

Prayer

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a diehard Red Sox fan. It used to be that being a Red Sox fan was like being a Cubs fan. ☺ My father, who had been a Red Sox fan his whole life and who tricked me into becoming a Red Sox fan my whole life, lived his entire 75 years here on earth without ever seeing the Bosox win the Series. When I was in 7th grade when the Sox made a rare appearance in the Series, and during game 6 I fervently prayed to God that the Sox could stay in the Series. That night Carlton Fisk hit his famous home run over the Green Monster in the bottom of the 12th. That night I truly did believe in God. However, my prayers didn't do any good for the next night the Red Sox lost to the Cincinnati Reds. I was depressed. In fact, and this is true, I was so depressed that for over a week I simply couldn't believe that God exists.

10 years later, I was a more mature man. I was in the seminary, and I knew what prayer was all about. The Red Sox were again in the World Series. This time against the New York Mets. I prayed all the way through the series right up to the beginning of Game 6, where the Red Sox were leading 5 to 3 in the 10th inning. But you know the result: the Red Sox collapsed, Bill Buckner let a simple grounder go between his legs and the Red Sox lost. I didn't even bother praying before Game 7 because I knew God never listened to me.

10 years later, in 1996, I was a more mature man. I knew what prayer was all about. That winter was a remarkable one for the Bulls. Michael Jordan had come back from retirement and the Bulls won their 4th championship, returning to their indomitable position. Oh, have I told you that I'm not only a Red Sox fan, but I'm a Boston Celtics fan. That year, the Celtics won 15 and lost 67. Ouch! My prayers did NO good that year.

Ten years later, last year to be specific, I was a more mature man. I knew what prayer was all about. Finally I figured out how to pray to God and as a result of my prayers, the Red Sox broke their curse and finally won the World Series. So now I'm ready to offer you the power of prayer. Not that I'm going to show you the secrets of my prayer, but I am taking requests. For \$5 I'll pray for the sports team of your choice.

So you have in front of you today someone who obviously doesn't know the first thing about effective prayer.

Let me get serious. Tonight I'm not going to talk about how to pray – you probably already know how to do that and we'll try out some different styles throughout the year. Instead, I want to define prayer so we can explore how it makes a difference for God, for me, and for the people we pray for. And once we do that, I want to touch on why we don't pray more often. Tonight's talk will be like the sampler platter at a restaurant. You'll get a plate load of stuff, but it won't be everything on the menu and it certainly won't fill you up. Yet there *is* a full menu out there if you seek it, and I hope this sampler platter makes you want to taste the rest of the selections – the rest of the beauty of prayer.

In addition, I'm confident there's nothing that I will say tonight that will be new to you, not even the jokes. Oh, I might put some nice words around it, but the only thing I hope to do tonight is to help you get in touch with the truths you already know and encourage you to think about and take action on them.

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to share how prayer really *does* make a difference, not only in each of our lives, but in the world as a whole. You see, while I might joke about its ineffectiveness, something deep inside of me, something about my experiences of this world, and something about the stories of God which come to us from the saints, and most especially from Scriptures, tell me that while the effects of prayer are a mystery, that our prayers really do make a difference in this world and the next.

So let's begin with a definition of prayer. Books have been written about this subject, but for me, prayer is simply "the act of putting ourselves in touch with God." Let me say that again, "prayer is simply the act of putting ourselves in touch with God." Of course, behind this seemingly simplistic definition lie a myriad of details, and there's 3 I'd like to call out.

The first thing is that prayer is an action, initiated by us. This doesn't mean that our relationship with God is totally up to us. Quite the contrary, God is always and everywhere reaching out to us. But God's reaching out to us is called Grace, or His Love. Our reaching out to God is what we call prayer.

The second thing is that prayer puts us in *touch* with God. The goal of prayer is not to simply *think* about God, but to actually *be* with God. Thinking about God is nice, but thinking about God is the realm of theology, not prayer. Prayer is all about developing a relationship.

And the third thing is that prayer puts us in touch with *God*. Many prominent thinkers in the past 150 years have seen prayer as a way to get in touch with *ourselves*. They see prayer as a method for trying to understand and change our own motivations. But no Christian can hold that view and remain Christian. Prayer calls us out of ourselves and towards God. It's ultimately an externally facing action not an internally facing one.

So, now that we've defined prayer as the act of putting ourselves in touch with God, let's go on to the question I asked myself when I set out to do this talk: what *difference* does prayer make for God, for us, and for the people we pray for? And to help with answering that, let me begin with a joke.

One week, a priest decided to skip out on mass and head out into the woods to do some bear hunting. As he rounded a big oak tree, he and a bear collided, which knocked his rifle loose and sent him tumbling down the hillside, breaking both his legs.

In the distance he could see the bear up on its hind legs ready to charge after him.

"Oh dear Lord," the priest prayed, "I'm so sorry for skipping mass today to come out here and hunt. Please forgive me and grant me just one wish.... please make a Christian out of that bear that's coming at me. Please, Lord!"

At very instant, the bear fell to its knees right in front of the priest, clasped its paws together and began to pray aloud:

"Dear Lord, for food I am about to receive, I am truly thankful."

Now, behind that silly story is a little wisdom about prayer. See, there were two types of prayer in that joke. The priest *asks* God for something. The Bear *thanks* God for something. These are the two basic stances of prayer: asking God to do something for us, and opening ourselves up to what God is *already* doing for us. Both are valuable.

When you look at the literature about prayer, you'll see that theologians (theologians are people who study God) gobble up the first prayer stance, asking God to do something, because it focuses in on understanding who *God* is. And you'll see that psychologists gobble up the second prayer stance, opening ourselves up to what God is already doing, because it focuses in on understanding who *we* are.

Let's begin by touching very lightly on what difference our prayer makes for God.

In my opening remarks, I commented about the ineffectiveness of my prayers of petition. Maybe I used some silly examples, but it's not too much of a stretch to realize that in things of greater importance, like wars, there are people on both sides of the conflict beseeching God to help their side win, asking God to intervene in matters of life and death. And even closer to home, at the bedside of our loved ones, there we are praying that God take away their pain, restore them to health, and let us enjoy their company in all its vim and vigor.

If you're like me, you've prayed to God in dire situations to help make things better, and again, if you're like me, you've seen those dire situations continue or even worsen. Yet, despite seeming defeat, we continue on in our prayer when the next situation comes about. We as a Church have even institutionalized this approach to prayer in the Prayers of the Faithful, the petitions we say at every mass. Certainly the Church is proclaiming that our prayers *do* make a difference! But *how* do they make a difference?

Theologians have been challenged by the question of whether God answers our prayers. If one of the qualities of God is that He is unchangeable, and if we believe He has predestining all of us, then we'd also have to conclude that our prayer can't change what God is going to do – otherwise God would be open to changing based upon what we pray for.

Now a lot of fancy thought has gone on in the past 2000 years around this topic. The predominant thinking has to do with the nature of how God knows the future and how he created that future in alignment with what we might pray for. Generally speaking, the theologians say that God knows each of us so intimately – more intimately than we even know ourselves – that He knows how we will act in every situation. This doesn't mean that God directs our actions. To the contrary, we are free in every situation to do whatever we want to do. But God knows us so deeply, that He knows what we *want* to do, and therefore, what we *will* do. See, no matter how you slice it, we only do the things we want to do. We might have experiences where we do things that are hard, or not in our own interest, or that cause us pain, but ultimately we do all those things because there's something more important to us than we want to do. So to get back to the point, God knows our prayers even before we pray them, and His plan for the world already accounts for those prayers.

So if he knows our prayers before we pray them, when why bother praying? Maybe so that we can align our requests of Him with what we truly want. For example, I've found in my own life, that when I pray for something fervently, that each time I pray, I open myself up a little bit more to think about what I really want to pray for and I come to better understand the prayer I really want God to answer. Typically the prayers start out very clear: Dear God, please do this thing or that thing. As I really enter into the prayer, my prayers start to change into Dear God, please help this thing or that thing. Then the prayers further transform themselves, Dear God, please help this thing or that thing to understand how to best fit into your plan for them. And then, Dear God, please help this thing or that thing help us become aware of your love for us. My prayers help open me up to what I truly should be praying for, to see things in their larger context, and to see (no matter how painful) the goodness that results.

If you think discussion of *whether* God answers our prayers a bit obtuse, the theologians go on to talk about *how* God answers our prayers. They again come up with ways to understand that God responds to all our prayers. God *does* respond to our prayers. He does say “yes” to us in every situation. But he says “yes” to our true selves, the person who is the fulfillment of all the potential God gave us, the person we are slowly becoming, not the person we are today. He doesn’t say “yes” to the person who is less than who He wants us to be. So His “yes” might sound like “no” to us for a number of reasons.

- It might be delayed a bit to help us grow in our spirituality, or due to larger universal circumstances which God does not wish to override.
- His “yes” might be a denial of our prayers because approving our prayers might bring us positive injury or hamper us from becoming the person he has called us to be.
- Or He might deny our individual prayers so that the larger desire of our heart might be granted.
- Or He might deny our prayers so that a higher and better blessing might come upon us.
- Or maybe even because we don’t ask sincerely for something that is truly good, like my asking that the Red Sox winning the Series.
- Or maybe it’s just because he’s a Yankees fan...

But all this thinking focuses in on God out *there* and quite frankly, I *trust* that God will keep up *His* end of the bargain, even if I don’t understand it. Instead, let’s move on to God in *here* where the focus is on *my* end of the bargain, and *my* ability to become more and more the person God dreamed of when he ignited the spark that is my soul. So, let’s move away from how our prayer affects *God*, and focus in our how our prayer affects *us*. Allow me to tell another joke to illustrate this.

A man, whom I’ll call Joe, was determined to win the lottery. So he prayed to God to let him win. But when the drawing occurred, someone else won.

The next week Joe prayed a little harder, and again when the drawing occurred, someone else won.

The next week Joe prayed as hard as he could. And again when the drawing occurred, someone else won.

Finally, in frustration, Joe called out to God: “God, week after week I prayed to you and week after week you let someone else win. Why?”

At which point God replied: “Joe, you’ve got to meet Me halfway on this. Buy a ticket.”

See, prayer isn’t about expecting God to do all the work. Prayer is the act of putting *ourselves* in touch with God. And if we are sincere about that action, it will have an impact upon us because it will open us up to recognizing and accepting some of the grace that God is always raining down upon us. Prayer is just as much about the prayer of the bear as it is about the prayer of the priest. It’s just as much about thanking God for what is as it is about asking God for what will be.

Now, I suspect this is the point in the talk that needs the least effort on my part. Everyone who prays regularly and I assume that’s everyone in this room – in fact I’m sure you’re praying right now “Good Lord, when will he stop!” Anyway, anyone who prays regularly probably already knows that prayer can help us as individuals. It can help us understand difficult things in our lives and help us grow into the person God wants us to be. So let me very briefly share a couple examples of how prayer can make a difference for us – and I won’t even bore you with any theology!

The first is just a statistic. A Gallup study acknowledges that 1 of 2 marriages end in divorce. It's a sad statement, but that same study also showed that for couples that attend church together regularly, the number drops to 1 in 50. And furthermore it says that for couples that *pray* together regularly, (and they didn't mean just saying grace before meals) the number drops to 1 in 1100. Think prayer doesn't make a difference in our world? Go home tonight and every night and pray with your entire family.

Here's another example of how prayer impacts things here on earth. I don't know how many of you were touched by the pictures of the aftereffects of hurricane Katrina. I was. I soon couldn't watch any more, it was so depressing. So I shut off the TV and just listened to music on the radio. But God's grace was gnawing away at me. At night I would ask God to bless and comfort those who were homeless and those who were separated from their families, in the same way He has blessed and comforted me my whole life long. It only took a day before I realized how God was calling me to help as well, and I joined millions in donating my time, talents and treasure to the effort – albeit from a distance. But I recently learned that a family from New Orleans has moved into our parish with 2 children in our school. I am compelled to do whatever I can to help them. I'm curious as to how God will turn my heart and my actions to lend them a hand, a welcoming smile, and a sense of community far from the place they call home.

See, living a life of thanksgiving for what God is already doing for us helps us more fully recognize and respond to the reality around us.

Let me try to tie the two types of prayer we've talked about, asking God to do something for us, and recognizing what God is already doing for us with a third, and I promise, final, joke.

The story is told of the man caught by rising floodwaters. As he looks out the second story window of his house, a man in a rowboat spies him and calls out, "Hey, get in and I'll save you!" The man replies, "Thank you, but no, I'm waiting for the Lord"

The waters continue to rise and now the man has scrambled out onto his roof, where he is seen by a man going past in a speedboat. This man roars up to the house and yells, "Hey, get in and I'll save you!" The man on the roof replies, "Thanks, but no, I'm waiting for the Lord. He will save me."

Soon the waters have rise so far that the man is perched on his chimney top. Miraculously, a passing helicopter spots him and the pilot shouts down, "Climb up this rope ladder and we'll save you!" "No, thanks," replies the man on the roof. "I'm waiting for the Lord who has promised to save me."

The waters continue to rise, and the man drowns.

Now he gets to heaven, and when he gets there he has a complaint to make. He says to the Lord, "Lord, I prayed to you to save me! And You never came."

The Lord replies, "You idiot! I sent you a rowboat, a speedboat, and a helicopter!"

So, you can see it's good to ask God for things. And it's equally good to recognize what God is already doing for us.

But there's one more aspect of prayer that I want to cover. We've talked about how they make a difference for *God* in his foreknowledge of fulfilling our inmost dreams, of how they might make a difference for *us* in opening us up to see our intimate connection with each other and with God, but we haven't talked about how my prayers actually make a difference for *others*.

While, there's a number of ways in which prayer impacts the lives of others, I simply want to focus on two.

My boss recently found out that he has a form of lymphoma. When he first told people about it, they responded that they would pray for him. Initially he found it difficult to accept the fact that people were praying for him – you know we men get his macho feeling that we don't need others' help. But as he entered into the chemotherapy, his knowledge that people were praying for him began to make a difference. In his weakness, the prayers of others gave him strength and determination. So now when I pray for people, I, as much as possible, let them know I'm praying for them. If I don't let them know about it, I still know it makes a difference, but it seems to make a more powerful impact on them here and how if they know they're being prayed for.

There are stories about how prayer not only lifts people's spirits, but it actually affects their health. It's not hard to find a study in which prayer is shown to, at a minimum, increase the speed with which people recover from surgery, and even dramatically reduces the amount of medication they need.

But, in my mind, the most beautiful aspect of prayer has to do with how prayers help each of us at the moment of our judgment before God – that moment when we become aware of all the prayers that ever have or ever will be prayed for us. I believe that the most beautiful teaching of the Catholic Church is the teaching called the Definitive Encounter. I can't get into the details of it here, save to give a brief synopsis. We'll talk about this more in the Spring when we talk about God's Grace.

Modern psychology has shown us that we are not fully free in our lives. As I said earlier, we are destined to do what we *want* to do more so that what we *ought* to do. Our wants are formed by a number of factors, including but not limited to, what our mothers put into their bodies when we were in the womb, the upbringing we had as children, the knowledge we were presented in school, and the society we live in. As a result, we are not fully free to make decisions because we've been put into environments, *without our choice*, and which impact our ability to know what we *should* want. Do any of you for a moment think you'd be the same person you are today if you were born in a different country or in the middle ages? Our environment impacts who we are. Furthermore, we make decisions every day without all the facts. How many of us have listened to someone's story, made up our mind about what we should do, and then talked to another person, heard their part of the story, and totally reversed our decision about what we should do? In most cases in life, we don't hear all the sides of the story. We don't have all the knowledge we need to choose the right thing.

The teaching of the Definitive Encounter recognizes all this, and realizes that we are not fully culpable for every behavior of ours on earth. It says that after we have died, we will be given full knowledge, full freedom, and finally, full responsibility for our choices. And we will have responsibility for one choice and one choice only – whether we say “yes” or “no” to God. This teaching is first formulated by St. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, when he says “now I see indistinctly as in a mirror” but “then I shall know even as I am known.” It's further explored by St. Thomas Aquinas when he talks about how we develop a “habit” here on earth around how we respond to God and that that “habit” of saying Yes or No to God in the little things of life will impact our ability to say “yes” or “no” to God at the final judgment. And it was clarified by Ladislaus Boros in the 1930's and became an official teaching of the Church in the 1940s.

It sounds so easy, right? Do whatever you want here on earth, go up to God, say “yes God, I want heaven” and in you go. Right? Well, not quite. See, at that moment of definitive encounter, we are brought to full knowledge of who God wanted us to be. We glimpse the potential of who we could have been if we’d have done everything the way God wanted us to, and we see how far we fell short of the mark. We see all the hurts we caused others, the pain we caused God, and the damage we did to ourselves. Such a realization is a real downer. But the beautiful thing about our prayers for others is that since God is in eternity, he is outside of time. And since the Definitive Encounter is a full encounter with God, it too is outside of time. That means that all the prayers that have been said for us, are gathered up into one and are brought before us, helping to counteract our pain. All the prayers that have ever been prayed for us and ever *will* be prayed for us help us realize the love that people have for us and the love that God has for us, and this blast of love helps to counteract the painful realization of all the hurt we have caused, and hopefully gives us the strength to say Yes to God.

Padre Pio was a Capuchin monk who was recently canonized as a saint. You may remember him as the priest who had stigmata, bleeding from his hands. One day, his doctor came into his room, and Padre Pio got up and said “Please excuse me, I was saying some prayers for my grandfather.” The doctor said “But you told me that he was already in heaven.” “That is so,” said Padre Pio, “but the prayers that I have *now* said for him and shall *yet* say for him have *already* helped him to get there.” Our prayer *can* help people in the here and now, but they most certainly *will* help people in the here after.

I’ve already gone on too long, talked about too many aspects of prayers, and touched on each of them too lightly. But my hope is that somehow through all of it, you came to recognize that which you already knew: *prayer is helpful and prayer is important.*

But if we know it’s helpful and important, if we know it impacts God, us, and others, then why don’t we do it more often? If we know that without a good prayer life, without an active relationship with God, we’ll never become the person God wants us to be because we’ll never know *who* God wants us to be, then why don’t we pray more often. This is the question I’d like you to ask yourself tonight. Jesus tells us to pray constantly. I suspect we each fall short of that mark, and I suspect we each have our reasons. To help you out, let me give you a starter list of excuses to help you move beyond them. You see, God doesn’t care about our excuses, God cares about our actions.

The first excuse is that we just plain don’t like it. Prayer can be like work if our goal is to get something out of it. You sit there and try to be still when all manner of things are rushing through your head. You sit there quietly instead of using that same time to get your tasks done. You sit there investing in something which only has a long term payout – kind of like investing in the stock market today, eh? Prayer can be a real pain if we do it for any other reason than just relishing the time with God and ourselves. Don’t enter prayer with an interest in getting something in the future, enter into it with an interest in getting something in that very moment that will *carry* you into the future!

A second reason has to do with our concept of ourselves and our God.

- We might say: “God is so big and I am so small, so what difference can my voice make before God.”
- We might say: “God already knows what I need and is kind, so why do I even need to ask him for anything?”
- We might say: “The laws of nature are immutable and so is God, so how can my prayers that things be different be of any value?”

Hopefully we’ve already answered some of these questions earlier in this talk.

But I suspect that the biggest excuse is that we don't have enough time. Our lives are so busy between work, and the kids, and meetings, and volunteering, that prayer kind of gets pushed aside. One of the books I was reading in preparation for this talk said "the awful rush of modern life" gets in our way. Doesn't that just say it all: "the awful rush of modern life." Well, the book from which I took that quote was written in 1906! Think about 1906. People didn't have cars – the Model T didn't come out until 1908. They didn't have phones. They didn't have little league baseball (began in 1939) or malls or television or movies. And they certainly didn't have the internet. So what could have made them so busy? Let's face it: people in all times have been oppressed by the lack of time in their day. And the last thing on people's minds is how they can fit 15 minutes into their day to grow closer with God. The real enemy here is not our lack of time, but our lack of attention to priorities.

Tonight, let's understand that prayer is the *starting point* for our relationship with God and our own goodness. If we don't commit ourselves to prayer, we can't have strong faith life, and without a strong faith life, we'll never act as God wants us to act .

Let me suggest to you that you perhaps our busy-ness is not the real problem. Perhaps the real barrier to our praying isn't the barrage of things *out there* that get in our way, perhaps, just perhaps, it's the barrage of barriers we set up *in here*. If we really *wanted* to pray, we'd find time and set priorities so that we'd be able to pray.

Let's take a moment to reflect on all the barriers, real or imaginary, that we have set up between ourselves and Jesus' directive to pray constantly. Take a moment to think of one of the barriers that keeps you away from God, most especially your desire or lack thereof, and think of a way to overcome that barrier. Maybe it's a matter of time management, or priorities, or attention, or something else.

And now think about a way to overcome that barrier. And commit to yourself that by this time next week, that barrier will permanently be a thing of the past.