

17th Sunday OT C/Solemnity of Sts. Joachim and Anne

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It would certainly be a lot easier to hear and preach today's gospel if it were not for all the unanswered prayers in our lives. I am not suggesting that our prayers never get answered the way we want. I know that happens. I have experienced it, and I suspect you have as well. However, I have not had anyone come to my office asking why they prayed and got exactly what they wanted. I have, however, had people ask why they asked but were not given an answer, why they searched but did not find what they were looking for, and why they knocked, but the door never opened. I have struggled with those questions, and I will bet you have too.

I don't know why some prayers seem to be answered and others seem to go unanswered. I don't have any good answers or explanations for that, but I have heard some bad ones. **"You didn't pray hard enough."** **"You don't have enough faith."** **"You were asking for the wrong thing."** **"It is all a mystery, and someday we will understand."** **"Everything happens for a reason."** **"Something better is coming."** **"Sometimes God says no."** **"God is testing you."**

If you have ever been told those things, then you know how unhelpful and hurtful they are. So, at the risk of adding to the list of bad answers, let me tell you where I have come to in my own life with this issue. I cannot promise that it will be a good answer, I am not sure there is one, but maybe it will be a less bad answer.

I wonder if we have misunderstood this text and what prayer is about. What if we are not to blame for unanswered prayer, but neither is God? What if God is neither the dispenser nor the withholder of answers, things, or what we want?

Before you begin responding to my wondering and what-ifs, let me ask you this. Who taught you to pray, and what were you taught? Somewhere along the way, I got the idea that if I bowed my head, closed my eyes, clasped my hands, were good and well behaved, believed with all my heart, and told God what I wanted or needed, I would get it. Any of that sound familiar? I suspect that many of us were taught, or have lived with, some version of that as our understanding of prayer.

I sometimes think of that as Coke machine theology. Put in your coins of faith and good behavior, make a selection, and get what you want. I like Coke machine theology. I like it a lot. It is reassuring. It makes sense, and it is predictable. It works great until it doesn't, until the machine gives you Dr. Pepper when you want a Coke, or worse yet, steals your money. Then what do we do? Kick the machine? Put in more money and push the button harder? Walk away vowing to never drink another Coke? God is not and never was a divine Coke machine. And prayer is not a transaction between God and us.

I don't think Jesus ever intended ask, search, and knock as a blank check on God's account. His instructions to ask, search, and knock are in relation to what we have come to call the Lord's Prayer. We are to be

persistent in aligning our lives to the hallowing of God's name, giving existence to God's kingdom in our life and relationships, opening ourselves to the gift and sufficiency of this day, freely receiving and giving forgiveness.

What if those words we pray as the Lord's Prayer are also words the Lord prays to us? What if they are the Lord's prayer to us, a call and insistence in our lives?

When Jesus teaches about asking, searching, and knocking, he is not teaching a technique or magic formula for getting whatever we want. He is describing a specific posture, a way of standing before God, exposed and responsive to a holy and life-giving Spirit. Maybe prayer is more about what we do than what God does. Maybe our words and actions offered in response to the insistence and calling of God in our lives are our truest prayer.

I have come to think of prayer not as asking God to do things for me, but as the way I stay open to the future that is coming to me; the coming of the kingdom, the coming of daily bread, the coming of forgiveness. There is always something coming to us, and I don't want to miss it. I want to stay open to the future because there is a sense in which the future is always better, not because it will necessarily be, but because it might be. That "**might be**" is the faith and hope in our prayer. That's the thread we hold onto when our life is unraveling. When we don't have a prayer, we pray for the coming of our future.

It means we do not give up when the sands of life are shifting under our feet, when our life comes unhinged, when we are overwhelmed, when we come to the limits of our ability, when it looks like this day is as good as it gets, and all there will ever be.

Prayer keeps **“the present from closing in upon itself and from closing in all around us.”** Prayer opens the present moment to **“the possibility of something new, the chance of something different, something that will transform the present into something else.”**

Prayer does not guarantee an outcome, undo the past, or offer an escape from life or the circumstances of our lives. It keeps us open to the future. And where there is a future, whether it is an hour, a day, a month, or twenty years, there is the possibility of life and more life. That’s what Jesus is promising in today’s gospel. And it is what I want, don’t you? I want the possibility of life and more life.

I don’t know if any of this is a less bad answer, but I know this. The Coke machine never really gave me life or more life. It left me asking, searching, and knocking for something more. And yet I am still tempted to go back to it. Lord, teach me to pray.

So, what would it be like for us to walk away from the Coke machines of our lives? What would it be like not to spend so much energy, time, and prayer trying to control or determine our future? What if we lived open to and ready to say yes to the future, to the possibility of life and more life?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us pray. Let us dare to pray. **Amen.**