

## HOLY REQUESTS

Last Christmas Linda and I visited our son Matt and his family in Florida. Our grandsons are not overindulged, but like many middle class kids they made a real haul of books and toys. Later in the week, as we sat around the dinner table, and took hands to say grace, four-year-old Zachary volunteered to do the honors. We were all quite surprised, and frankly amused, when he prayed: “Dear Santa Claus, I like you a lot and hope you come back soon. Amen.”

Of course, as we grow older, of course, we usually come to understand that God is not some celestial St. Nick. In fact, we may go to the other extreme, and come to a point where we think it is somehow wrong or selfish to ask God for things as mundane as the everyday needs we human beings often have. And so, we stop asking altogether. We *may* offer up prayers of thanksgiving, even prayers of confession, but we hesitate to offer petitionary prayers for ourselves.

But God wants to know your needs. God wants to hear your requests. Quaker Richard Foster writes: “Petitionary Prayer remains primary throughout our lives because we are forever dependent upon God. It is something we never really ‘get beyond,’ nor should we even want to. In fact, the Hebrew and Greek words that are generally used for prayer mean ‘to request’ or ‘to make petition.’” (*Prayer*, 179)

When Jesus’ disciples ask him how to pray he teaches them the simple prayer we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer. Right in the middle of that prayer is a petition, a simple straightforward request: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

In teaching the disciples to use these words, Jesus is reminding them (and us) that petitionary prayer is quite acceptable. In fact, not only are we allowed to pray for our needs, we are expected to. No matter what they are. Worried about a test in school? God wants to know. Upset about an unkind remark your best friend made? Pray about it. Hoping your boss will give you a raise? God wants to hear about that as well. Too many of us edit our prayers: that’s not important enough for God, we tell ourselves. That’s too silly. Too embarrassing. Too selfish. Too trite. But nothing is off limits.

There’s a story told about former Yankees catcher Yogi Berra that illustrates. It seems it was the bottom of the ninth, with two out and the score tied up. The batter from the opposing team comes up to bat, and when he does, he makes the sign of the cross in the dust of home plate, and, presumably, offers a prayer, asking to hit one out of the park.

Berra, a practicing Catholic himself, bends over and brushes off the plate. “Listen,” he says, “Why don’t we just let God watch the game?”

Commenting on the Berra remark, James Hewitt writes: “That is good theology when it comes to the outcome of a baseball game. It’s terrible [though] when applied to the way we live our lives. . . .” (*Illustrations Unlimited*, 424) And, I would add, when applied to the way we think about our prayers. As much as we Red Sox fans would like to think otherwise, God doesn’t choose sides in baseball—but God *does* care about it. For the same reason my wife cares about it. Because she loves me, and it’s important to me. God loves us, and therefore cares about all the details of our lives.

Often it seems we live in a world where folks expect things handed to them on a silver platter. I know parents of young children in our congregation who worry a great deal about whether or not their sons and daughters will grow up thinking they are entitled to a world of comfort. It is a valid concern here in Fairfield County! But petitionary prayer is not about entitlements. Nor is it about selfishness. Rather, it acknowledges that all we have is a gift. It reminds us of our dependence on God and on others. For neither you nor I are truly self-sufficient. And we are reminded of that each time we ask God for even the simplest of our needs.

But, even if you are willing to acknowledge the legitimacy and the need for petitionary prayer we are still faced with a difficult problem and an intellectual dilemma. What about unanswered prayer? Jesus promises in our gospel reading, “If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it.” (John 14:13) In light of those words, what are we to make of all the times our requests are left hanging?

This promise is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse, the final words he shared with his apostles as they ate the last supper. They are highly theological and probably styled by a later hand. Still, the underlying truths they convey ring true to Jesus.

In this portion of the discourse Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father—to show them God. Jesus responds if you’d been paying more attention you’d realize you have already seen God, in and through me. God and I are one, says Jesus. We are in complete accord.

I own a PDA—it’s like a Palm Pilot. It is for all intents and purposes a miniature computer. It keeps track of my calendar, my to-do lists, my e-mail. It has the same vital information on it that is on my desktop computer. Every time I go into my office I place the PDA into a device known as a cradle. The cradle is hooked up to my desktop computer. As soon as I turn on the desktop it sets in motion a program called ActiveSync. And, within minutes, any changes that I’ve made on the desktop are reflected on the PDA—and visa versa. They are in complete accord. They are in sync.

Jesus and God are in complete accord, they are in sync. As we see Jesus in action, we come to know God.

So, says Jesus to Philip, when you pray do so in my name. Which means, pray the way I would pray: pray to do God's will. Let God know your every concern, but let every prayer reflect your willingness to follow God's lead in all that you do.

Scholar Raymond Brown writes: "A Christian prays in Jesus' name in the sense that he [or she] is in union with Jesus . . . . [Therefore] because the Christian is in union with Jesus and Jesus is in union with [God], there can be no doubt that the Christian's requests will be granted." (*The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, 636)

And that, quite frankly, is where things start getting dicey. Because we've all made requests that weren't granted—and many of them far more significant than the outcome of a ball game! We've all asked for things to happen that never transpired. So how can one say that our requests will be granted?

Theologian and author C. S. Lewis married very late in life, only to have his newfound happiness ruptured when his wife Joy Gresham was diagnosed with cancer. It was a trying time for Lewis, testing his faith in ways it had never been tested before.

At one point Joy goes into remission. In the film *Shadowlands*, which beautifully tells the story of their relationship, we overhear a conversation Lewis had with an Anglican priest at the time of the remission.

"I know how hard you've been praying," says the priest. "And now God is answering your prayer."

Lewis responds, "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray . . . I pray because the need flows out of me all the time . . . waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me."

Prayer—all kinds of prayer including petitionary prayer—doesn't change God, it changes you, it changes me.

Gresham eventually loses her battle with cancer, and Lewis, despite his whirlwind of emotions, continues to pray. But his prayers are very angry, very despondent. During that time he kept a journal recounting the first months of his mourning. It has been published under the title *A Grief Observed*. In it one reads of Lewis' frustration, his anger, his loneliness and despair, as he deals with what feel like unanswered prayers. At one point he writes: "Meanwhile, where is God? Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting inside." (6) And later, "What chokes every prayer and every hope is the memory of all the prayers [Joy and I] offered and all the false hopes we had . . ." (30)

In an earlier book, Lewis had noted: Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death-bed, is a monument to a petition that was not granted.” (*Letters to Malcolm*, 58) Now he was learning that first hand.

In the strictest sense, Lewis’ prayers were not answered, his requests not filled. His petitions denied. Yet in the experience of grief he found a new answer, and towards the end of his journal he comes to terms with it all. The loss is still very real. The pain has not disappeared. But he has come to a new realization.

“I get no answer [from God],” he writes. “But a rather special sort of ‘No Answer.’ It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though God shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. ‘Peace child’ [God says,] ‘you don’t understand.” (69)

Because Lewis continued to pray in the name of Jesus, because he continued to bring his requests, his needs, before God, in time he drew closer and closer to the Holy One. And, in that sense, the deepest need he had, the deepest need every human being has was met. The greatest request of our very souls was indeed granted. For more than anything we need to be united with God, even as Jesus was. For as we are united with God, as we are caught up in that holy and eternal love, so we are united with all who have gone before us and all who will follow.

You see, God wants to hear our prayers of petition and intercession, our holy requests if you will, so that by and through them we might draw closer to the very Source of all Love and all true life.

There is a part of me that finds all this quite unsatisfactory. It is intellectually incomplete. There are holes in what I’ve said. There are logical inconsistencies. Thousands of prayers have been made in Jesus name for my best friend’s wife Kathleen, why then does she still have MS? Millions of prayers have been offered for our troops and for others in Iraq, why then does the war drag on? I’m not really sure I’ve helped resolve the quandary presented by Jesus’ words here in John. But maybe I’ve helped shift our focus. For prayer is not about results. If it were it would be as simple as my grandson Zachary’s making a Wish List for Santa. No, prayer is about our relationship with God. It is about recognizing that we are not self-sufficient. It is about aligning my will with that of the Holy One.

I don’t understand all its implications. I don’t understand how it works. But despite my intellectual dilemma, I continue to pray, everyday. For my needs and for a very long list of others.

I do take some comfort in Richard Hauser’s wise comment in an essay he wrote: “Praying,” he reminds us, “is an art, not a science.” (*Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, 391)

**And I take even more comfort in a story told by Elisa Morgan.**

**One evening as she was putting her eleven-year-old daughter Eva to bed she was very distracted. Kids pick up on such things, and so Eva asked her mother what was wrong.**

**Elisa told Eva that she had just learned that Amy, the teenaged daughter of one of her friends, was suffering unexplained hair loss.**

**That night when young Eva said her bedtime prayers with her mother, she made a simple request: “Jesus,” she prayed, “Please hold Amy’s hair on her head.”**

**But Amy’s hair kept falling out. And several different treatments failed to stop it. In time she was diagnosed with a rare disease called alopecia, which can result in total and permanent hair loss.**

**Elisa finally shared this news with her daughter Eva, and that night, as she held her mother’s hand, and closed her eyes, she prayed a different prayer. “Dear Jesus,” she said, “If you won’t hold Amy’s hair on her head, would you please hold Amy?”**  
*(Christian Parenting Today, Christian Reader)*

**I do not understand the economy of prayer. I don’t begin to comprehend its inner workings—nor do I understand the mind of God. But I do know the heart of Jesus. And in that heart there is room for every Amy. And every Jack Lewis, and every Kathleen, every US soldier, every Iraqi, and so too, sisters and brothers, every one of us. And the more open we are in our prayers, the more we are able to experience that love.**

**For in the end, God is not Santa Claus. In the end, God is love. All-encompassing, never-ending love. Love made known in and through Jesus. Love made available to you and me each time we pray.**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**