** In our society we have **inflamed-inflated consumer desire** for all sort of things (words to Friends—car seat organizer) This petition is channeling that kind of desire to basics.

4. **Excuse our debts as we excuse our debtors.** Re-directing our **desire for vengeance** into **desire for reconciliation** wherever possible. (We would create a different criminal justice system)

5. **Save (or keep) us from the time of trial.** We often fear a horrible future situation—child like desire “save us from that”

6. **Save us from “him who is wicked”**—people in power who are corrupt, out for themselves, willing to run roughshod.

Praying like this, shapes our desires, shapes our petitions.

So our prayers of petition aren't, in a sense, self-generated.

They are imitative—mirroring God's desires.

QUIET REFLECTION (Prayers of the People, BCP)