

“The Power of Prayer”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian
Holy Communion Sunday
Rev. Kit B. Billings, M.Div.
July 25, 2021

Scripture

Psalm 86:1-4

Luke 18:1-8

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Hymns/Songs

“Morning Has Broken” 307

“Fill My Cup Lord” 604

“Take My Life and Let It Be” 215

Psalm 86:1-4

Great Is Your Steadfast Love—A Prayer of David

“Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.

² Preserve my life, for I am godly;
save your servant, who trusts in you—you are my God.

³ Be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all the day.

⁴ Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.”

Luke 18:1-8

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

18 And He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Insight for Worship

Secrets from Heaven 2535 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“Prayer, in itself considered, is speech with God. There is then some inward view of the objects of the prayer and answering to that something [in the prayer] received like an influx into the perception or thought. Thus, there is a kind of opening of the person’s interiors toward God, with a difference according to the person’s state and according to the nature of the object of the prayer. If one prays out of love and faith and only about, and for, things heavenly and spiritual, then there appears in the prayer something like revelation, which shows itself in the affection of the supplicant, in hope, comfort or an inner gladness.”

SERMON: “The Power of Prayer”

The power of choosing to pray to the Lord changes things—in fact, it changes us. We know from our own experience that praying for others and for ourselves makes a major difference in life. I can say for myself that when I have asked you or others in my life to pray for me, or to pray for someone in my family, deep down it lifts my soul. It’s because I know and can somehow feel that my deepest needs and concerns are being held in God’s own God’s hands and I trust that Divine Love and Wisdom itself is addressing the issues, and doing so for the greatest good possible.

Sometimes, prayer seems simple and straight forward, while at other times it’s quite baffling and complex, and sometimes it may seem like nonsense or irrelevant. If we are in a dark place inside and we do not acknowledge our dark frame of mind nor sense of feeling lost, then things may unfold in ways very different from what we expect.

There’s a story in *1 Kings 17:8-24* about a widow of Zarephath. This was the hometown of Jezebel, wife of King Ahab. The people there worshiped Baal, the god of rain. The town of Zarephath was one hundred miles from the brook Cherith, where Elijah had been in hiding from King Ahab. God told Elijah to go to Zarephath and find a widow. When Elijah arrived in Zarapheth, there was a woman drawing water. I have no doubt that she was haggard as her food was almost gone, and she was gathering sticks to build a fire to prepare a last meal for herself and her son, realizing that soon she and her son would die of starvation.

Elijah asked this poor, exhausted widow of Zarapeth for water, and she went to get it for him. As she was going, he also asked for some bread. That is when she told him, “As surely as your God lives, I have no bread; I only have a little bit of oil and flour. I’m getting ready to fix my last meal before we die.” Elijah told her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to

me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.” Then he told her what to do next, and she did it. This widow made the cake and served Elijah first, just like she was told to do. When it’s natural to try to hoard things for ourselves, this widow gave first so that the prophet was fed before she took for herself and her son. Because of her obedience, the oil and flour in her house never ran dry for the duration of the drought...and thus God gave them a miracle throughout their hardship, which serves as an example for all people today. From the story of this widow, there are things I have learned:

- obedience must come first if we expect God to do anything miraculous
- with obedience comes blessing
- and, with faith and love in action come blessings too

[PAUSE]

Have you ever seen the movie, “90 Minutes in Heaven”? It is a powerful true story on the life of a pastor named Don Piper who gets in a horrific head-on collision with an 18-wheeler semi-truck down in Texas in 1989. Immediately after this terrifying crash, this pastor died for 90 minutes, and during those 90 minutes a stranger wedged his head inside of the pastor’s wrecked vehicle and prayed for him in what looked like a hopeless situation. Those around the scene had already given up and pronounced the driver dead. But during those 90 minutes, Don had a very powerful and real spiritual experience known as a near-death-experience. He was allowed to see the gates of Heaven, and to feel and experience the astounding, all-encompassing Love of God *for real!* But while Don was experiencing the living reality of all-mighty God surrounding and encouraging him, the faithful visitor was praying over Don’s mangled body. And then, suddenly, Don started to sing, and while he sang he felt the hand of the praying stranger holding his hand. Pastor Don who was the driver sang the familiar song, “What A Friend We Have In Jesus,” almost inaudibly. And this was just the beginning!

Throughout this pastor’s extraordinarily painful recovery, he struggled with despair as he lived each day with bone-crushing pain. The bones in his leg were shattered and separated and had to be re-connected and then stretched daily with a medical device that turns and turns screws inside of his leg. This made him scream until...well, until he became silent with hopelessness. For him, God was nowhere around. He was despondent and wanted to die. I can understand and sympathize with this poor man, crying out to God for help, and not yet able to sense God’s response.

Have you ever been in a similar state of being? “Just make the pain go away, Lord...*PLEASE!*” we pray.

[PAUSE]

In the movie, there was a best friend, a fellow pastor, who visited him in the hospital when his breathing was shallow and he had given up. The friend put his hand on his head and then he reassured him that he, his family and his congregation would continue praying for him. His best friend said to him, “You just rest now and we will ask God to take care of you.”

The suffering pastor had a hard time, though, receiving their prayer support; he even struggled just allowing himself to think he needed help with anything in his life. In short, he felt inside that he could handle things better than God can, although it took a while for him to consciously realize this spiritual struggle he had inside. You see, before the accident, he carried the false notion that he didn’t need help, because **he was “the helper.”** He always came across as Mr. Goodie two-shoes, and he thought this was how a pastor was supposed to be.

Then one day a senior pastor came to visit him in the hospital, and not long into their visit the senior pastor chastised him for not accepting the help of his congregation, or anyone else for that matter, especially after he had given so much to them...and they now wanted to reciprocate with loving prayer and support toward him.

Another amazing thing happened within this true life experience, which was remarkably, that Don Piper didn’t want to share his near-death-experience of Heaven with anyone, including his loving wife. He didn’t want anyone to think he was cooky or crazy, and so secretly he longed for both the pain to end and he longed for the peaceful Light of God to return and enfold him, which he knew without any doubt was REAL and that he knew was waiting for him through the veil between this natural world and the next realm after death. He also knew that there were many loved ones on the other side ready to welcome him home—a home where there was no more suffering...a home in the deepest sense of the word. We find out at the end of the movie that while Don was near-death inside his mangled vehicle, that he had been holding on to someone’s hand in the wreckage at the scene of the accident, and he thought it was the hand of the man who was praying for him.

But, the praying stranger said that he couldn’t reach his hand, because that arm and hand of Don’s had been severed and was at the time sitting someone in the rear seating area of that mangled Ford Escort, which Don was driving that day. The truth was that it was the Lord who was holding on to Don’s spiritual hand, and that it was his friend in Jesus keeping his hopes alive during Don’s darkest hour. Thus, in truth, Don’s Good Shepherd had come and was there to rescue him.

[PAUSE]

After his recovery, after many months of painful physical rehab therapy, Pastor Don shared his whole journey with over 3,000 churches world-wide, while standing at podiums with his healed leg propping him up. So, you see my friends, **prayer truly does change things—it changes us.** And like the widow in the Lord's parable who never gave up going back again and again to the unjust judge, no matter what, we are urged by our Lord never to give up on prayer. **Through prayer we are opened to the ways of love and love is activated inside of us!** And we all truly and deeply **NEED THIS, don't we?** We need it most of all, in my experience, when it comes to forgiveness: forgiving ourselves, forgiving each other and even for forgiving God...because sometimes God's ways seriously are NOT our ways, and then we can feel deeply hurt by God, even though the truth is that God never, ever stops loving us all along the way.

In our New Church theology we find that prayer is speech with God. It is a living conversation at the deepest level of our being. Swedenborg learned that we are given some inward view of the prayer and an answer then comes that is influx into our thoughts or perceptions. In other words, God is moving in us and through us...warming us...soothing us, giving us life, as we pray to Him! There is a kind of opening of our interior mind toward God and then, especially when we pray with love and faith, then a revelation appears, which shows itself in our affections as **HOPE, COMFORT or INNER GLADNESS.**

This is the power of prayer, and it is here to **change us.** Let us take a moment in prayer now together—where first I will pray, and then I will give you more time in unity to offer up a prayer of your own—it could be a prayer for our planet, for a friend...or, one you seriously need for yourself. Let your heartfelt prayer come forth, before the Lord. Let us pray...