

Pentecost 10C + July 24, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit

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It is said that “life happens in the interruptions,” in those incidents that intrude into our daily plans. That happened to me twice this week. After Children’s Song & Story Time this Wednesday, I had just gone back to work in my office when the doorbell rang. There stood two children, a girl and her little brother. “What is that sign in front of the church?” she asked. I explained that we do this every Wednesday but had just finished, and invited them to come back another time.

The other interruption was a call from someone at the police department inviting me to a meeting the next day of the police chief with a group of Beloit pastors. The short notice was a surprise and I already had the day planned out. But it was good I changed things around because the meeting was very fruitful.

I didn’t process at the time that both of these were answers to prayer. I’d been hoping for more neighborhood kids to come around. And I had been hoping to find avenues for partnering with local leaders to make the Beloit community stronger.

You might notice that I said “hoping” -- but not “praying.” I should have been praying! So these two “interruptions” made me think: “If I didn’t even get around to really praying for these things and they still happened, how much more will God give us when we actually remember to pray?”

It’s so easy to forget. We go about our daily business, sidestepping some problems, tackling others, and keeping joy and sorrow in a cautious balance so that neither runs away with us. But often, to keep that balance means that we push things safely below the surface so that we

can get on with our busy lives. As a result we don't experience that joy, even in small things, that can take our breath away. And we lose touch with deep sadness that, if we allowed ourselves to experience it, could bring healing—sadnesses such as the past or imminent death of those beloved to us; the decline of loved ones through the ravages of dementia or Alzheimer's; friends who have turned against us; or a job that dulls our mind and suffocates our hope.

How simple, simplistic even, it might seem, then, to hear those words of our Gospel reading: "Ask, and it will be given." In the face of death, dementia or terminal illness, what good is asking? Nothing can bring back those we have loved and lost.

But let's look at our Gospel reading more closely, especially the strange illustration Jesus gives the disciples after he's instructed them how to pray using words that form the basis of what we call the Lord's Prayer:

"Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'

Then Jesus delivers the punch line:

⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

I hear this as Jesus speaking tongue in cheek. This scenario of the unwilling friend is unthinkable! Of course the man who is called upon will give his friend what he needs, not least of all because of his persistence. Helping in times of need is what friends do.

Asking a friend for provisions is straightforward: the request was made and granted. But it's easy to get discouraged when God doesn't respond in the way we would like. "I prayed so hard for my father to recover, God, but you took him anyway."

Or what about all our prayers for peace? “God, I have been asking you to bring stop to the terrible violence in the world, but these terrible events just keep happening—Nice, Wurzburg, Munich, Kabul.” What good is prayer then, we might ask?

In a few moments we will sing one of the great hymns of faith [“What God Ordains Is Always Good”]. It assures us that God *always* hears our prayers, and that God’s mercy never fails us.

What God ordains is good indeed.
When hope seems like delusion,
I taste the bitter cup and plead,
"Lord, quench my fear, confusion."
God ends the night,
restores delight;
by faith I face tomorrow
and yield to God all sorrow. (stanza 3)

Having certain expectations in prayer keeps us from seeing the ways in which God does respond. Sometimes these responses often take the form of interruptions, as they did for me this week; other times God’s answer is right in front of us but we are too self-absorbed to see it.

God gives us our daily bread, that which nourishes and sustains us, through the living Christ—the bread that is come down from heaven. Jesus never leaves our side. He feeds our weary souls with words of love and mercy. He walks with us through our sorrows with words of love. He wraps his arms around us, and promises that he will never, ever let us go.

What God ordains is good indeed.
My Lord will never fail me
on danger's path, in deepest need,
when death in grief shall veil me.
My God so dear
will draw me near,
in loving arms will hold me,
at last in light enfold me. (stanza 4)

Amen!