

Pray with Confidence
Sunday School Lesson
I John 5:13-21
November 23, 2025

Frederick Buechner on prayer:

We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad. The "Ah-h-h-h!" that sometimes floats up out of us as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the skyrocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds we use for sighing with over our own lives. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves, but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world.

According to Jesus, 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 was rather comic to have to explain it at all. He says God is like a friend you go to borrow bread from at midnight. The friend tells you in effect to drop dead, but you go on knocking anyway until finally he gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again (Luke 11:5-8). Or God is like a crooked judge who refuses to hear the case of a certain poor widow, presumably because he knows there's nothing much in it for him. But she keeps on hounding him until finally he hears her case just to get her out of his hair (Luke 18:1-8). Even a stinker, Jesus says, won't give his own child a black eye when the child asks for peanut butter and jelly, so how all the more will God when his children... (Matthew 7:9-11)?

Be importunate, Jesus says not, one assumes, because you have to beat a path to God's door before God will open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there's no way of getting to your door. "Ravish my heart," John Donne wrote. But God will not usually ravish. He will only court.

Whatever else it may or may not be, prayer is at least talking to yourself, and that's in itself not always a bad idea. Talk to yourself about your own life, about what you've done and what you've failed to do, and about who you are and who you wish you were and who the people you love are and the people you don't love too. Talk to yourself about what matters most to you, because if you don't, you may forget what matters most to you.

Even if you don't believe anybody's listening, at least you'll be listening. Believe Somebody is listening. Believe in miracles. That's what Jesus told the father who asked him to heal his epileptic son. Jesus said, "All things are possible to him who believes." And the father spoke for all of us when he answered, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:14-29).

What about when the boy is not healed? When, listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? Who knows? Just keep praying, Jesus says. Remember the sleepy friend, the crooked judge. Even if the boy dies, keep on

beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that, down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer, the God you call upon will finally come.

Our Purpose Statement: To manifest a greater confidence in prayer and the power of God to transform hearts and lives

Early in my ministry, I met once a week with other UMC pastors in our area to discuss the weekly lectionary, to pray together, and often to go eat together. Growing up in an evangelical church, I was used to praying aloud but I was stunned when these guys started praying. They had words I did not have. Their prayers were powerful and elegant. My prayers sound pretty simplistic. Their prayers were inspiring while I sounded like a 12-year-old. What I learned from the people I served is that most people have difficulty praying aloud, especially in public. What I also learned the hard way, is that your words do not matter. What does matter is what is in your heart.

Where do we learn that? We learn it in hospital waiting rooms and by an ICU bed. We learn it in the homes where family and friends have gathered after their loved one just died. We learn it praying with parents when they know their child will not be coming home. We learn it as we stand with an old man watching his business burn. We learned it when we are in the middle of a divorce and we learn it when our last child goes off to school. We learn it when we hold our first or our sixth grandchild. God listens to our hearts.

Jesus teaches us a simple prayer that we learn as a child and recite every week in worship. When we are old and unable to respond, we hear that prayer and join in moving our lips because there is little breath to speak. Prayer shapes us if we let it. It humbles us because in prayer we acknowledge that we are not in control, we do not have our act together, but we believe in something greater than ourselves.

Prayer without faith leads to cynicism and despair. Prayer with faith leads us to hope and transformation. This is why following Jesus is so important. Jesus brought a new kingdom to the world that does not depend on limited resources. This new Kingdom has resources that are never depleted, never hoarded, and never hoarded. It is full of grace when we have no ways of lifting ourselves up. It is full of strength when life has sapped us of all energy. It is full of forgiveness when we have made the worst mistakes of our lives. It is full of love when we have been devoured by the people or the work we love.

Prayer leads us to salvation, that ongoing relationship with Trinity that helps us become the human God created us to be

Let us pray:

O God of love and light, guard our hearts and guide our steps as we follow Jesus. As we fellowship with you, help us to reveal our deepest hope in becoming all you intend us to be. Help us to faithfully follow you as we strive to be a people who live in truth and love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.