



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
March 18, 2018 Sermon

Saying “Amen” as a Certainty and a Truth: Prayer as Conversation in Trust

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 7:7-11

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the “Amen” firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say “yes” to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, “Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.” This is what “Amen” means.—Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*

“Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.”—Matthew 21:22

As Linda and Jeff said, prayer has been the theme for this year’s journey through Lent at Westminster. In Sunday morning and Wednesday evening classes we’ve been practicing it; here, I’ve been preaching on it; and now thanks to the prayer ministry team, we have the new email prayer ministry and new cards in the pew racks for our prayers to come.

So at this point, it’s not only a legitimate question, but one begging to be asked: Does prayer work? I mean, if you pray, do you get what you ask for?

A few weeks back, I preached on Mark Twain’s novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, focusing on Chapter 31, the great chapter, about 2/3 of the way through, where Huck, trying to figure out what to do (now that Jim, the runaway slave he’s been traveling down the Mississippi River with, has been recaptured), tries to pray. But if you remember the novel or are now re-reading it (by the way, it’s done my teacher’s assignment-giving heart good to hear how many of you are re-reading it), you know that this is not the first time the subject of prayer has come up. Much earlier in the novel, in chapter 3, we get this discussion of prayer: (remember the setting is the pre-civil war south, and Huck, the thirteen-year-old orphan, ne’er do well, and now runaway, is narrating):

Miss Watson . . . —stop there:

Miss Watson is one of the two sisters, the other is Widow Douglas, who have taken in the orphan Huck in order to “civilize” him. Huck is considerably fonder of the Widow Douglas than he is of Miss Watson.

Anyway back to Huck’s narration:

Miss Watson, told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it . . .

Stop again: to be fair, Miss Watson has some authority on her side: Martin Luther, in the quotation I put on the front of your bulletin, says, “Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say ‘yes’ to your prayers.” And Jesus himself says in our Scripture Lesson for today, “Ask, and it will be given you.” And later in Matthew’s Gospel (our focus verse) Jesus says, “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.”

But Huck, ever the pragmatic empiricist, has to try it out:

I tried it. But it warn't so. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work.

Well, maybe the problem is that it's Huck—never the best student in Sunday School—who's doing the praying. So Huck goes to Miss Watson:

By-and-by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to pray for fish hooks for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way.

When in doubt, go to the woods to think it out. Huck continues:

I set down, one time, back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff-box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it.

But Miss Watson isn't the only possible authority here; there's also Widow Douglas. So Huck next goes to her:

I went and told the widow about it, and she said the thing a body could get by praying for it was "spiritual gifts." This was too many for me, but she told me what she meant—I must help other people, and do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself. This was including Miss Watson, as I took it.

So back to the woods again:

I went out in the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no advantage about it—except for the other people—so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.

Now this episode might have ended right there—with Huck the innocent, areligious egoist. But it doesn't, and Huck isn't. Huck adds this:

Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence . . .

Stop there: remember "Providence" is just another way of saying "God," particularly the sovereign *God who guides and provides all things*. Back to Huck:

*Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was **two** Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's, if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was agoing to be any better off **then** than what he was **before**, seeing I was so ignorant and so kind of low-down and ornery.*

Two Providences—one belonging to Miss Watson; the other to Widow Douglas. And if you remember Chapter 31, you remember that Huck first tries to pray to Miss Watson's Providence, which is nothing but a man-made lie, but he can't—you can't pray a lie, as Huck finds out. But then as Huck sits there on the raft thinking, thinking about what he's going to do, and remembering all their adventures, their friendship—everything—he and Jim shared on the raft, it's then that the Widow's Providence speaks to Huck—not directly, mind you, but through the voice of memory, from within his own heart. And it's then that Huck decides that he will steal Jim out of slavery, even if that means hellfire for him, Huck.

Huck belongs to the Widow's Providence. It seems that the living God, the true God and the God of truth, holds a special place for the ignorant, and the low-down and ornery, like Huck, even if there's

nothing in it for him. How else could you explain the grace we have received, or the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah?

Which gets back us to the question: do you get whatever you ask for in prayer? Well, yes, but sometimes it's in due season: in God's own time and in God's own way. What we do get unfailingly in prayer, however, is the most important thing of all: God, conversation with God.

Now before you say, "That's nice, but in the meantime, it won't catch you any fish," I need to talk about the importance of conversation. Conversation lies at the heart of teaching and learning, at the heart of our being human, it makes us who and what we are. I could appeal to any number of renowned philosophers to support this, but I don't need to—all I need do is appeal to your experience.

When you get to a certain age (and that age varies from person to person), you find yourself talking to the dead. This has nothing to do with seances, ghosts, or anything else "supernatural." Instead, it has to do with this:

Think of how words—the words of our teachers—of our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, pastors, bosses, co-workers, siblings, friends, classroom teachers, peers—think of how words, their words, get inside us and stay with us. For better and for worse, those words, those conversations, make us who we are.

You've heard me say this before: if you ask ordinary people who did extraordinary acts of goodness (and researchers have), if you ask them, "why—*how*—did you do this?," they do not cite high moral principles, or religious doctrines, or even passages from the Bible or other sacred books. What they say is: "Well, of course I was scared but then I thought, 'What would my father/mother, grandfather/grandmother, husband/wife, sister/brother, teacher/pastor/counselor, best friend have said, have done, here?.'" And then they say what that person would have said, did say to them, in conversation again and again—a remark, or saying, that may sound trivial or clichéd to us, but to them, because it was said to them in love by that one, the one they loved and revered, that one who loved and cared for them—for them it has meaning, all the meaning in the world, and made all the difference in the world to them, in that difficult moment, that moment of decision, that moment of truth, when they were scared and needed to do the right thing. Those words came back to them.

Popular culture—the culture that tells us the stories we live by—knows this: "Use the force, Luke, use the force."

One philosopher said that, "thinking is a conversation we have with ourselves." And if you think about it, it makes sense: ***we need to talk***—whether aloud to others or in our heads to ourselves—***we need to talk*** to know what we feel and think, to discover our best feelings and thoughts, to know what to say and do: Conversation lies at the heart of teaching and learning, at the heart of our being human, makes us who and what we are. And we are blessed indeed if we've had conversation partners who spoke the truth to us, spoke to the better part of us, to the better angels of our natures. So if we're sufficiently blessed, we end up, at some point in our lives, talking to the dead, into that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

Of course, it's not all blessing in this world. Words in this world can—and do—wound. Huck's pap verbally and physically abused him—beat him and reviled him in his drunken rages—and Huck bears the scars: he thinks that he's ignorant, and low-down and ornery, and that God might well send him to hell.

But in such cases, as Huck says in chapter 31, “there’s One up there in heaven, that’s always on the lookout, and ain’t agoing to allow no such miserable doings.” In such cases, we can always appeal to that One, in prayer—we can turn to conversation with God.

But it needs to be said that not all talking is conversation. Hardly. Real conversation requires listening, real listening. And honesty in what we say. And concern, real concern, for the well-being of the other person, for what the person is saying, and more than that, for what the person is thinking and feeling, for his or her experiences and life-story. Not to mention a shared commitment to the truth and to saying and doing the right thing.

Much of what passes for conversation just isn’t. Just sound waves bouncing around without much attention or care: passing the time, showing off and self-aggrandizement, griping and dumping, one-upsmanship and putting down, name-calling and belittling, manipulation and deceit. True conversation requires trust—trust, in oneself and the other or others involved, that all are committed to true conversation; otherwise, we are wary, self-protecting and/or self-seeking, maneuvering and on guard for being maneuvered against. But not in prayer. It’s different in prayer. In true, prayer, we can speak our hearts, and hear the heart of God.

And so, I have to say that, as much as I admire the Widow Douglas’s mouthwatering view of Providence, I don’t agree that we should pray for only “spiritual gifts.” We should speak our hearts to God: In drought, pray for rain (that’s what we want in our hearts)—and in the meantime, for the spiritual strength to endure the drought. In sickness, pray for health (that’s what we want in our hearts), and in the meantime, for the spiritual strength to endure everything the sickness brings. In loneliness, pray for friendship and the spirit to endure trusting in God’s friendship. Will the rain and the health and the human friendship come? Well, yes, in God’s time and in God’s way. Jesus said: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” And: “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

But remember this too: God knows what prayer—especially the waiting and the suffering of prayer—is like from our side of the conversation: On the night of his arrest, in the garden at Gethsemane, Jesus, threw himself on the ground and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, let this cup pass from me; yet not my will but yours be done.” And in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” And he prayed this again a third time. Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. And then he stood up, and said to his disciples, “let’s go: my betrayer is here.”

So when you pray, never think that you are kneeling or standing alone; rather think that this whole church and the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. And remember this, too: that the one who prayed in anguish in the Garden at Gethsemane, is there with you, with us, praying for you and for us. This is what “Amen” means: “Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.”

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen