

**“Power More Than Answers”<sup>i</sup>**  
Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor  
First United Methodist Church of Wausau  
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Philippians 4:6-7

If there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with thanksgiving; and the peace of God, which is much greater than understanding, will guard both your thoughts and your heart.

Matthew 6:7-8

“In your prayers do not babble on as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them; God knows what you need even before you ask it.”

What’s the use of prayer? There have been seasons in my life when I didn’t pray much because I could not come up with a good answer to this question. God knows what we need before we ask. God cares more about us than we do ourselves. Scripture affirms both statements. So, why pray?

Jesus says, “Ask and you will receive. Seek and you’ll find. Knock and the door will be open.” But have you ever wondered? Do we pray to try to talk God into things? To get what we want? To get God on our side? If you pray better than me, will your prayer get answered while mine is ignored?

Before we continue, let’s pause and notice that in each of these possibilities we are trying to control things. To grow spiritually, we need to release our illusion of control. We need to surrender to God.

Jesus say, Ask. Seek. Knock. So we can trust that it’s good for us. But why do it? And what happens when we ask things of God? Why does Jesus tell us both that we are supposed to ask, and that God already knows what you need so don’t babble on like pagans do?

In his book *Praying Under Water*, Richard Rohr explains that “we ask, not to change God, but to change ourselves. We pray, not to get things done, but to form a living relationship. Prayer is a symbiotic relationship with life and with God, a synergy which creates a result larger than the exchange itself” (60-1).

The word *symbiosis* refers to an interaction that’s generally good for both. Symbiotic relationships provide balance that can only be achieved by working together. I’ve always thought of symbiosis as relating to gut flora or mycorrhiza. But Rohr suggests that “we need to pray to keep the symbiotic relationship moving and growing [and that God knows this]. Prayer is not about trying to control God. Or even to get what we want (61). It is, as Jesus tells us, to receive the gift of God as Spirit. (Luke 11:13).

We have talked about entitlement before. To some extent, we all succumb to it. Yet a sense of entitlement will undermine every relationship. Any belief that “I deserve” or “I’m better than…” corrupts whatever faith, hope, or love exists between parties. This is surely the reason Jesus tells us to stay in the position of a servant or beggar. We need an attitude of radical dependency on God. For our own sake, we need to live as the Hebrews writer describes: as nomads and strangers on this earth (11:14).

Our real truth is what we live. It's "how we situate ourselves in this world" (62). Philosopher Josef Pieper wrote that "the natural habitat for truth is in interpersonal relationships." We think truth is about ideas. But more than any ideas or beliefs, our truth is who we are.

Prayers for God's intervention are about setting our lives in honesty and truth. We'll want to remember that how we do life is our real truth.

Thomas Keating, originator of the practice of Centering Prayer, spoke of divine therapy. He wrote that:

The only prayer you need to say is, "Help!" It's right to the point. It describes what we need. And when it comes from a heart that is broken by its own failures ... God responds. It is not a question of forgiveness, because [God] has already forgiven us ... but to give us the ability to be free of the straitjacket of the emotional programs for happiness based on those instinctual needs [for security, control, and affection]. ...

The purpose of ordinary psychotherapy... is to help a person lead a normal life when he or she is hampered by psychological problems. The purpose of the divine therapy is the healing of the roots of all our problems and to transform our attitudes and, indeed, the whole of our human nature into the mind and heart of Christ. ...

[The early Church leaders] who wrote about this subject called this process deification. In other words, the purpose of this journey ... is not just to become a better person and to maintain recovery, as important as these are. It is to change us into the divine way of being human. This is a much bigger and more comprehensive project and opens us to the full extent of human possibilities and capacities.<sup>ii</sup>

We cannot effect our own transformation. Even when we mean well, it leaves most of our own ways still fully intact. Only now they're more disguised. Trying to effect a self-conversion is like an active alcoholic trying to define her own rules for sobriety. When it has been all about me – or you – so far, we need God to change us from the inside out. Otherwise, we don't know where to begin. Without God's help, we keep spinning in our own little spiral. Never getting any further and, this is the sad part, never knowing that we're still in the same old place.

Today, we begin the second half of our spirituality sermon series using the 12-Steps from A.A. Step 7 says that we "humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings." We don't try to remove them ourselves because we go after the wrong thing, or as often happens with addicts (and we're all addicted to our own ways of thinking), we would substitute something else. Think of Jesus words, "Don't try to pull out the weeds, you'll pull the grain out along with them" (Mt 13:29).

Instead we ask God to reveal our true faults to us and then ask God to remove them from God's end and in God's way. If we start whacking at them, we just end up with the same shortcomings, only now they're disguised even better and we're likely in denial. This is what happens to many folks early in their recovery journey.

When I dig creeping Charlie out of my garden, I lay it out on the driveway for a week to make sure it's good and dead before I dispose of it. Similarly, God digs up our old ways. They're "*exposed and starved* for the false program for happiness that they are" (64). And as God does this, she fills the void with something better, something luminous and more satisfying.

The psalmist writes that our whole being thirsts for God. We crave God like a deer craves a cool stream (42:1-2). God creates this spiritual desire in us from the beginning, "for total satisfaction,

for home, for heaven, for divine union” but addiction, whether to alcohol, media or our own ways of doing things, displaces this desire (64-5).

This is why it's so important for us to pray and to keep ourselves in right relationship with God. Life is gifted to us. An attitude of gratitude helps us to remain open so that we allow that life and receive what it offers at ever deeper levels of fulfillment, not because we deserve it but because God wants it for us. Everyone who lives in humble openness received life's gifts full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over into our laps (Lk 6:38).

We ask for our daily bread to remind ourselves that God is the giver. When we forget to ask, we take ourselves too seriously.

After a few years in recovery from whatever confines you, you can know that your desiring came from God – all along. You simply took a bit of a detour.

We each have our faults. We have our ego ideas. All this is baggage that keeps us from noticing what God offers.

God is waiting for an invitation to remove our shortcomings. Ever-present, God is willing to wait to be noticed. It took Jacob until one morning when he woke up at the foot of a ladder, where angels had walked between heaven and earth. We can say with him, “Oh God, you were here all the time and I never knew it! This is nothing less than the house of God, the very gate of heaven (Gen 28:16-17).

This gate of heaven is everywhere.<sup>iii</sup> We simply need to check all baggage with God. Then we will be able to see heaven right where we are, to walk through and to live it.

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon is based on and borrows heavily from Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, “Chapter Seven: Why We Need to Ask?,” Franciscan Press, Cincinnati, 2011, 59-66.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Keating with Tom S., *Divine Therapy and Addiction: Centering Prayer and the Twelve Steps* (Lantern Books: 2009), 102, 105-106 as found at “Twelve-Step Spirituality: Part Two, Divine Therapy,” Sunday, December 15, 2019 (last viewed on January 12, 2020).

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Merton, as referenced in Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Franciscan Press, Cincinnati, 2011, 66.