

The Work of Prayer
Luke 11:1-13
First Presbyterian Church, Luling
July 28, 2019

I've been thinking of buying a new hummingbird feeder. We've had one before, but on the one we had in Buda, the plastic got old and sun-baked and broken, and the whole thing fell on the concrete and busted. But I was watching them at my parents' house last weekend and realized I missed them.

We also had a feeder when we lived in Gonzales. It, too, broke in some way I can't remember, but it must have sprung a leak, because it hung there, empty, for a few weeks.

In the way that these things go at our house, I had "get new hummingbird feeder" on my list of things to do, but it never got marked off. After only a few days, most of the birds left. But one female bird kept coming back to check on things. Perhaps you can tell I'm not really much of a bird watcher, since the best description I can come up with is "female hummingbird." Anyway, she was persistent. She would show up a few times a day, poke hopefully at the plastic flowers, and then fly away when she didn't get anything.

I obtained a new hummingbird feeder from my mom, the one that was doomed to crash on the concrete patio in Buda in a few more years. I hung it up, several weeks after the other one had been empty. Soon enough, probably within an hour, the persistent female hummingbird came to check things out. She tested it out and helped herself to a generous serving. She was the only bird visiting for two or three days, but then the word spread and soon there were three or four.

The Gospel reading this morning brought to mind this little tiny bird. Her persistence at the feeder, the way she faithfully returned each day to check on its supply, and her eventual reward, is a model for prayer as Jesus describes it. There are three sections to this reading, the first is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, a bit shorter than in Matthew. The second is a parable of the friend who comes for bread for a guest after nightfall. And the third is a comparison between parents who give good things to their children, and God, who answers our prayers and requests. Rather than go through each section in detail, I'd like for us to think

about them together, as a general description of prayer, and we'll visit with our hummingbird friend for her insights as we go.

The sermon title today is "The Work of Prayer." I mean two things by that. First, how prayer works. And second, prayer *is* work, praying *is* work. So first, how does prayer work? Well, the short answer is that I don't know, but it does. Jesus indicates that prayer works when we are shameless in our asking. But Jesus also indicates that prayer works because of the goodness of God, the parent who will not give us something harmful.

This week, a friend wrote that prayer works on God, works on others, and works on ourselves. The first is hard to explain, the second and third a bit easier. How does prayer work on God? There are examples from Scripture of people convincing God to change God's mind through prayer. But we ourselves know that God does not always answer our prayers in the way we hope, that sometimes no matter how hard we pray, no matter how many people we have praying on our behalf, no matter what words we say or how we say them, our prayers don't seem to be answered, they don't seem to "work" like we thought they should. We often feel like that little hummingbird, reminding God gently and persistently of our needs, but unlike the hummingbird at my house, that feeder never gets replaced and we are tempted to look elsewhere for fulfillment of our needs.

I have no answers for this, except to turn again to the comparison that Jesus makes, between parents who answer their children's requests, and to God who answers ours. Perhaps our requests are not, after all, what we really need, what is really good for us, or might hurt someone else. Perhaps, or surely, we don't understand the larger picture that we are a small part of. We can't pretend that our limited minds can comprehend the breadth and depth of God's knowledge or mercy. Sometimes, the best we can do is pray with the desperate father in Mark's gospel (9:24): "I believe; help my unbelief."

Prayer works on God. We believe that, and we don't believe it, all at the same time. But prayer works on God, somehow, someway.

Prayer undoubtedly works on others. Holding up others in prayer has been one of the great and deep privileges of ministry, one of the great and deep privileges of following Jesus. As we lift brothers and sisters to God's care, there is

no way for us to anticipate or predict what the Spirit will do in their lives. Our prayers work on other people.

And having been held in prayer by other people has been one of the great blessings of my life as a Christian. Knowing that someone is praying for you is unspeakably precious, a gift. I may have encouraged you to do this before, but here it is again: pray for other people. And tell them you're doing it. Maybe even pray with them—I know it may be scary to pray out loud for someone, but it is a powerful testimony to the work of prayer.

Prayer works on God, prayer works on others, prayer works on us. Prayer works on us. This may be the easiest to understand. Prayer leads us into a relationship with God. And being in that relationship with God, a relationship where we share our joys and sorrows, ups and downs, good times and bad, with God leads us to see our lives through God's eyes, to live our lives as a prayer, to change our lives as we work to live faithfully.

As that hummingbird came to the feeder, day after day, she learned patience and persistence and faith in the goodness of the people who lived in the house. Her prayer, if you will, changed her, matured her, helped her grow.

Prayer works. And now we turn to the second part of the Work of Prayer. Prayer *is* work. We just said that prayer is a relationship, and if you have a relationship, which of course you do, some kind of relationship with somebody, a relationship is work, requires work. You don't become friends or spouses or maintain family bonds with someone without working at it. Being kind when you don't feel like it requires work. Listening when you have something you need to say requires work. Forgiving requires work. All of that is part of being in a relationship, and all of that is part of prayer.

Many of us would like a formula for prayer, and perhaps that's what the disciples were asking from Jesus: teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples. We think, if we could just get the formula right, maybe prayer wouldn't be so much work, maybe it would work out the way we think it should. But there isn't a formula that releases us from the work of being in a relationship with God, there isn't a magic incantation that makes God listen to our prayers and respond the way we want.

Prayer is a spiritual discipline, something that we have to discipline ourselves to do. The hummingbird came back and came back and came back. I don't know that she has a big enough brain to think about disciplining herself, but that's what she had done. I will continue checking on this food source, even though I'm disappointed every time, I will keep coming back. Even though prayer is difficult, even though we may not get the results we think we need or deserve or ask for, even though we may have to make ourselves pray, we are commanded in Scripture to do so. Prayer is expected of us, part of relating to God, part of opening ourselves to the presence of God in our lives.

First Thessalonians (5:17) commands us to "pray without ceasing." Which certainly calls for discipline, for who feels like praying all the time, nonstop? This instruction gives us a window into what prayer can be. Though it doesn't release us from the work of prayer, an instruction to "pray without ceasing" tells us that prayer is far, far more than sitting quietly with hands folded, eyes closed, and head bowed. That may be prayer, but that posture is not all prayer is. Prayer can happen at rest, while walking, while working, while talking to someone else. Prayer can become our life, and our life can become prayer. Prayer does not have to be words. Paul promises us in Romans that the Spirit intercedes for us with "sighs too deep for words" (8:26).

Prayer is work to do, and prayer leads us to work. For we cannot pray "thy kingdom come" nor "give us this day our daily bread" nor "as we forgive our debtors" without those prayers calling us to work, without those prayers calling us to do something, without those prayers expecting something of us. I'm sure you've heard "be careful what you pray for, you might just get it." Be careful about praying for the kingdom of God, because God just might ask you to work for it. Be careful about praying for forgiveness, because God might just ask you to forgive.

That hummingbird, as we imagine her praying for food to appear each day, had to work. She had to find food elsewhere to make enough energy to fly to our empty feeder, several times a day. Her prayer worked, but her prayer asked work of her.

The work of prayer is nothing short of miraculous, for prayer works, and prayer calls us to work.