"When the Answer Doesn't Come"

I was visiting a shutin once – a lady chronically ill. After a pleasant visit, where we talked a bit about her illness and how she was doing, I asked if she'd like me to pray with her. Her response

was, "Oh, I don't know. It doesn't do any good." This lady put simply and bluntly what most people at one time or other have felt! We don't have to get very far in our praying to come smack up against this problem: We pray, and nothing seems to happen. Our prayer doesn't seem to be answered.

Jesus must have known that we can become discouraged when this happens, because He told a parable to encourage us to keep on praying. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). It's a story about an unjust judge. Apparently this was an incident that easily could have happened in Palestine. Judges appointed by Herod or the Romans were notoriously crooked and guilty of taking bribes.

In Jesus' story a widow comes before one of these unscrupulous judges who neither fears God nor others. He isn't at all concerned about her cry for justice. What does she have to benefit him? The widow has no money to buy justice. She possesses no power to force the judge into taking notice. But she has one thing going for her: *her persistence!* She doesn't give up! (It's hard to know whether Jesus told this story with a grin or a straight face!). She pesters the daylights out of Him until He finally says, "This woman's driving me crazy!"

She keeps dogging him to give her justice. "For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming'" (Luke 18:4-5). The words, "wear me out" literally mean lest she "assault me" or "give me a

black eye"!

In this parable, Jesus *contrasts* the unrighteous judge with God: If a crooked judge will answer the woman's request just to get her off his back, *how much more* will God give us good things in response to our persistent praying! "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

Yet, it's easy to lose heart, isn't it! We pray and pray and pray about something, and nothing seems to be happening. Sooner or later, if we're serious about having a prayer life, we have to tackle this thorny issue of unanswered prayer.

Perhaps a good place to start is to say that the attitude many of us bring to prayer and answers to prayer is off track. Some people believe that if we can just discover some secret formula, if we can just push the right buttons, we're guaranteed that God will give us what we ask for. I saw a magazine advertisement claiming, "You can have your prayers answered." Readers were told to write to a certain address (and send money). I saw an old rerun of the TV program "Different Strokes." Arnold has done something to make his older brother Willis angry. In his comical way, he spits out a prayer for help. Instantly, Willis has a change of heart. Arnold is dumfounded, looks up to God with an appreciative look, and says, "Boy, that's quick service."

Unfortunately, some people have this childish, kindergarten level view of prayer, that God is at

our service, and if we can just pray the right way God will show up with what we want.

That's not what prayer is meant to be. *God's primary interest is not to give us things we want, but to build a relationship with us so we're in tune with what God wants.* Certainly we can ask for things. Jesus plainly told us to pray for our own needs, and the needs of others. God delights in giving us good things! He said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). But building and maintaining a relationship with God through prayer is more important than just getting God to give us things we want and think we need. Praying is not just about *getting.* It's about *becoming* – growing in my relationship with God and becoming more the person God wants me to be!

Ok, let's get back to the question of why some prayers aren't answered. *Are there things that hinder or block our prayers from being answered?* Yes. I believe Scripture tells us that.

*For one thing, willful sin and disobedience to God can keep our prayers from being answered.*

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:15). Micah spoke for God when the prophet wrote: "Then they will cry out to the Lord, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done" (Micah 3:4). It's good to hear this as a healthy corrective to the sentimental notion that we can willfully sin against God and expect Him to hear us and answer our requests.

This doesn't mean that if there's *any sin* in our life we shouldn't pray, or that God won't hear our prayers. We'd never pray if that were the case. But it's the *willful* sin, I believe, that hinders our prayers. Perhaps this is what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote this: "If I had *cherished* iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18). If I've never confessed my sins to God and trusted Christ as my Savior, if I'm a believers and there are sins in my life that I just want to hold onto…this will be a stumbling block to effective praying.

Willful sin and disobedience to God can keep our prayers from being answered. Also, *asking for selfish things can hinder answers to prayer.* James 4:2b-3 says, "You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings" (Common English Bible). Sometimes our prayer requests can be selfish and short-sighted. A little boy was asked, "Do you pray every day?" He answered, "Nope. Some days I don't want anything." It's like the single young lady who said she prayed, "Dear Lord, I'm not

praying for a husband. I know that's selfish. I'm just praying for my mother – that she can have a son-in-law." The Bible says we are to pray "in Jesus' name". Part of that means we should ask for things in keeping with *His will and character* (not selfish and foolish things).

God loves us too much to overindulge us with our whims! What happens to children who are given just about everything they want? They're often spoiled, right? Feeling entitled. A problem to themselves and others. So, if our prayers aren't being answered, it's good to ask: Is what I'm asking for selfish? Is it more for the furtherance of "me" than the furtherance of God's

- 2 -

kingdom and glory? So, two things can hinder our prayers being answered: (1) willfull sin and disobedience to God; (2) selfish requests.

But I suspect that many of us can think of a lot of unanswered prayers where the problem isn't that our heart isn't right with God, or that we just wanted something selfish. We've prayed for things that seem good. They don't seem to violate God's commands or purposes. So what about these unanswered prayers?

As I've thought about this, and struggled at times with my own unanswered prayers, let me suggest a few additional reasons for unanswered prayers. First of all, *sometimes God says "Wait".*

*We ourselves may not be ready to receive what we're asking for.* For instance, maybe we are praying for an advancement in our job, but we're not skilled enough yet to handle a promotion.

*Sometimes God says "Wait" because the other pieces aren't in place.* You may be praying for a house, but the house God wants for you isn't up for sale yet. Or, you're praying for a husband or wife, but the person God has in mind for you may not be available yet!

When God says "Wait" that's usually hard isn't it. We don't like to wait. But some important things can happen during these times of waiting. These can be times when we can *grow and mature.* When things come easily, or quickly, it often keeps us shallow. Often it's the tough

times, the agonizing times, in which we mature the most. These waiting periods can be times when we *develop a stronger prayer life and more reliance on God.* They can be times when we *grow closer to God.*

And sometimes when we pray and we're waiting for God to answer our prayers, we come to realize that *what we thought we wanted or needed isn't really that important.* In my own experience, sometimes after praying for something for a while, it becomes less and less important – or I see things differently – and I just kind of move on. What was once a big deal, isn't so anymore. *Sometimes God says, "Wait".*

*Sometimes God says, "No."* Not because God is mean and stubborn. But because He loves us.

It's like wise and loving parents who sometimes say "no" to their children. "No," when the 5 year old wants to drive the riding mower. "No", when the teenager who just got his or her driver's license wants to drive some kids to New York City.

*God sees that what looks good and sensible to us might not be good in the long run.* God sees all the factors involved; we don't. Something we ask for might be good for us, but affect someone else adversely.

*Sometimes God says "No" because He has other plans for us!* What God has in mind is even *better* than what we have in mind!

- 3 -

Sometimes God says, "No".When that happens, to us it seems like He's not answering. But in God's eyes, that's His way of answering!

We've seen that sometimes prayers are not answered because God says, "Wait", or God says, "No". And finally, *sometimes our prayers aren't answered, and we don't know why.* (You may be thinking, "I was afraid you were going to say that!). But it's true. We can't understand God completely, nor grasp all the mystery surrounding our Creator. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" We may not like this, but it's true, isn't it.

I believe, however, that things we can't understand now, we will understand on the other side, in eternity. As the Apostle Paul wrote: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

But this doesn't mean we shouldn't give it all we got when we lay our wants and needs before the Lord. Jesus told the parable about the unjust judge to remind us to "pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). For even when we're praying, and it seems like our prayer isn't being answered, God can be at work, and a lot of good can be happening that we're not aware of!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*

*Community United Methodist Church*

*September 26, 2021*

- 4 -