

Acts 10: 1-23

The Mechanics of Prayer

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is Prayer. Miriam Webster says that Prayer is an address or petition to God in word or thought. According to Wikipedia the word Prayer comes from the Latin and means to ask earnestly or to entreat. Some people think of prayer as a repetition of standard holy phrases. Others think of prayer as a solemn, request for help. Some use prayer as their last-ditch effort when things have reached an emergency status and all other avenues of help have failed to work.

But Prayer has many dimensions. You can pray in a group or individually. You can pray in worship or at home. You can pray with words, with songs or with silence. I like the notion, which is strong in Judaism that, at its heart, prayer is a conversation with God. Hebrew scholars say that prayers are not simply requests to God, but the habit of setting aside this time to think about God. Prayer reminds **us** that we need God. Talking to God cultivates a deeper awareness of the spiritual dimension of life, and helps us to see that life is more meaningful when we take this quality of prayer into consideration.

How do you cultivate a relationship with a Supreme Being who is vast as the ocean, the author of galaxies and yet as close as each breath you take? How do you speak to the One who invented language itself? How do you approach your Heavenly Father and how does prayer really work? Let's look at this story in Acts; it will give us a glimpse into the mechanics of prayer.

In the first place nobody is an expert when it comes to praying. We are all novices. The story we read today begins with a man of great faith, a man named Cornelius. He happened to be a Roman centurion but the Bible is clear about his devotion. Cornelius respected God. He set a good example for his whole household and was so exemplary that they all had deep faith also. Cornelius had integrity and he gave alms to the poor. The Bible says that he **prayed constantly**. Yet when he was praying in the 10th chapter of Acts he had a vision of

an angel and the angel told him to seek the help of a Jewish man, a disciple of Jesus. This prayer baffled him a great deal but he sent messengers to Peter to learn more. Even with all his experience in prayer, Cornelius was confused.

The Pew Research Center found in 2013 that 55% of Americans say that they pray daily. Another 23% pray weekly or monthly. With all those Americans talking to God you would imagine that we would be surrounded by experts on prayer. But in fact prayer does not work like that. We are all newbies when it comes to prayer. That takes some of the pressure off. You don't have to be an expert. Lots of church folks wish they "knew" how to pray. Others want to pray more but worry that they don't know how or how to begin. Still others imagine only monks and nuns really have mastered prayer. At first, prayer is a little like falling in love or starting a relationship that you hope will lead to something deeper. No one feels in control of that. After you have begun to pray more, prayer becomes like a longer-term relationship. There are times when you feel so close and other times when you feel distant. There are times when you are jealous or angry and other times when you fit together like a hand in a glove. It is all part of the process of building a relationship.

In the second place authentic prayer is honest and real. You would imagine that Peter knew how to pray. He was Jesus' right hand man. But in this story he was praying when he fell into a trance and heard God tell him to give up his kosher diet. When he opened his eyes Peter began to protest because he could not understand what God was saying. He argued with God. He grew frustrated because God seemed to be changing His mind. I thought you wanted me to keep all these dietary rules, and now after decades of trying to do that you are telling me to stop?

What happened after Peter yelled at God? Did lightening hit him? Did an angel come to chastise him? Did the earth open up and swallow him whole? None of that took place. After Peter yelled at God the Bible says he was greatly puzzled and suddenly people came to him from Cornelius. After his honest frustration, something new happened. Somehow that admission of confusion, that honest bewilderment set the stage for God's new message. God said that the old is being re-made. I have something new in mind for you. God led him to Cornelius' house where Peter found folks eager for faith and he baptized the whole household that day. God

was starting the church, which was going to be a combination of Jews and Gentiles. But it stretched Peter's imagination almost to the breaking point.

A lot of people are frightened to yell at God, or to be as real with God as Peter was in this passage. But in my own experience the yelling prayers are usually the ones that open new doors. After the yelling is over when you sink into confusion and acknowledge how puzzled you have become – then your honesty opens the door to something new. Then, right then, God reveals something brand new, and suddenly you can see it.

Finally, the story tells us that prayer is the ability to give up control. It takes vulnerability to pray. This is a confusing story because God is so busy. God sends a vision to Cornelius and a trance to Peter. When you really pray about something you open a door to a much bigger reality. You make yourself vulnerable to being challenged and even changed.

We have seen this phenomenon right here on Great Plain Avenue. One year ago we heard about the opportunity to buy the property next door. We knew it was a good idea and it would help us reach our goals but we never knew enough to feel totally secure while we were evaluating this opportunity. In our confusion we prayed about it. We asked for God's guidance and came to believe that the timing of this opportunity was so uncanny that it made sense, and that one new building would allow us to renovate our old building. Buying that building would help us renovate this one. But still it was a leap of faith. Yet we have had incredible signs along the way. One of the men on the Board came from a Christian Science background. His grandparents were among the leaders at the Christian Science Monitor and he grew up learning the power of prayer in his own home. When we talked about the building and how it had been used for senior citizens who did not believe in medical intervention and who were themselves lifelong prayer warriors, he helped us recognize that it was as holy as any space in our own building. Then we realized that few people would appreciate that fact like we would. So we wondered if God had not brought this opportunity to us because we could see its sacred purpose and would honor the people who had lived and died in that space over the years.

At Christmas time a card from a stranger in town provided another sign. This man had attended our Lessons and Carols service. He wanted to tell me that he was a Christian Scientist and that he and many of his fellow Christian Scientists were praying about this building and specifically praying that we would get it. This

experience reminds me a lot of what happened in Acts 10. The air was quite full of prayer- on all sides, and we were feeling it and moving with it. It is unusual for a church to do what we did because it requires a lot of faith.

This is how prayer works in Acts 2000 years ago, and how it still works in Needham today. We pray as earnestly as we can, and do all our homework and yet know that we will never have all the answers. But we trust that God will reveal a path and open a way. We also trust that if this is God's opportunity for us then other people will be praying too and God will bring our prayers into alignment. God will be the conductor of this prayer symphony and we need to trust that.

The archdiocese of Washington says that prayer is paying attention to God – simply paying attention to God, a notion so fresh that it can get overlooked. Prayer takes a level of vulnerability and openness which is strange for most of us. It makes us nervous. We associate vulnerability with people who suffer and have no power whatsoever. We think vulnerable people have less education or money or choices. Most of us fight the sense of vulnerability tooth and claw from the time we are young enough to know how.

Yet the Bible teaches us that everybody is vulnerable. It is not a dirty secret to feel unprotected, or to know that you have weak places, or tender memories, or things that are hard to heal. That is just human. The Bible also teaches us that some of the greatest heroes in the history of our faith were strongest when they felt most vulnerable. Peter awoke from his prayer and felt like everything he knew about God- and how to serve God had been called into question. He had followed those dietary restrictions since birth. He was limited and could not see that God was giving birth to a new religious movement that would bridge both Jew and Gentile. He could not see that in that moment when he felt the most vulnerable he was at his best. Martin Luther King was so confused when he went to Selma. He did not have a big plan but he did not know what else to do. Nobody did. In that vulnerable moment this modern prophet was giving birth to something new – the pressure needed for Black people to stand tall finally, the pressure needed to pass the Civil Rights Act.

Brene Brown is a social worker with a Phd. Her essay on the power of vulnerability led to a TED talk in 2010. She says that successful people have the ability to connect, and the only way to connect to others is to be vulnerable. Yet vulnerability is the very thing most of us try to avoid. In her research she discovered that the

happiest people knew that they could get hurt in life, could lose in relationships but tried to forge them anyway. They could get it wrong several times before they got it right. The ones with the best sense of self-worth dared to be vulnerable. Conversely, Brown says those who guarded against pain, chose safer paths, sought certainty, and self-protection were less authentic. Vulnerability may leave us open to fear, shame, self-understanding, confusion if we are hoping to learn to pray or build a lasting connection with God. But oddly the courage to be vulnerable opens us to love, a sense of acceptance, and true belonging as a child of God. Prayer does not work instantly. It is a dance and you have to strive to learn the steps and risk some stumbles or even falls. But the God who made himself vulnerable to us in a manger, and a message of love, the God who makes himself vulnerable to us this Lent at a table, in a garden of tears, and on a cross. That God who knows the depth of vulnerability will reward your efforts to approach and seek connection, to yearn for more than rote petitions and to come into His presence to unburden your heart. Just as fervently as you seek to know God, God seeks to know you.