

# Sermon: “Learning about prayer”

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Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra, Pentecost 9, 29 July 2007

Bible readings: Psalm 85, Luke 11:1-13

*Thanks for condolences - for the terrific caring and support from the parish.  
[This is my first sermon since the death of my wife, on 26 June 2007.]*

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

I've learnt quite a deal a year. I've learnt a lot about cancer, about pain and nausea medications, about hospitals and specialists, about courage and fortitude and love from my dying wife, about the extraordinary importance of family and friends, about the value of life and about the beauty of receiving and giving love.

I've also learnt a lot about prayer this year. Since it became known early this year that Alison was facing terminal cancer, scores of congregations and church groups and thousands of people have been praying for Alison and for me. And it wasn't just in the Uniting Church - Catholics, Anglicans, Churches of Christ, Lutherans, Presbyterians, the Salvation Army, Armenians, Serbs, Copts, Indonesians, Syrians and Assyrians, all have included prayers for my wife and family in many and various churches.

Back in April when the oncologist told us Alison was doing better than he'd expected, I said to him I wasn't surprised, that with all the prayer happening for us maybe a miracle was taking place. He wasn't convinced, nor was Alison, and nor of course in the end was I. But I have no doubt that all the prayers helped.

How then does praying help, in the face of someone dying? I've thought about that and I reckon prayer helps in at least four major ways:

First, when you know people are praying for you, you feel a deep caring from them for you. Praying for another connects them with you, in fact it more than connects you, it bonds you, it commits you to the other. When you're the subject of another's prayer you have this marvellous sense of their feeling for you, their being for you and with you, and that uplifts you and gives you strength and peace.

Second, you know that God is listening, and that God is feeling for you too. Today's gospel reading tells us that God listens to prayer, and that God is goodness and love. The last verse says "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him". The Holy Spirit, the presence and peace and power of God on earth, with us. When you pray, and when others pray for you, you are connected with this God of goodness and love, bonded, committed to each other. That uplifts you and gives you strength and peace.

Third, prayer releases you. It is liberating to share your burden, your anxieties, with God, to know that your concerns are being taken seriously by someone with much more understanding, much more wisdom and much more power than you have. To know that people are praying for you eases your burden and feeds your own courage and endurance and love. It makes you positive.

One of the things Alison said to me late last year immediately after the doctors had told her she only had 3-12 months to live, was “Gregor, we must see the positive side of this”. Now I’d have to say I had great difficulty seeing anything positive about it at all. But even though Alison was no great believer in God and no great pray-er, she much appreciated the many messages of care and support we received from all over, including all the assurances of people including us in their prayers. And she sure did stay positive, living these last months with courage and acceptance and love. Prayer helps to keep you positive.

Fourth, prayer helps you to get things in right perspective. Once you share your thoughts and feelings with God and once people have committed you in prayer to God’s care, you no longer see things narrowly. As you are freed from your burden and your anxieties you are enabled to see the bigger picture, to realise that everyone of us is going to die one day, to realise that death is part of life, to realise that God is with us both in life and in death, and to realise afresh that God’s love and life are stronger even than death. The truth of God’s promises in Jesus Christ’s life and death and resurrection come home to you as you pray, and as others pray with and for you. What an uplift that is.

So I have four C-words about the effectiveness of prayer. Prayer connects you, prayer encourages you, prayer calms you, and prayer corrects you.

That is why Jesus is able to teach “ask and you will receive, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you”. On the surface of it that sounds too easy, too glib. It sounds like we will receive from God whatever we want. But that’s to take that part of Jesus’ teaching about prayer out of context. The immediate context in Luke 11 is about how we can be sure God is listening and how we can be sure God is loving and good. So the certainty is we’ll receive a response, the uncertainty is it may not be the response we were hoping for or wanted - God cannot be manipulated.

And if we go a little further back in the context, to the first verses of Luke 11, we are given a model prayer, what we’ve come to know as the Lord’s Prayer. Here Jesus teaches us to pray with humility, to pray first for God’s way and will to hold sway, to pray second for our own needs - never for our selfish or greedy ambitions, and to pray third that we will always relate to others with forgiveness.

Prayer has become even more part of my life, these past months. One of the things I’ve learnt about prayer this year is that often our deepest prayers have no words in them. As I paced around the house frequently late at night, knowing Alison had only weeks to live, I found it nigh impossible to put my sharing with God into words. And as I sat by her bedside, knowing she only had hours to live, all I could share with God were feelings, yearnings, pain, love. And God was there with us, hearing my praying and responding with understanding and love.

Friends, to be a follower of Christ means you’re a person of prayer. Christ prayed all the time - sometimes in the gospels you can feel the impatience of the disciples that Jesus was at it again, praying. Whether we pray morning, noon or night, or all three, it doesn’t matter - we are called to be people of prayer. Lord, teach us to pray...

To the glory of God. Amen.