

“IS GOD LISTENING?”

Luke 11:1-13 August 6th, 2017

“Sometimes I thank God, for unanswered prayers

Remember when you’re talking to the man upstairs

That just because he doesn’t answer doesn’t mean he don’t care

Some of God’s greatest gifts, are unanswered prayers.”

If you are a country western fan you probably recognize this refrain from Garth Brook’s song titled “Unanswered Prayers.” While I have always liked the song, I have always had a problem with it. The “unanswered” part of it bothers me. So I did an informal survey of some folks about what the topic “unanswered prayers” means to other people. Very unscientific, you understand, but helpful all the same. And I did get a variety of responses...

One thoughtful response was “Truly, unanswered prayers are often some of life’s biggest blessings!” Another person wrote, “I feel God has a plan for all. Sometimes prayers go unanswered for reasons that only God knows. I think we have to have faith in him that even though our prayers may not be answered how we would like them to be, God is allowing what happens because that is the best outcome.” A third response was “Sometimes they turn out to be our greatest blessings although we don’t see it, God does.” And finally, a fourth response was “I don’t like the term ‘unanswered prayers’. To me it sounds like there are some prayers that God doesn’t answer, and I feel that’s just not true...”

Some time ago I read a story about a young boy who was praying for a bicycle for Christmas. But his family was very poor, and when Christmas morning came there was no bicycle. A family friend, who was not very sensitive, said to the boy, “Well, I see that God did not answer your prayer for a bicycle.”

“ Oh, yes, he did!” replied the boy, “he said No.”

Most of you are aware that No is an answer every bit as much as Yes is an answer. The problem is that we want what we want and we want our prayers answered according to our will and timing—not God’s will and timing. We want what we want and when we want it! Another response from my informal survey stated:” What I think of when I think about unanswered prayers is that maybe the answer is “no” to that prayer because He has bigger plans in store for us that we couldn’t even think to pray for.”

So sometime when it comes to God’s answering our prayers, it often seems that if we do not hear the answer we want to hear, we conclude that it was not an answer at all.

It’s like the three retirees, each with a hearing loss, who were taking a walk on a fine April Day. One remarked to the other, “Windy, ain’t it?”

“No,” the second man replied, “it’s Thursday.”

And the third man chimed in, “So am I. Let’s have a coke.”

I believe there are times when we tend to think that God is the one with the hearing problem, when it turns out to be that we are the ones with the hearing problem. God is always present and He is always listening! But what are some of the responses we might get from Him when we pray?

In Garth Brook’s country song, he had met a girl (isn’t that always the case?) and he wanted her to love him back. However, God said no to his request and in the future, he met the perfect girl for him, they married and lived happily ever after. So he’s saying that this was an unanswered prayer—which doesn’t happen. It was God’s timing, not this young man’s, and God was listening, But the prayer was answered in a most wonderful way with God saying Yes to what

was best for him! By hindsight sometimes we can thank God for saying “No, to prayers that we thought were appropriate at the time. Now in hindsight we can say, “Thank you, thank you that you said no to that particular request!”

If the request is wrong, God will say “No” to your request.

If the timing is wrong, God might choose to say, “Slow, go slow; wait.” If you are wrong [a distinct possibility for some of us], something is amiss in your life, maybe God will choose, instead of granting your request, to say, “You need to grow.” But if the request is right and the timing is right and you are right, chances are God will say, “Let’s go,” and grant the request.

In this week’s gospel lesson, Jesus not only shares with us the Lord’s prayer, he also offers an explanation about what to pray for by way of an object lesson based on an illustration involving a man asking a neighbor for some bread. At first glance Jesus seems to be lifting up the virtue of perseverance and assuring us that our prayers will be answered, as he tells the disciples: “Ask and it will be given you, search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:9-10) Many who hear these words interpret this to mean that, if we are persistent enough and believe hard enough, we can expect the answers we’re asking for in response to our prayers.

One time James and John went to Jesus, and asked if they could make reservations for the best two seats in heaven. They said, “We’d like one directly on Jesus’ left and one directly on Jesus’ right. Could you arrange that for us, Jesus?” Remember Jesus’ answer to that request? “No. I’m not going to grant that one, fellows. It’s a wrong request.”

The disciples were fully capable of making inappropriate requests of Jesus. And when the requests were wrong, Jesus said no. Are you and I capable of making wrong request to God? Unfortunately, when we're being honest, absolutely! Are we capable of making requests of God that are materialistic, shortsighted, and perhaps immature? Yes, we are. And our God loves us too much to say yes to wrong requests. If the request is wrong, God will answer the prayer, but his answer will be "No." And you wouldn't want God to do anything less.

If the timing is wrong, God will say, "Slow." Parents, have you noticed in your childrearing challenges that second only to the word "No" the words "Not Yet" rank as the most awful words in the English language to little children. You're leaving on a 500 mile trip in the car. You are just 15 miles from home and you slow for a construction detour. And the kids say, "Are we there yet?" And you say, "Not yet." And they groan and complain, "Oh, no. Come on, Dad, hurry it up!" You think, *It's going to be a long trip!*

Or it's four days from Johnny's birthday and he says, "Can't I open my present? It's close enough!"

"Not yet, Johnny."

"Aw, come on!" Groan, complain, murmur.

Oh, how children hate those words --"Not yet." And guess what, there is a child in all of us, isn't there? The child in all of us still wants God to meet every need, to grant every request, to move every mountain! When? Now! Maybe yesterday, actually. And when the loving Heavenly Father decides it's best to say very caringly to his children, "Not yet," what is our mature, adult response? "But God, I want it right now, right now! You don't understand how badly I need this right now! Not three years from now, not three months from now, not three

weeks from now, not three days from now. Read my lips as I pray to you, God, I want it now, now, now!!!

So, does this work with our Heavenly Father? God is no more intimidated by our childish fixation on instant gratification than our wise parents were. He probably shakes his head at our immaturity and says, “Kick back and wait. Not yet, my child.” How essential it is for you and I to understand that God’s delays are not necessarily God’s denials. How essential it is for us to understand that often God isn’t saying no, he is merely saying, “Not quite yet. Trust me. I know what I’m doing. I have my reasons.” God says in Isaiah 55, “My ways are higher than your ways; my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.” In my time, God says, which is one reason why God encouraged people to pray and not lose heart, because sometimes our requests are okay. What you are asking for is good and proper and right. But for reasons known only to God, he simply chooses occasionally to say, “I’ll grant it, but in my time.”

If the request is wrong, God will say, “No. You’d better change the request or let it go. If the timing is wrong, our loving God will say, “Just slow down. Not yet. In my time.” If you are wrong, God will say, “Grow.” And this is a rather sobering statement, isn’t it?

If you are wrong. What does that mean? Isn’t it a lot easier to point the finger at God for not answering prayer than it is to look in the mirror and to say, “Maybe I’m the problem.” It’s almost always easier to think, “Why isn’t God moving my mountain?” It’s human nature. It’s just easier to point the finger of accusation at God than it is to look in the mirror and take a spiritual inventory and say, “Maybe it’s me.”

Psalm 66:18 says if I regard sin in my heart, in other words, if I’m

leading a life of disobedience to God, the Lord will not hear my prayers. Pretty well sums it up, doesn't it? Matthew 5:23-24 warns that if there is relational discord, if there are private wars going on between people, if there are broken friendships, Jesus says it cuts us off from close fellowship with God. He continues in that passage by saying, "Drop everything and attempt to reconcile those relationships. Then go back to the altar and worship and pray."

In the book of James, the brother of Jesus says the fervent prayer of a righteous person has great power. But if you want to pull the plug out of the power of prayer, then just dishonor God in some area of your life on a continual basis. The psalmist says if you do that, if you regard iniquity in your heart, if you are leading a sloppy life, your prayers will not be heard.

God is saying to you people this morning that there is power in prayer. When the request is right, when the timing is right, and when you are right, "Let's go!" He says, "Just let me release my power in your life' let me be great in you and through you; free me to address and meet your needs. Free me to do that. But you've got to grow. When the timing is right, God will say, "Let's go!"

If the request is wrong, God will say, "No." Thank him for saying that. If the timing is wrong, he'll say "Slow. Not yet." If you are wrong, he'll say grow. But when all those get lined up, as it fits into the plans that he has for you and for this world, you'll be amazed at how often God will say, "Let's go!" -- because you matter to him and it's in his heart to meet your needs and grant your requests. It's really more a matter of you letting him in and you freeing him to do it. Unanswered prayers?!?!? God is always present in our lives, loving us and wanting what's best of us. Be persistent in your prayers because they are always answered! Amen and amen.