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“Prayer: Why Bother?”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

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Luke 11: 1-13

My standing order at Starbucks is this: Café Latte, Grande, decaf, low-fat milk,
no sugar or sweetener.

After the clerk behind the counter deposits my money and writes my name
on the paper cup, she calls back to the busy barista: one *Why Bother*.

Why bother drinking something as good as coffee if you deny its caffeine kick?

Why bother drinking something so beautifully topped with frothy foam
if the milk is practically water?

Why bother drinking something almost like a dessert mousse or trifle
if it doesn't taste sweet?

By same token, why bother launching a prayer

if you perceive the recipient to be randomly responsive? Why bother?

If I were to pound on the door of a good friend at midnight

and urgently beg for something to feed my starving guest,
and that self-serving friend won't to get up out of bed and come to the door

for fear of waking his own well-fed children,

then what's the point of all the pleading and the pounding?

Twice in my career as a minister, I have been summoned to someone's home,

knocked softly on the door and pushed it open to enter,

only to find a person curled in the fetal position in grief.
One was an elderly man suffering from dementia who had just lost his
wife of sixty-some years, the wife who remembered **for** him
how to fill his days-of-the-week pill box, which pants and shirts clash,
when not to nap, and how to navigate from hither to yon.
But he remembered *well enough* to realize that she was his lifeline,
and that having lost her, he had lost the names and phone numbers of friends,
the back stories of their children's lives,
the daily order of breakfast, lunch and dinner, the traditions of their holidays,
and as such, he was as helpless and as dependent as a newborn.
Another was a young woman, whom I arrived to find curled up in a ball
under the dining room table. Still mourning the death of her only child,
she now was faced with the departure of her spouse,
who had announced that he needed space apart to grieve at his own pace.
They were both in places of deep lament, the prayer which bypasses words
but which flies straight to the heart of God, raw and uncensored.

Pastor Dominique Gillard says this about lament:

"Somewhere along the way, we modern Christians got lament wrong:

we began thinking of it as optional instead of a required practice of the faith.

A strange word to modern ears, 'lamentation' feels inherently ancient.

It brings to mind images of an overwrought demonstration of mourning—
sackcloth and ashes, 'wailing and gnashing of teeth' of biblical proportions.

More than the mere expression of sorrow and regret, however,

lamentation is a powerful act, one that the church

desperately needs to reclaim, he says.

In our world of nonstop news and social media,

lamentation is an essential and even revolutionary act.

Scripture suggests that lamentation is a liturgical act

that reorients and transforms us.

Lamentation is uncensored communion with God—visceral worship
where we learn to be honest, intimate, and humble before God.

Lamentation is both an acknowledgment that things are not as they should be
and an anguished wail, beckoning the Lord to intervene....

(Dominique D. Gillard. www.faithandleadership.com/dominique-d-gilliard-reclaiming-power-lament)

The practice of lament reminds me of a scene from one of my favorite old movies,

The Princess Bride, where in a dream, Princess Buttercup

has agreed to a political marriage to the unsavory Prince Humperdinck.

And when she steps out of the castle to be introduced to her new would-be subjects,
an old crone stands and protests loudly from the crowd:

“Boo, boo! Because you had love in your hands,

and you gave it up. Boo! Your true love lives and you marry another.

Boo, boo, boo!”

(based on book by William Goldman. *The Princess Bride*. 1987)

When we sense a failure of love, either a misdirection of love

or a love of the right things in the wrong way, we boo and we lament.

Jesus does not have to teach us how to do that; we do that automatically

when things are not as we had hoped and dreamed they would be.

When a disturbed young white man is invited into an AME Church in Charleston,

sits through their bible study, and then shoots and kills nine of their members,
we lament.

When a lone shooter kills 49 and wounds 53 at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando,

we lament.

When Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray,

and now Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and other young black men

keep losing their lives to overreactive police violence, we lament,

as we do also, when police are picked off randomly in Dallas or in Baton Rouge.

When the gun violence just will not stop, not even for a week,

and innocent lives are lost, we lament.

When a child suffers or dies, when a suicide occurs, when disease strikes,
when accidents happen, when love dies, when divorce takes place,
we lament.

Jesus doesn't have to teach lament; it is inherent, I think,
in the preamble to his prayer:

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

The Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of lament for those who have died,
begins similarly, "Magnified and sanctified be your great name."

Our lament for things amiss, for failures of love,
and our hope for things to be put aright in the age to come,
"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,"
are the first words off Jesus' lips as instruction to prayer.

But why bother if someone you thought you knew as friend, as BFF,
won't budge at night to answer to your request
or if someone as close as a parent won't provide for a child's basic needs?
Why bother to ask, to pray, to direct our laments towards God,
to pray as Jesus himself prayed?

Perhaps it is because prayer was an integral part of Jesus' life.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is frequently glimpsed at prayer:

when overwhelmed by crowds, he withdraws to lonely places to pray (5:16);
after a non-restful Sabbath of defending a why-wait-until-tomorrow healing,
and before choosing twelve allies to join his defense team,

he heads up a mountainside to rest the night in prayer (6:13);
following the exhaustive but miraculous feeding of the 5,000, he retreats
to pray in private (9:18);

before his arrest, as was his custom even when he was not about to be arrested,
he visits the Mount of Olives, where he withdraws about a stone's throw
from his friends, and pleads that this cup of suffering

might be taken from him (22:41-42);
and even from the cross, he prays to his Father to forgive those who
transgress out of ignorance (23:34);
and with his next to the last breath,
he commends his spirit into his Father's hands (23:46).

Because Jesus *bothered to pray*,
because prayer was as integral to Jesus' life as eating fish,
as being with friends at midnight, as dealing with difficult people,
as making tough decisions, as living, as breathing and as dying,
he commends the practice to us.

Prayer was not just something that Jesus did.

Prayer was an essential part of who Jesus was. He was a pray-er.
He was *The Prayer* of a fallen world, given voice through prophets, priests and kings.
He was *The Prayerful Word of God*, made flesh and blood.
He was God's loving response to the lament of the ages, embodied for the world.

Jesus model prayer is quite simple: five short sentences.

The first two are directed towards God, setting a tone of respect and expectation
of the coming reign of God on earth that is not yet realized.

The other three are petitions, uttered out of urgency, need, perhaps even desperation:
bread to stave off starvation, absolution to assuage guilt,
protection for the lost and vulnerable whose faith now is on the line.

Ask, seek, and knock, Jesus tells his disciples,
for EVERYONE, not just the deserving, but ANYONE can open the door
and access God by merely asking.

And if we feel that we are met with a wall of silence or a locked door
when we pray, then why bother:
because even a fair-weather friend will finally come down and open the door to us

at midnight, just to keep us from continuing to knock;
because even a dead-beat dad will not respond to his own child's request for
food with a stinging insect or a snake;
because God is neither fair-weathered nor dead-beat;
and because God *requests to be bothered* by our asking, knocking and seeking.
Who knows, perhaps God even likes to be so bothered.

And even if you don't feel like praying at some point, or feel that you can't pray,
then you probably already are praying a lament, praying the voiceless,
guttural prayer that goes straight to the heart of God,
booing against the way things are, the way things should not be.
And then, too, God, the good friend, the good parent, gives us the Holy Spirit,
which "helps us in our weakness, with sighs too deep for words"
(Rom. 8:26-27).

I've told the story before, but it's worth repeating,
about trying to put our son, Stuart, to bed
when he was a little thing, when he would stall relentlessly,
asking for water, another story, another toy in his bed.
And once we had all of that straightened out and taken care of,
I said to him, "Stuart, say your prayers." And he was quiet.
"Stuart," I said. "I've about had it with your stalling. Say your prayers, please."
And he was quiet still longer.
And finally, in exasperation I said. "Stuart, this is it.
If you don't say your prayers, I'm turning out the light and leaving."
"Shhhh," he said. "I'm listening to God."

Mary Oliver's poem on *Praying* goes like this:

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

(Oliver, Mary. *Thirst*. "Praying," p. 37)

Amen.