July 28th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

Unlock the Door

1. The Coke Machine

The text we hear this morning is another classic – one that teaches us the prayer that we pray every Sunday morning together. When they asked Jesus how to pray, Jesus answered them, in a way that spoke to the very human nature of praise, redemption, and intercession. It has been a hallmark ever since.

And then Jesus dives into a metaphor about doors and the relationship God has with his creation: ask and you shall receive, knock the door and it shall be opened up to you, seek and you shall find. But one of the most human questions, one that hangs out in the ether is this: “What happens when you pray and the door is shut, you do not receive, or you seek and you do not find.”

Jesus doesn’t give us an answer for that deep dark question that looms in the human heart. What about the prayer that feels unanswered? What about the times you’ve asked over and over again, and you haven’t received what you’ve prayed for? What about the times you’ve sought over and over and over again – to not find, but rather, be lost and at a stand still.

This question is deeply theological, but moreso, human. We don’t talk about this part of prayer enough. It’s easy, and admittedly, I’ve done it a fair amount of times in my own life: I treat prayer like a coke machine.

When you take your coins and put it in the coke machine, you expect it to drop down your drink, and the transaction is done. But, it’s all happened once or twice, and you’ve probably seen it in the movies – where you put the coins in and the machine doesn’t do a thing. You’ve seen people shake the machine, kick it, frustrated rightfully that the money they put in didn’t get them what they requested.

Sometimes, prayer looks a lot like this – I say to God, “Dear God, I praise you, and I long for you to do x, y, and z – thank you, amen.” And the prayer isn’t ‘bad’ – there isn’t such a thing as a ‘bad prayer’. But that prayer might not be answered with the answer we wanted, or the can of coke we thought we rightfully asked for. Sometimes it feels like there’s no answer, empty silence, and you ask yourself what prayer means anyway.

II. Answered Prayer

A time in my life when I felt this acutely was when I was in university, studying graphic design, and I applied to the great Glasgow School of Art. I prepped my portfolio, many of my peers were getting in and going abroad, and I was so excited to go. I prayed to God that God would open the doors to let this amazing experience happen and I felt confident that God would lead me to a great semester abroad.

Until it didn’t happen. I still remember the tears rolling down my face as I sat on my parents porch in the summer when I found out that I wasn’t accepted for the fall term in Glasgow. My friends were going – but I would not be. I was devastated. I was ashamed. I was completely and utterly convinced that God was not on my side of this big adventure. The door was shut. The prayer I put into the coke machine of God’s prayer system did not return results. I was 20 – I thought that if God didn’t answer my prayer, it was a failure on my part, or God’s part, and I distinctly remember walking away from prayer for a bit, because why did it matter?

And yet, hindsight is 20/20. Years later, I would end up in Glasgow – not for art, but to go to Iona, to spend time with friends, to join a woodworking group in Glasgow’s most deprived areas. What I couldn’t hear at 20 is that God would not be answering that prayer right then and there, right when I wanted it. God could see the bigger picture that I couldn’t – it wasn’t time yet, God had something else in store, and I still look back with a renewed clarity on God’s plan for me.

1. Other Prayers

You could say to me though, ‘but your prayer was eventually

answered, in some way’ – what about those prayers that we pray that never seem to get answered? When the door is shut, locked down, and stories end – when we pray earnestly for friends who die, when we watch our family divide and never reconcile, when we see a prayer never come to fruition? What then?

I would say, you’ve asked one of the biggest questions, something theologians call ‘theodocity’ – or, in other words, ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’ or ‘why do my prayers go unanswered’? And if this is any consolation, this larger question about prayer has been asked throughout the centuries and no theologian, no matter how clever or quick or intelligent they’ve been has ever been able to answer that question. And to try to would be diminishing God’s mysterious movement in our lives and seeking to unravel the Spirit’s movement into something we can tangibly take in.

I can’t tell you why some prayers aren’t answered. I can’t tell you why when you seek so hard for something, you may not find it. I can’t tell you why a door may be closed and never opened up to you. But I can tell you this:

For all the prayers that we do not understand, for all the reasons we cannot grasp, the Gospel lesson today teaches us this: Jesus gives us a format, a way to pray, where we can find hope and meaning. We also learn that maybe the door is a two way system, and what I mean is this:

We ask that God opens a door, God opens a way, and gives us all we ask. But, I ask of you, and I ask of me – are we keeping the door open? It’s a two-way door – are we praying the prayers that we long for? Are we remaining open, keeping the door of our hearts and souls unlocked so that God can enter in? Are we willing, waiting, remaining, steadfast, and faithful in saying, ‘In your time, O God’?

1. Unlock the Door

We’ve been taught again and again to keep the doors

locked, keep our security, protect our homes and our assets – when we go to sleep, the door deadbolt gets switched. We lock down our homes so that none may enter in. In some way, we, in our lives, also have a deadbolt on our hearts – we have boundaries and measures to make sure that we are protected, safe, and we do not get our hearts broken. All of these safety measures are wise and positive.

Yet sometimes, the deadbolt stays on – our vulnerabilities aren’t shown, and we shut down. The challenge this week is to keep the door open, however that looks for you, for God to do the good work of challenging you, moving you, and letting the Holy Spirit reign in ways you could not perceive before. The challenge is to unlock the door and let God in, and whatever your prayers are, answered or unanswered, may you trust in a God who knows our story more than we do and is opening the doors that are the ones necessary for us to live a full and authentic life in Christ. Alleluia. Amen.