Word & World
Volume 35, Number 1
Winter 2015

Pastoral Perspectives

Prayer: Honesty with Self and God

META H. CARLSON

I beg my parishioners to be honest with me, and their candid concerns about prayer can be most heart-wrenching.

Does God hear every prayer? Does God care? Sometimes, I feel bad about asking for stuff because I don't mean to sound needy. I'll even list a bunch of requests about other people before I get to my own issues, because I feel rude starting with myself. What's the point of praying, anyway?

When people confide in me about such things, mediocre clichés want to erupt, urging people to trust the call to prayer. But I try my best to listen and then back way up. These big questions about divine relationship and human worth require a careful examination of God's reputation. So we begin with the story and the Holy resume; God doesn't just invite people to pray, God *commands* us to pray.

we wrestle with what it means to be vulnerable with God, who already knows our darkest secrets and selfish hearts

While the Israelites are wandering and discerning a new identity, God breaks in several times to cultivate a foundational narrative. It always begins with, "I am the Lord your God. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt...," and then it emphasizes how well God chooses to know and love them. This is God's love ballad disguised as a lecture. It's a story that invites our mutual affiliation and contact with God.

We wrestle with what it means to be vulnerable with God, who already knows our darkest secrets and selfish hearts. It's scary to think that our toolbox for making earthly friends and being likeable doesn't really apply in conversation with God. There's no one to impress and no narrative to spin with the one who created stars and knit us together.

With an appreciation for God's reputation for relationship, we can better trust the command to pray. If you think your prayers are boring, infrequent, or

simple, stop ranking them! God's tickled that you're in conversation instead of remaining distant and apathetic. God never demands eloquence or fancy diction. Any dialogue is better than none at all. Some sort of relationship, however confused or doubt-filled, is always better than golden calves or the silent treatment.

And so what if you think you sound selfish? God already knows we're selfish. God has been there every time we've lost our train of thought in prayer, drifted off into list-making, or fallen asleep mid-petition. God has heard all kinds of rote words, deep sighs, and late-night lobbying. Our self-absorption has surely lost its shock value. Perhaps God finds our neediness endearing and our neuroses adorable and wants these things revealed in our relationship. Perhaps God rejoices every time we admit our truest selves in prayer and in that rejoicing loves us with open ears and wide arms.

This is familiar but forgettable good news! God's patience and love are always showing up in Scripture, sermons, and stories of our own, but we still convince ourselves it all depends on our drama or cooperation. There's that selfishness again—how quickly we get lost in our own fears, boredom, and assumptions.

Prayer is one more example of God doing things the complicated, crazy way—like a swooning fourteen-year-old girl who just can't get over us, even though we keep breaking her heart and jerking her around. God is in the unhealthiest of all relationships, because God keeps choosing to do stuff with us and for us. God keeps calling us into the master plan, using our bodies and voices to make something beautifully messy out of God's beauty and our mess. According to the story and the holy resume, God gets tired and frustrated with us all the time, but God will never break up with us. If I were God's mother, I would get a restraining order, change our phone number, and find a wonderful family therapist.

When my parishioners cannot bring themselves to believe in their own worth or the value of prayer, I ask to get together. Once we show up face to face, I remind them of the story and the holy resume. We believe in a God who shows up, too. God does things the hard and crazy way, that is, with us. Then we pray, showing our true colors, deep desires, and shaky questions. For these are things God already knows and loves, but there is great rejoicing when we pray them anyway.

Listening God, thank you for calling and hearing us. Gather every vulnerable and selfish part of us in prayer so that our whole beings can trust your merciful presence. Amen. ⊕

META CARLSON is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota.