

Prayer: 5. When God is Late
John 11:1-7
February 19, 2012
Pastor Steve Richards

Last Sunday night's Grammy Awards show began in a most unusual way. Did you see it? The night before, singer Whitney Houston was found dead in her hotel room. Suddenly, the music community felt something. Maybe you did too. And the next night, Sunday night, singer LL Cool J walked on the stage at the Academy Awards and said, "The only thing that feels right is a prayer." He took a note from his coat pocket and he began to pray: "Heavenly Father, we thank you for our sister..." Prayer is to the soul as breathing is to the body. If you've ever been pushed underwater, you know it doesn't take long until you come to the surface, gasping for air. The circumstances of life can sometimes send us gasping for prayer. One of my most vivid memories was in the moments before our daughter Lauren was born. Amanda was rushed to the delivery room – suddenly this child we had been waiting to be born was in distress. It turned out that she was okay, but in that moment we feared the worst and I was gasping for prayer. "Lord, help her." And last Sunday night, many of the people in the Grammy Awards were gasping. Souls gasping for prayer. You know how that is. Prayer is to the soul as breathing is to the body.

A relationship with God will make all the difference. Last Sunday, someone asked, "When will you tell us how prayer can get us what we want?" That's actually the point of this series on prayer. Shel Silverstein, the writer of several well-known children's books, once wrote the "Prayer of the Selfish Child": *"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my toys to break. So none of the other kids can use 'em. Amen."* Children come to their parents with all kinds of requests – wonderful, foolish, generous, and selfish. What matters to parents, however, is that their child comes to them. Not so parents can give their children whatever they want, but so that they can give something greater than that – it's a relationship – am I right? When I pray, I end up praying about things I think I should be concerned about – but my mind wanders to the things I am genuinely concerned about. I can't help myself. I'm gasping. I pray what's in me. Even if you never pray, when life pushes you below the surface, you come up gasping – for the relationship.

Sometimes we wonder about the reason for this relationship if we pray and pray and pray and whatever we are praying about doesn't get fixed and even gets worse. Why doesn't God answer my prayer? Why doesn't God do something about that? This morning, I want us to look at that, because everyone of us has a that – he could be at home right now or at work or at school – or something inside us, some burden that we carry. What we will discover in our scripture for today is you can continue to hope and believe even when it seems God is doing nothing at all. All of us will experience times when God is silent or God says no or God is late. And in John 11, we see three people who had a close relationship with Jesus and yet they experience what we experience.

Verse 1: ***Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha...*** Jesus was often traveling through the village of Bethany. They were friends of Jesus. He was often in their home. And now their brother Lazarus is sick. ***So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."*** Jesus received the message and no name was require. "The one you love" – Jesus knew who this was. If Lazarus had a bumper stick, it might look like this. All Mary and Martha had to do was say to Jesus, the one you love is sick. They had seen Jesus heal strangers. They had seen the lines of strangers waiting for Jesus to heal them. This would be a "slam duck". Jesus, the one you love is sick. It is

important to know this because what is about to happen may be hard to believe. **When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”** Why is Lazarus sick? What’s the diagnosis? For God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified though it – the sickness. Jesus is about to bring light to darkness, hope to those who don’t think they have any hope. **So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,** Wait a minute! Didn’t John just tell us that Lazarus, the one Jesus loves, is sick and Mary and Martha, his friends, just sent a message that Lazarus needed help so they must be going there – a two day trip, but no – Jesus stayed where he was for two days – **and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. It is when people walk at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”** Huh? Is Jesus even listening to them? Lazarus is sick – not sick enough that he will die, so for two days we have remained where we are. But now, you want us to go to Bethany and that’s in Judea and the last time we were in Judea, you know what happened. People threw stones – and we’re telling you we don’t want to go there. And then you ask us how many hours there are in the day – as if you don’t already know! Jesus, are you even listening to us? But Jesus is asking them a question that will make perfect sense at the end of the story. Jesus is saying that there are opportunities available in the daylight that are not available in the dark. Right now there is an opportunity and we have no time to waste. I have something to teach you that will change your life forever and give you light to shine in your deepest darkness. So let’s go. Don’t miss what God will do through me.

But then in verse 14, Jesus makes what may be one of the most insensitive statements in the Bible. In fact, if you were trying to make the case for Jesus as the Son of God, you would not put this in the Bible – unless it was true. **“Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there,** You knew he was going to die? You let Mary and Martha nurse their brother, believing that you would come and save him and you didn’t go on purpose? And you are glad you weren’t there to save the one you love? What could be so important that you would allow the one you love to die? **so that you may believe.** (believing is that important) **But let us go to him.”** We are about to see what Jesus will do when Jesus doesn’t do what we think Jesus should do. **On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.** In Bethany, Lazarus is dying. Mary and Martha are doing all that they can, but Lazarus is getting worse, not better. So they send a message to Jesus. They have no doubt that Jesus will come and heal their brother. “Don’t worry. Jesus will come.” They whisper in his ear: “Hold on, Jesus is coming.” And I can picture Mary at the end of the road, waiting. Jesus heals strangers, and my brother is the one Jesus loves. He’s coming. We have faith. And she waited. The whole community waited and watched and then Lazarus died and still no Jesus. Surely he will come today, but no Jesus. Not the next day or the next day or the next. And finally, Mary and Martha are told Lazarus must be buried – “but Jesus is coming, we know he would never not come.” “But Mary and Martha, it’s time to bury your brother.” So they cleaned his body, wrapped and placed in a tomb (much like Jesus would be) and they rolled a stone to seal the entrance, and they began to mourn – and no Jesus. And isn’t that where we live sometimes. We need God to show up and God doesn’t come. “God, I thought you cared.” But Jesus is about to provide a lesson that we can hang on to while we wait.

Four days is important. Many Jews believed the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope that the person would come back to life, but by the fourth day there was no hope and the soul would leave. The fourth day is the day of no hope. Imagine how embarrassing it must have been for the disciples to come into Bethany. Everyone would be staring at Jesus: how dare you; you didn’t come and heal; you didn’t even come when he died;

you waited until four days and he's in the tomb and you have the nerve to show yourself in this town. Jesus, you could have, should have, but didn't come! We thought you loved us. You don't love us. You love strangers, not us. Mary and Martha are angry. Maybe you've been in this place? Jesus, if you had been here our brother would not have died. This is your fault! And Jesus says **"Your brother will rise again."** I know, I know, I know, he's in a better place. Isn't that what people tell you – "you'll see him again." Don't tell me that. I know that but it doesn't comfort me. You should have been here. And Jesus looks at this angry woman who thought she knew who Jesus was and he says to her as he says to you and me: ***I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?*** It is a question that he asks of you and me. Do you believe this? Do you still trust me – even though I did not do what you wanted? Are you willing to believe even when Jesus didn't answer your prayer when you wanted with what you wanted? Can you still trust God?

And Jesus went to the tomb where Lazarus had been buried. "Take away the stone," he said. Now remember, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. And Jesus says to Mary and to Martha and to us. Here's the point, the message for this morning: ***"Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"*** This is about Jesus. Jesus, you let your friend die so we would believe, so we would put one foot in front of the other, so we would keep going and never give up? And Jesus says, you will catch a glimpse of my glory even in your most difficult time. And after offering a prayer, Jesus says "Lazarus, come out!" And he did! And the people were shocked. They couldn't move. This was way beyond anything they expected. And John concludes the story this way: ***Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.*** I'll bet they did! Jesus didn't raise someone from the dead who was asleep or passed out, but dead four days. There is nothing Jesus cannot do. So why doesn't God answer your prayer? Honestly, I don't know, but I know God can. I know sometimes God waits. And I know we can trust God. Why doesn't God do something about...? I don't know, but I know God can. I know sometimes God waits. And I know we can trust God.

Why doesn't God answer when I call? I don't know, but I know God can. I know sometimes God waits. And I know I can trust God, because God never let's go. Jesus made this promise: If you believe, you will see the glory of God. In the midst of whatever and wherever, God can bring about God's glory. Give up on God and you give up on the one who will never fail, the one who will never let go. So hang on. There is a resurrection.

Why pray? To live into a relationship. Prayer is to the soul as breathing is to the body. Without prayer, there is no relationship. When God is silent – look outside your own circumstances because God is there. When God's answer is no – lean into God's grace. Paul says, God's grace is sufficient even when our circumstances do not change. When God waits – look for God's glory. If you will hang on, you will catch a glimpse of the glory of God. I don't just believe this. I am counting on it!

Prayer

Most gracious and loving God, we seek your presence in the midst of our lives this day, just as Mary and Martha sought it long ago. For in your presence, Lord, all the sorrows and pain we face can be conquered; not even death can stand against you. Lord, we, your people, seek your presence. Hear us as we pray. Amen.

Monday

Read John 11:1-45

When God is late in addressing your problems or answering your prayers, it can be difficult to know how to continue on in faith. But the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead offers a picture of hope in the midst of a hopeless situation. If you continue to trust God through your pain, he will eventually show you his glory.

- Has a painful circumstance ever caused you to question God's love for you? How does knowing that God isn't too big or too distant to understand your pain change your perspective on suffering?
- Jesus' late arrival resulted in Lazarus' death, and great suffering for Mary and Martha. How can Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus give us hope when we suffer loss and God offers no obvious miracles?

Tuesday

Read John 15:5-8, 10-16

As we have heard throughout this series: to have a relationship with God, prayer is essential. In fact, prayer is really about a relationship with God. In today's scripture, Jesus indicates that this relationship is initiated by God. Normally disciples chose their teacher, but Jesus is saying that Jesus chose (and still chooses) disciples. We usually reach out in prayer in order to get what we want, but here it is the other way around. Jesus wants from us!

- Philip Yancey writes: "Prayer is hardly a perfect form of communication, for I, an imperfect, material being who lives on an imperfect, material planet am reaching out for a perfect, spiritual Being. Some prayers go unanswered, a sense of God's presence ebbs and flows, and often I sense more mystery than resolution. Nevertheless I keep at it, believing with Paul that "now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." *Prayer*, pp. 326 – 327
- In what ways have unanswered prayers affected your relationship with and expectations of God?

Wednesday

Read Luke 11:5-10

Although praying with persistence can seem like a challenge, Jesus emphasized it in this reading and several of his teachings and by his life example. Jesus urges boldness in prayer. Persistence is a sign of genuine desire for change. We see this in "shameless audacity" that Jesus describes.

- But what about us? Often when we really want something (an achievement, a trip, etc.), we work at it. We are prepared to do whatever it takes. But do we show the same spirit in prayer?
- To what extent do you value persistent prayer and sacrifice for it? How closely aligned do you think your view of persistent prayer is to God's view?

Thursday

Read Psalm 13

Sooner or later, everyone who prays will experience difficult times when God seems hopelessly distant, when the act of prayer seems futile, or when it seems as if God is simply unwilling to answer heartfelt prayers. The psalmist David felt such a barrier when he cried, "How long, Lord?"

- What barriers have you faced that made your prayer seem futile? Consider the barriers you currently are feeling in your prayer experience. How might you let go of that barrier or allow God to help you overcome that barrier?
- As we have learned in this series, sometimes we must look outside our current circumstances to see that God is doing. Can you remember a time when God did act in your life?

Friday

Read 1 Corinthians 13:12

Paul provides an explanation for that which we do not fully understand, such as unanswered prayer. No human being, no matter how wise or how spiritual, can interpret the ways of God, explaining why one miracle and not another, why an apparent intervention here and not there. Along with the apostle Paul, we wait, and trust.

Consider this checklist to keep your prayers on track when you are not getting an answer.

- *What do I really want?* Am I being specific, or am I just rambling about nothing in particular?
- *Can God grant this request?* Or is it against God's nature to do so?
- *Have I done my part?* Or am I praying to lose weight when I haven't dieted?
- *How is my relationship with God?* Are we on speaking terms?
- *Who will get the credit if my request is granted?* Do I have God's interests in mind?
- *Do I really want my prayer answered?* What would I have if I actually did get what I want?

Saturday

Read Psalm 112:1, 4-6 & Psalm 40:1, 3

God always longs to hear from you! One day each of us will have the chance to talk face to face with God, the Creator who loves us, is redeeming us, and truly desires an ongoing relationship with us. In the meantime, we have the privilege of "showing up" in prayer to commune with God. We have confidence that God listens to us and indeed longs to engage us in a holy partnership to do on earth what is done in heaven.

- In this series, what have you learned about prayer and your own person prayer life? How is prayer changing you?
- Prayer is to the soul as breathing is to body. Prayer is a relationship with God, a consent that opens the way for grace to work. What will you do to make prayer a more vital part of your daily life?