

Who is this God to whom we pray? It sounds in our reading from Hosea today that God doesn't think much about for his creation. "You are not my people and I am not your God." (Hosea 1:9) The psalmist also wonders if God is a god who loves us, "Will you be displeased with us forever?" (Psalm 85:5)

In the parable that Jesus tells after teaching the disciples the Lord's prayer, God is described as a person who has gone to bed and won't get up to help us unless we keep being persistent. He does not get up to help because the visitor is a friend, only because of his persistence. What kind of God is this?

I don't know. In these readings this morning I don't see the loving God who is always there to save us, help us, heal us. I see an angry God. God who is tired of our shenanigans and must be approached with the right words and a lot of humility and fawning over.

We must take time with difficult texts, though. Now, as always, we can't take these readings literally. We need some background and some understanding of the time the writers live in, and the circumstances in which they wrote.

Let's give God a chance to open up these texts for us through patient study, and then maybe we can understand how God means for us to pray. And ultimately, we want to know if God listens to our prayers and if God answers prayers.

So let's dive in. First, Hosea. Now he was a very angry man. He was a prophet who lived at a time when the people of Israel were not well behaved. They are portrayed as unkind, without compassion for the less fortunate. They were not a just and honorable people. Remember that the prophet Amos last week had the same message for the people of the southern kingdom, Judah. "We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances." (Amos 8:5)

Hosea continues the harangue against the people in God's name. He accuses them of unfaithfulness in their religious and political life. They worshiped other gods like Baal, the storm god of the local peoples who many thought would bring rain and fertility to the land. And he condemns the people of Israel for their inability to have a peaceful transition of government. They thought nothing of killing a king who fell out of favor along with all of his family.

So, Hosea portrays God as a faithful husband who has cared for his wife through thick and thin, and Israel as the ungrateful and promiscuous wife who is disloyal, wanton and unjust. We won't get into my feelings about the ancient stereotype of the man being good and loyal and the woman being bad and disloyal. It's just there.

The point is that God has done everything for God's people. And the people have wandered away. If they are not God's people it is because that is what they have chosen. But Hosea says that there is a glimmer of hope. There is always hope. God hears us. "the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered." (Hosea 1:10a) God will turn us around then we will be called "Children of the living God." (Hosea 1:10b) Note that God is described as a living God; ever-present in the world and in the lives of the people.

Now take the psalmist who wonders how long God will be displeased. The person writing this psalm is having a rough go of things. As happens with all of us, life is not always so rosy. And in the days that the psalms were written all things were attributed to God's favor or lack thereof. The psalmist writes that he knows God is a forgiving God, but life has not turned around in spite of the prayers and the humility of the people.

"Will you not give us life again that your people may rejoice in you?" (Psalm 85:6)

But like Hosea, the psalmist ends on a more positive note. "The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, *and our land will yield its increase. (Psalm 85:12)

This seems to indicate that the dismay that is shared at the beginning of the psalm is due to a drought, or some other sort of crop failure. But again, as in the Hosea reading, the author admits to having hope. God listens to God's people and in hearing will bring about the needed change, or give us strength to withstand the current situation as people pray together in community.

Now we turn to Luke's Gospel. Prayer has long been part of the life of God's people but the disciples want to know more. How EXACTLY should they pray to God to be most effective, and to have prayers answered? We and they want to pray the RIGHT way.

What we now call the Lord's Prayer is the answer Jesus gives. But we all know that some prayers seem to be answered and others not.

My ex-husband, Philip, now lies in the ICU at Yale New Haven. His kidneys as well as his liver have failed. Our sons are once again gathered at his bedside wondering if these are the last days, and continue to pray. Ever since 1995 when I got sober I have prayed every day for Philip. I have hoped for him that he would find health and happiness that I have known. That's almost twenty four years of unanswered prayers. So it leads one to ask, Does prayer work?

Jesus assures us that persistence will pay off. And that if we knock the door will be opened to us. Here's a better way to think about prayer. Rather than picturing ourselves as lowly serfs hoping against hope that the mighty lord of the manor will take a minute to hear us in our pleadings for mercy and justice, what if we really take to heart that Jesus is within us.

As we heard all through the Easter season from the Gospel of John, and as we hear every Sunday in our Eucharistic prayers, Holy Communion is about coming to the understanding that the spark of divinity, the presence of Jesus is the ground of our being, not an old man in the sky.

When we pray alone we are aligning our wills with the will of the Christ of our heart. When we pray in community on a Sunday or at a wedding or a funeral, we are aligning our wills with the wills of the people around us as well as the God of our understanding.

A wise and holy man says, "Prayer is that experience of meeting God. Prayer is the conscious human intention to relate to the depths of life and love and thereby to be an agent of the creation of wholeness in one another."ⁱ

What Philip knows and God knows from the 24 years of prayer for him is that I care about him and want to see him live a full joyous life and to see his grandchildren graduate from college and live their lives.

When we pray for our brothers and sisters who suffer anywhere we are asking what can be done; what can we do to alleviate the suffering we see unjustly happening in our country and in the world. Its our part to help people understand that we love and support them. Christ, who sometimes whispers and sometimes shouts back to us, encourages us to act, to have compassion, to be a friend and a support to the sick, the suffering, the mistreated, and the dying. Christ is always there with us, and will remind us of that when we meet the Holy at the Table this morning.

ⁱ Spong, John Shelby, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, pg. 143.