

Today we are invited by Scripture into the realm of prayer. Just as the Pharisee got it wrong about prayer in his own way, prayer seems to be just about completely misunderstood in public life these days. For example, the governor of New York said in response to the onslaught of COVID a few years ago, “Listen, prayer is not going to solve this for us. We have certain steps that we have to take: stay at home orders, social distancing, wear a mask, wash your hands.”<sup>1</sup> The governor apparently mistook prayer for a magic problem-solving mechanism. His steps alone didn’t prevent over 6 million infections and over 71,000 deaths in New York. Prayer would likely have helped not only with that, but also with the pandemic’s collateral effects.

Similarly, the Prime Minister of Canada remarked after the deadliest shooting in Canadian history a while ago, “[The families of the victims] deserve more than thoughts and prayers.”<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a ban on over 1,500 makes and models of military assault weapons. More magical thinking. Homicide in Canada is not common, but murders by firearms have increased in the years since the ban. Maybe prayer could have helped improve a few murderer’s opinions of their fellow humans, perhaps even to the point of choosing not to kill them. What do you think?

In both of these cases, prayer was viewed as ineffective avoidant behavior that distracts our attention from real problems. It follows from a point of view that perceives that the only purpose of prayer is to get God to do what we want, and oh, by the way, it doesn’t really work, so why bother in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> [Ask Jon 8 – ‘We don’t want your thoughts and prayers. We want action.’ | In-Sight Publishing](#), October 5, 2022

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Though it's never unseemly to ask God to do something for us, "my will be done" doesn't appear in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. A deep understanding of prayer senses that prayer is actually our entire response to God's invitation to love. St. Luke and St. Paul indeed urge us to pray continually, with persistent confidence. Following their logic, what we're actually asking for when we pray for a particular thing is much bigger than just what the thing is in itself. Let me tell you a story.

One evening I was doing an overnight shift at Hartford Hospital as the on-call chaplain. In the middle of one particularly busy night, the pager went off and I was summoned to the neurotrauma unit, C9WI, where a woman was being treated for a burst aneurysm in her head. She had a big tube connected to her, and the nurse explained to me, pointing to a gauge nearby, that they needed to reduce the pressure in her head.

I went to the waiting room next. It was filled with her sons and daughters, friends and relatives in a variety of emotional states. I remember with deep clarity the prayer I uttered in that moment. "Dear Jesus, I am completely out of energy and have no idea what to say or do right now, but I trust that you, living in me, will do whatever is needed." That, as it has always turned out, is the way God likes it. Here's how God answered my little prayer.

First, the way it often happens during prayer, it occurred to me to ask folks if they wanted to write a short note or prayer to mom. This way she'd know how they'd been feeling during this very anxious time. They all liked that and we spent about forty minutes writing notes and prayers. Then it occurred to me, the way it often

happens during prayer, that we take the notes and prayers and read them to mom, because hearing is the last of the senses to go. They liked that, too.

The nurse was OK with it, and off we went. I asked them to read the prayers aloud, but they were too upset and asked me to read instead. I was fine with that, so I just asked everyone to grab hold of mom someplace and started to read. As I was reading, I happened to look at the gauge the nurse had shown me. The reading was going down. They all saw me looking at the gauge and the room got very quiet just then. Together, we watched it go down further.

I'm not going to tell you that a miracle was happening, but I will tell you that it was perfectly clear that mom heard us, God heard us and all of us gathered there together knew that a very, very good thing was happening right in front of our eyes. God, working in and through God's people, using the medical technology that God's people had developed as God's creation unfolded in time, was at work in so many ways. Prayers for healing were being answered directly. Peace, joy and hope had replaced the anxiety, sadness and despair I'd encountered when I first met everyone. In that moment, our faith and love for God and for each other were being deepened in ways that would not have happened otherwise.

Far from being magical thinking or avoidant behavior, the far more accurate description of prayer is that it's our ongoing dialog of love with God and each other that St. Paul and St. Luke had in mind. It's the narrative of an entire life lived in full awareness of our blossoming into eternal life in the presence of God.