

**PRAYER: NO, REALLY, WHY BOTHER?**

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

Imagine two people dancing. Their feet trace intricate patterns on the ground. Their bodies flow with grace and strength, weaving in and out of each other's arms in perfect harmony, sometimes as one, sometimes distinct. They are colour and light and motion. They are music given form. There's a perfect wholeness about them, a wonderful grace about them. And as a third dancer joins in, there is no disruption. The trio moves as if they'd always been so. They are perfection. They are complete. They are whole.

This dynamic image of dance has frequently been used by modern theologians in an attempt to help us understand and imagine God, who we know to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all at the same time.<sup>1</sup> It's an attempt to describe the inherent relationality of the Trinity, to put a metaphor to Jesus' words from John 10:38, when he said, "the Father is in me, and I am in the Father." It's about the fundamental, inner, communal nature of God. To say that God is Love, like we read in 1 John 4:8, is to say that there is an intrinsic relationality to God. It's a relationality captured to some extent by the image of dancers whose movements are so intertwined, weaving in and out of each other flawlessly, that it is at times almost impossible to distinguish between the dancers.

Now imagine that there is room in this dance for you. Imagine that there is room in this perfect communion of the divine for you, for me, for all of us. Imagine that as we step into the dance, rather than our stumbling, awkward movements wrecking the grace and beauty of it, we are made more graceful and more beautiful. Without losing our uniqueness – all the things that make you, you and me, me – we somehow become more; we become a part of a whole that surrounds us and cradles us, that fills us and flows over us; we move and breathe the love that is God; this is perfect communion... with God... *and* with all those others who have also stepped into the dance.

I think this is heaven. I think this is life in a world in which sin and death are no more. I think this is what it means to be saved. And while we may not yet be able to experience this perfect communion, while we as yet, as written in The Message version of 1 Corinthians 13, "don't...see things clearly, [like] we're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist," there is communion with God to be had. There is friendship with God to be had. There is the promise that as we grow in our faith, as we get to know God more, as we do things like practice the spiritual disciplines, we learn how to dance the dance of the divine, we learn how to move with the grace and the beauty of beings who are created in the image of God.

I wonder how all this sits with you. I suspect framing our relationship with God as dance might be weird for at least a few of us – probably even weirder than when I talked about being friends with God six weeks ago. But I think we need some new images and metaphors to talk about our relationship with God because the old metaphors aren't always working for us. They aren't influencing our behaviour. They aren't serving the Holy Spirit's work of transforming us into Jesus' likeness. Maybe they're just too familiar. Maybe we forget that there's no single metaphor or label that can fully capture God.

If you're uncomfortable with any of this, especially any of these metaphors and images that I'm talking about, I'd like to suggest that it's possible that the discomfort you feel may be a clue to some embedded theology that needs to be uncovered and examined?

Hopefully you remember from last week that embedded theology simply refers to those beliefs about God that are so deeply ingrained in us that we often aren't even aware of them, even while they shape our assumptions and practices of faith. Take, for instance, the label of Father for God this is probably the oldest label, the oldest image, we have for referring to God. For some of us, a father is distant and removed – unapproachable. For others of us, a father is stern and uncompromising. For yet others of us, a father is warm and safe. For others of us a father is simply absent. There are as many descriptions of *father* in this room as there are experiences of fathers. Those experiences are part of what has shaped our embedded theology. They helped mold our assumptions about who God is and what God is like. And those assumptions, in turn, impact how we live; they impact how we pray. Consider: if your experience of a father is one who is stern and uncompromising, compare that to the God the Father you would pray to if your experience of a father is one who is warm and safe. These would make for very different ways of approaching the father who is God, I would guess.

It's my guess that we all agree that prayer is something we're supposed to do. It's my guess that we agree that we're supposed to not just pray for ourselves, but pray for other people and for the world around us. After all, we do this every Sunday when we gather for worship. In Ephesians 6:18 we read: "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." It's there in black and white – that prayer is something we're supposed to be doing.

However, as we all know, just because we are supposed to do something, doesn't mean we do it. I suspect, where prayer is concerned, the disconnect between what we believe we're supposed to do and what we actually do is probably responsible for some of our worst Christian guilt. I think we sometimes don't pray because we don't know how. I think we don't pray because we don't have time. And I think we don't pray because, buried deep inside, hidden in that place where we keep all the things we're embarrassed about or feel guilty for, we think maybe prayer doesn't make a difference; maybe prayer doesn't actually matter. Let me tell you, whatever the reason you don't pray, you are not alone. If you don't know how, if you can't sit still long enough to do it, or if you don't really believe there's any point, you are not alone. This morning I want to focus on this last piece – the whole question of why we should bother praying at all. Does it even make a difference for us to pray?

When I started asking the question, *why bother praying?*, I was surprised that it was even a question. I assumed that because we know we're supposed to pray, we also know *why* we're supposed to pray. But the more I tried to answer the *why*, the less satisfied I became with any of the answers I heard, and the more I realized that I'm not alone in this question. It's just a question we're not supposed to ask. "Don't ask that! Of course you're supposed to pray! How dare you question whether or not you should pray?" This is a question that's in us, and unless we're permitted to ask these questions, unless we're permitted to bring them out into the light of day, we can't solve them – we can't answer them. The more I asked this question, the more I came to realize how connected our answers to that *why* question are to our embedded theology – our entrenched ideas about who God is and how God acts.

When I ask why we should bother praying, one of the answers I get is, “because we’re supposed to.” It’s right there in Ephesians 6: Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Why bother praying? Because God told us to. That’s it. That’s the answer. Just like a parent might say to their child, “because I told you to,” and the child is expected to obey without question, so must we obey God without question.

For some of us, this answer is sufficient. But for some others of us, it isn’t. I wish it was enough of an answer for me. It feels wonderfully straightforward. But the God I encounter in the Bible is one who repeatedly engages in dialogue with people; he’s a God who accepts, even invites, people’s questions; he’s a God who cares what people want. He doesn’t come across to me, in the way I read the Bible, as a God who demands unquestioning obedience. I wonder how much my understanding of what a father is shapes that. I wonder how much your understanding of what a father is shapes this whole question of whether or not we’re supposed to do whatever God says without any question.

I also can’t deny that there are plenty of examples of God’s actions being so far beyond human comprehension (Job’s story comes to mind), that all God can provide is “because I said so” and that simply has to be enough. But if that’s all the answer I get to the *why bother praying* question, I have to admit that it just isn’t enough for me... Not all the time.

Here’s another answer to the *why bother* question (you might recognize it from last week; I quoted from a guy named Dutch Sheets, but it’s an answer we hear all over the place)... Why bother praying? “Because God has chosen to work in the world through us and to limit his own work in the world to that which he does in partnership with us.”<sup>iii</sup> In other words, God needs us to pray because that’s the only way he’s allowed for himself to intervene. I suspect that many of you have the same reaction to that answer as I have: Do we really want to suggest that God never does anything independent of our prayers? In the midst of an environmental disaster, like a tsunami, before anyone even knows it’s happening and so knows to pray, how do we explain the stories of people miraculously saved, except that sometimes God does act independently? And yet, if God doesn’t require our prayers in order to intervene, at least some of the time, then we’re back to the original question. If God’s going to do what God’s going to do regardless of what we do, then why should we bother praying at all? And if the answer “Because God told us to,” isn’t enough, we need something else.

Maybe the reason we bother praying is because doing so is good for us – it is a relational act that draws us closer to God and puts us in a space where God brings our will into alignment with his. As we ask God for things, express our frustrations and our joys, as we tell God what we’re thinking about, he responds and we, if we stop talking long enough to listen, grow in our understanding of who God is as well as of who we are. I like this answer. It definitely fits my own experience of my own relationship with God. And I see it in the back-and-forth conversations of people in the Bible like Moses and Isaiah and Elijah. One of my friends wrote this to me in an email: We pray to give expression to what’s on our heart to God. When God responds, it is an invitation to know God in that. When God ‘doesn’t respond’, it’s an invitation to know God in that. We pray to clarify what we think about God’s response, and we pray to be honest with God about what we think about God’s response. And so, the relationship grows.”

I think all this is true. Just as it's true that God told us to pray, I also think this is true. But I also think something is still missing. If the reason we bother with prayer is because it's the way we have conversations with God and thus get to know God more and more, growing our friendship with God as a result, why bother praying for each other when we gather every Sunday? If we don't actually believe God will do something in response to our prayers, and not just something in me, the pray-er, but something for the one for whom we're praying, then why bother? Why should you bother praying for me, in a setting like this – in a public setting – if you don't actually think that God's going to do anything?

I get that there's a mystery here that maybe can't be answered. There's a lot about God that we just have to throw out there and say, "this is a mystery we don't understand." Sometimes God acts without any human involvement whatsoever. Sometimes God acts in direct response to prayer. Sometimes, to paraphrase another friend's words, "God turns our prayer back on us and commissions us to be the answer to whatever we prayed."<sup>iii</sup> I don't think there's one simple way that God behaves or acts in our world. But it still leaves me with the big question: Why bother praying? Particularly, why bother praying for other people, unless God will actually do something for those other people in response to our prayers?

There's a British theologian, Paul Fiddes, who I've just started reading, who offers another answer to this whole *why bother* question. It has to do with the dance metaphor I talked about earlier, in which the inner communal nature of God, while perfectly whole and complete in itself, is never closed to those who want to know God. When we pray, we, in effect, step into the dance, where Father, Son, and Spirit teach us how to move in rhythm with them. And as we pray for others, we carry them into the dance with us. Fiddes writes: "Intercession [that means praying for other people] becomes the enfolding of someone in the interweaving currents of the love of God."<sup>iv</sup> It's not that God doesn't already love them. It's not that God doesn't already know everything about them. It's not that God isn't capable or won't do whatever the person needs him to do, even if we don't ask. But there is this mysterious truth, that for whatever reason, there is something important – essential – about us carrying each other into the dance where the love that is God will enfold them.

Maybe it's not just that the love of God enfolds them; maybe it's that because we've carried them into the dance, our love enfolds them along with God's love. We already know the power of God's love. We know it through Jesus. It is the power to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to raise the dead. What if our love, when we ourselves are woven into the love of God, moving in rhythm with God, is thus empowered by God? What if, our empowered love carries within it the power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead? I know that asking questions like that is not a very Baptist thing to do, but I want to ask them anyways because if that's what love is – if that's what God who is love is – then is it really such a stretch to think that if our love is empowered / if our love comes from God himself / flows through us from God himself, that it also would have the power of God to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to raise the dead. Not outside of or disconnected from God – I'm not talking about us suddenly becoming miracle workers – but with God? What if we pray, not as a way of handing people off to God to deal with, but as a way for us to become more intimately connected with them, as we carry them into the dance and hold them there until they can start to dance themselves? Often I think we approach this whole thing about praying to God as saying, "This person has some needs; there you go, God. You might have forgotten about it, or you weren't aware of it, or let me tell you

about it, and you've got to do something about it." We pass it off. But what if it's more about us carrying a person into God's presence and holding them – cradling them – until the point when they are able to step in and dance for themselves?

There's something that feels holy about this, I think. There's something beautiful and sacred and humbling about this kind of image, for me. There's something in this that causes me to pause with the weight of it. There's something in this that should inspire us to worship. That God would not only invite us into the sacred dance that defines him as love, but would so empower our love as to make us participants with him in the world.

Again, we don't pray for people just to pass them off. We pray for them as an act of love, as we carry them in that space.

I want to invite you to think about somebody who you're aware of, somebody in your own life that you need to be praying for, maybe somebody you've heard raised up in the church. Imagine that person. And imagine holding them in the midst of that dance of God, weaving in and out and around you, as part of that communion, that perfect wholeness, that love that is God. Maybe you don't even say anything; maybe you just hold the person there in the midst of it – in Fiddes words, "in the interweaving currents of the love of God," holding them in that.

*Pause for a minute or so.*

Through this week, I want to invite you to take some time every day, to consciously carry someone into God's presence – to hold them there. It may be that as you hold them there you have things to say to God: "God, this person desperately needs your healing. God, I love this person; I want them to know what it is to love you. God, this person is sad, this person is hurting, I pray for your comfort for them." You may not have anything to say and that's o.k. It's the act of somehow holding them there that's important. This week, every day, carry someone into God's presence and hold them there for a time.

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<sup>i</sup> For a quick survey of the way this image has been used, see Riyako Cecilia Hikota. "Beyond Metaphor: The Trinitarian Perichōrēsis and Dance." *Open Theology*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 50-63. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2022-0192>.

<sup>ii</sup> Dutch Sheets. *Intercessory Prayer: How God Can Use Your Prayers to Move Heaven and Earth*. (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 23-35.

<sup>iii</sup> Spencer Boersma. *Prayer: God Listens, Partners, and even Surprises*. Feb. 13, 2019. <https://spencerboersma.com/2019/02/13/prayer-god-listens-partners-and-even-surprises/> (accessed Feb. 15, 2022).

<sup>iv</sup> Paul S. Fiddes. "The God Who Acts and the Point of Intercessory Prayer." *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 137.