

October 20, 2019

'Don't Lose Heart!'
Rev. Jane Courtright

Luke 18:1-8

The day of my 'official' Ordination into the Christian Ministry,
more than 25 years ago, was for me,
a day of many feelings and revelations!

Have you ever noticed that on days like these,
when family and friends gather for an occasion or rite of passage –
like a wedding, funeral, graduation, baptism....
any things which we have been only partially aware of
BECOME CRYSTAL CLEAR.

One of the insights I experienced involved the presence
of my family at my ordination and the answering of prayer.

At one point during the service, I became extraordinarily aware
of the presence and participation of my family.
It was almost as though they had spotlights shining on them,
or a beaming heat radiating from where they sat or stood.

I watched and listened as my son Phil & my sister Diana,
both nervous, but proud, read scripture.
As I walked down the center aisle at the end of the servicem
I saw the proud and loving faces of my mother and father.
Now, ordinarily, a family's presence at someone's ordination,
WOULD BE moving and supportive!

But for me, it was MUCH MORE.
Their presence on that day was a continuing answer to a prayer-
a prayer which I had begun to pray when I was 10 years old.

As I have shared with some of you,
my family did not attend church during my childhood.

Yet, I always seemed to be searching for God,
for a place to ask questions, to learn, to worship.

There WERE a few times when I attended church
with friends or by myself.

When I was 10 years old, we lived in New Jersey,
and I took an old rickety blue bus every Sunday
for about a year and one half,
to the Full Gospel Assembly of God Church.

At this point in my spiritual journey, it was my most fervent prayer
that my parents would convert and go to church with me!
in my 10 year old mind, I expected that if I prayed hard and enough
times,
my mom and dad would one day have a miraculous conversion
experience,
go to my church....and in front of all present,
accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and friend.

This DID NOT happen as I expected it to happen,
and over time, I quit consciously and verbally
praying for such a conversion.

But I did NOT quit loving my parents,
And I did NOT quit my search for God.

On the day of my ordination, with my family
proudly present and participating, it hit me with full force....
that God was answering the prayer I had first prayed
as a 10 year old child.

My family was in church with me. And my parents were,
in their own way, and in GOD'S TIME, on their own spiritual journeys.

I knew that this process had been happening through the years.
But on that day, I had a moment of clarity.
the essence of the answer to a 10 year old's prayer
shone clearly through that moment...often called an 'Epiphany.'

HOW HAD THIS PRAYER BEEN ANSWERED...
AND WHAT IS THE SECRET TO PRAYER?

According to Jesus, in this week's gospel passage,
by far the most important thing about praying is to keep at it!
The images he uses to explain this are all rather comic,
as though he thought it rather comic to have to explain it at ALL!

Elsewhere in the gospel of Luke, Jesus says God is like a friend,
that you go to borrow bread from at midnight.
The friend tells you to drop dead, but you go on knocking anyhow...
until finally, she gives you whatever you want,
just so that she can go back to bed again!

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that even a stinker
won't give his child a black eye when he asks for p'nut butter & jelly...
So how much more will God give when God's children ask!

The gospel passage which we shared minutes ago,
is another parable which Jesus told to explore the meaning of prayer.

As we've learned in our adult series thus far,
these parables seem simple on the surface.
PERSISTENT PRAYER WILL BE ANSWERED BY GOD.

This is true.

But then, we might ask the question:
"Is it true then, that I need only to ask for what I want,

and eventually, I will get it from this generous God?"

Well.....like the answers to many of life's questions,
YES, AND NO.

There is more to prayer than meets the eye, so to speak!

On my ordination, as I thought about God's answer to my prayer,
I began to realize some things about prayer:

PUT SIMPLY, I REALIZED:

- #1: that God's answers to our prayers
may not be what we expect or demand,
- #2: that we ourselves are PARTICIPANT
in the answers to our prayers,
- #3 that we have to trust in God's wisdom & timing!

Our cooperation with God is absolutely essential in the answering of
prayer.

We can't count on God as the easy way out!

Suppose, for example,
that you have to take an important test at school...
and you've done absolutely NO studying or preparation.
You go into class and sit down, read the test,
and realize that you don't know the answer to ANY question!

Suppose then, you pray to God that you'll pass the test.
SUCH A PRAYER HAS A SLIM CHANCE TO BE ANSWERED.
Suppose you HAD studied for the test,
but found yourself nervous on the day of the test.
You might pray to God to give you the calm and memory
to pass the test, and that prayer could be answered,
because you had done your part!

When we pray for the homeless or hungry to be helped, or the grieving to be comforted, or the sick to be encouraged; our prayers are half-hearted, insincere, and ineffective.... Unless we do WE can for the very people for whom we pray.

THIS IS ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN PRAYER!

A woman named Susan was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. As her disease progressed, she prayed for a cure or for the ability to cope. Of course, as time went on, this disease changed the way Susan could work at her career. She handled these changes by working as usual until she could no longer hang on. After a lot of anger and stubbornness, Susan quit business as usual.

Slowly, though, Susan began to cooperate with God in prayer. Susan herself remembers, "I came to trust in prayer. I began to trust that SOMETHING would turn up. Once, it was an idea that popped into my head. Another time, it was an unusual request by someone to do a task That seemed to come out of nowhere! A year ago, that person would not have come to me... or if they had, I would have dismissed their idea!"

Susan says, "I hesitate to put this in religious language, but I seem to be in some kind of partnership with God. Whenever God sees that I am doing my part in my prayer, God sends my way...an idea, or a person with a request. Somehow, when I don't give up, neither does God!"

Seems that when it comes to God's wisdom and timing, we are like someone who pops into a theatre in the middle of a play of a movie and then leaves.

We haven't seen the beginning and we can't see the end.
We can only see the little bit at which we are present.
So, we might be impatient & disappointed in prayer –
but there may be something much better & different in store for us!

When I was 10 years old, I imagined that the answer to my prayer
would be my parent's sudden conversion and presence at church.
I was given, at that age, to making DEALS with God!
I even remember fasting for almost one day –
Alas, a toasted tomato sandwich undid my fast!

Prayer is not something we can manipulate!
But what I wouldn't have given to have my parents in church with me!
Little did I realize at that point what I would ultimately give:

*My participation in helping to make the prayer come true-
would be the faith to continue searching for God in my life.

*My trust in God's timing and wisdom – I learned that prayer
is a process , a partnership with God which is never fully over.

Fred Buechner writes that Jesus tells us to be persistent in prayer,
“not because one assumes that you have to beat a path
to God's door before God will open it, but because UNTIL you beat the
path....
maybe there is no way of God getting TO your door.”

Let's continue, with our thought, words, breaths, and lives...
To PRAY, PRAY, PRAY, PRAY, PRAY, PRAY, PRAY!
Amen.