

We've heard "*beauty* is in the eye of the beholder." How about **prayer**?

**Prayer** is multifaceted. It gets fought over in Court; it's more ancient than Sarah and Abraham yet as modern as reactions to the new James Webb space images.

There's no one right way to pray. Some bow heads and fold hands. Others walk and pray as with the 12<sup>th</sup> century labyrinths restored to use today. A First Nation translation of the Bible calls for dancing our prayers. Sometimes incense is used. Often candles are lit.

Some people go places to pray. Jesus went up the mountain or out to the desert. Some people pray at every meal – even in restaurants. Some pray before going to sleep or when they awake. Some traditions require prayer 7 times a day, others 3 times daily. Some pray just on Sundays.

The sky's the limit it seems with this thing called prayer. But as the James Webb telescope has shown, there's little limit to the sky. We could say *prayer is like* the James Webb images in that there's always more to prayer than meets the eye – more than rational minds can grasp.

We could also *liken prayer to* a suitcase packed for a journey. Or *prayer could be like* little carry-on cases we keep close at hand. My last day of vacation enjoying a sudden mountain cloudburst made me think *prayer might be like* a cloudburst restoring our dry, weary souls. Or we might also consider *prayer as* an apple a day keeping the doctor away – a healthy practice.

For my mom *prayer was like* well-worn shoes. She was always praying. Galatians 5:22 was read in worship a few weeks ago. It brings to mind *prayer as a* fruit salad – promising the Spirit's fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Today's gospel speaks of the Spirit – promising God won't withhold the Spirit from whoever asks for it. Luke 11:13 says, "*How much more will our heavenly God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.*" What a promise! May we ask for this often!

For those who know grief, *prayer is like* Holy Saturday – the day between the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection. *Prayer is a* space where being numb or feeling entombed by sorrow is part of the story.

There are days when even faithing people – like the early disciples on that first Holy Saturday – can't imagine a future; have no energy to take one more step. **Prayer gives us a safe space** when we're inconsolable.

*Prayer might also be likened to* a river that carries us, *or to a* creek we dip toes into. For those who've discovered it, *prayer is like* water – **essential!** – no longer just optional.

For some, *prayer is like* the energizer bunny. It restores their souls. Or *prayer is like* a nap in the lap of Almighty Love. *Prayer for many is* coming home to safety - where it's OK to not be OK.

*Prayer could be likened* to a soup kitchen, or Union Station Homeless Services, or Ascension Lutheran's *Our Friends' House* benefiting people we don't know in ways we can't fathom.

Perhaps most life-changing for me is seeing *prayer as* a relationship where I can be honest with myself because I'm met not with judgment or shaming but with help to fall upward as Richard Rohr teaches – to fall out of prayer into restored growth on the good days and the difficult.

I've discovered *prayer to be like* holy ground where even when the foundations are shaking, we have footsteps to follow – the footsteps of Jesus who models and teaches prayer as relentlessly trusting God's love no matter what. The Gospel of Luke and its companion book, Acts, mentions Jesus at prayer 32 times. Prayer was a gamechanger for Jesus.

In today's gospel Jesus adds: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened." This may be the most difficult of what Jesus says on prayer because life doesn't always work that way.

We can ask and not receive; seek and not find. The most fervently prayerful people still lose loved ones to illness and accidents. We pray for hunger to end, for the climate crisis to be abated, for wars to cease, and yet they rage on.

If God is love, why do prayers go unanswered – even when we pray for good things God too surely must want? Easy answers are sometimes given. I've heard it said that prayer only *seems* unanswered, or that everything happens for a reason, or that God's answer was No.

The Bible doesn't give out easy answers about prayer. What the Bible tells us is that Jesus was a regularly praying people, but that he also wept at times. Even when things were difficult, Jesus kept praying, even from the cross.

We might wonder, why pray when there are no guarantees?

I pray because I've experienced what I think Jesus is getting at – that prayer is about love. Father Henri Nouwen said of faith what could also be said of prayer. He wrote,

*When Jesus talks about faith (or prayer), he means trust unreservedly that you're loved, so you can abandon all false ways of trying to obtain love.*

For Jesus, prayer was a life-long choice. He chose to step toward God who he knew loved him. Jesus could have busied himself otherwise, could have seen himself as above prayer – or seen prayer as useless. Instead, Jesus turned to God often, becoming known as a praying person.

The disciples saw Jesus pray. That's why they asked him to teach them. When he did, he added the compelling words that end today's gospel: *"How much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask."*

Jesus doesn't say ask for a Porsche but ask for the Spirit. And ask expectantly he says. All I can say is Wow!

Amen

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