

Open Doors

Thank you for welcoming me back again this summer. What a summer it has been! This is the season that we yearn for on those cold wintry days. Yet, everywhere you turn right now, we hear of hatred, pain, violence. The world is full of fear. And the summer is far from being over yet. We keep hearing the words – “they are in our thoughts and prayers.” But what does that mean? How can we begin to vocalize what is in our hearts regarding recent events? Can we really change the trajectory of history through our prayers?

Do you remember the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*? That Christmas classic which I must confess I love.... At the beginning of the movie, the camera pans across a scene showing many houses. We hear voices, young/old, male/female all offering prayers for George Bailey. While the exact words vary, the petition is the same: bless and care for George Bailey. In those dire moments, people are speaking from their hearts. The words tumble out of their mouths, very easily.

We wish that the words could tumble easily out of our mouths too. The people of Bedford Falls spoke about one thing only – George Bailey. We have many needs and desires. What about our challenging lives as well as our troubled world? Our words fail us. How do we pray? Do our prayers even matter? So many prayers appear to go unanswered.

The disciples around Jesus also had concerns about prayer. They noticed how Jesus would go off to a quiet place to pray in solitude. It seemed to sustain him through his ministry. The gospel of Luke provides many examples of Jesus praying. Luke tells us that Jesus prayed even as he was dying on the cross. Seeking forgiveness for those responsible for his crucifixion (Luke 23:34) and moments before he took his last breath he prayed that God would receive his spirit (Luke 23:44-46).

With the multitude of references to prayer, Luke must be trying to explain something beyond the mere act of praying. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, comforted the outcast, taught, preached, mentored, and formed faith communities. That is a tremendous load for one person! Still, he always took time for prayer. It nourished his soul. He connected with something greater than himself – God – and by doing so was able to continue with his work and life.

So the disciples, wanting to follow his example, ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. We can imagine them sitting in a circle, feasting on every word. He offers a simple prayer: honouring God, asking for enough food, for forgiveness, for support during a time of struggle. But this prayer is more than just an “ask” or petitioning prayer. It is about our relationship to God’s reign in our lives. The prayer turns upon the words: “Your kingdom come.” Following the example of Jesus, the disciples are asked to turn themselves over to God. Jesus provides a story to explain that they are loved, they will be cared for, and that they are to do likewise.

Matthew, Chapter Six, also has a version of this prayer – this is the one that is more familiar to us. Luke, the author of this gospel and the Book of Acts, is writing in a later period than Matthew and is trying to appease the Roman authorities while still advancing the radical message of Jesus. Jesus is presented as a prophet who will pass along the baton, first to the apostles then to Paul. The words are meant to calm the fears of the authorities. Jesus is just one man among many. The Spirit will rest on others as well.

In Luke's gospel, the Spirit is the constant factor. The Spirit comes upon Mary, Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, the Spirit accompanies him into the wilderness. Jesus' first reading in the synagogue is from Isaiah – "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." (Luke 4:18-19) As my New Testament professor asserts: "The Spirit is the player across the narrative of Luke." The Spirit is mentioned at the end of today's passage as well. Jesus is explaining how to have a change of attitude in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. It does not seem that the disciples wanted to know the exact words to say. They had each joined Jesus and were part of his work and mission – an offering of compassion and justice. The disciples wanted to know how to approach life.

The same holds true for us as we hear these words today. They demonstrate how to approach our lives. We are so familiar with the words to this prayer that we tend not to think about what they mean. We repeat them from rote memory. Perhaps today's reading provides space for us to reflect on more. Jesus provides a story to explain that we are loved, we will be cared for, and that we are to do likewise. Our values and attitudes will become a reflection on earth for the values of compassion and justice which are part of God's kingdom.

We are called to live faithfully; we are to be aligned with Christ. We will know what to ask for, where to search, where to knock. We become focussed on the "other" rather than our own concerns. We are asked by Jesus to give prayer a try. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." Which door? The door to the Divine, Source of all being. Prayer allows us to connect with God. To open our hearts and allow the Spirit to soften them.

Luke is leading us to a place where we discuss the Spirit. In the previous chapter of this gospel we find the stories of the Good Samaritan and Martha and Mary. These two stories work together. To love God – take time to connect - and love the neighbour as ourselves. This is the kingdom – wholeness and holy. This is shalom or peace on earth. In order to get to the kingdom on earth, we need to connect with God. We need to open the door. We pray to align our hearts with God's heart - to see our needs as the Spirit sees our needs. We move towards affirmation and commitment to each other, seeking the well-being of all peoples and all of creation. This is transforming. It helps us play a role in mending the world.

God transforms our lives and we can join as co-creators with God in mending the world. AND as Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall says, “we must not sin by letting our ego assume that our work automatically leads to the coming of God’s reign.”¹ God brings forth beauty and wholeness over the long haul. This is our hope.

While we view this mending as the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1), it is still tied to our current lives. The doorway is open between the world that God desires and the world in which we live. This is God with us, among us, struggling, striving along beside us.

A few years ago, my family went to Atlanta for the February Family Day weekend. I knew that I had to attend Ebenezer Baptist Church where Martin Luther King Junior was pastor for many years. While the original building has been replaced, I felt enveloped in the history, the struggle, the deep faith of that particular congregation. They were and still are a witness to participating in God’s work of healing and mending creation. What an experience! What was unusual that Sunday was that it was the annual visit by the congregation of the oldest Jewish synagogue in Atlanta – simply known as The Temple. Twice a year the two congregations share interfaith worship. During the final prayer, congregants were asked to stand and hold hands. This is not our United Church way of doing things! We held hands across the aisles. Young, tiny hands; old, weathered hands; hands of different colours; hands of those of different faiths and no faith... the entire congregation holding hands. I cannot tell you what was said but for a few moments, God’s people were one. We were united in love and our common humanity. That is hope. That is God’s kingdom come.

Like those people in Bedford Falls and the hapless George Bailey, we can gather together. At the end of the movie, people gather at the Bailey house. They offer gifts of money as they come through the door to pay off the debt owed to Mr. Potter. Bailey was a man who was trying to make Bedford Falls a better place. Yes, it is a movie so there is a happy ending. Prayers are answered. Still, what is more important in the story is that all come together and love is shown - despite their differences. Like Ebenezer Baptist Church on that Sunday, praying together, united in love of God and our common humanity. Now, modelling in these walls so that we do likewise when we leave this place. So we work towards wholeness – shalom. This is the kingdom come. This can be our prayer during these trying times. In these moments, like the United Church’s Song of Faith states:

We sing of the Spirit,
who speaks our prayers of deepest longing
and enfolds our concerns and confessions,
transforming us and the world.

May it be so.

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 230.